

DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Providing factual information about our Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions and events of historical Christianity & Judaism.

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Do You Want “to Come Near to God”?

By Jim Myers

Most will probably immediately answer, “Yes!” The next question is -- What do you do “to come near to God?” Today, the answers would probably be read the Bible, pray, sing worship songs, etc. In many churches, during the praise and worship period of the service, worship leaders declare that the “presence of the Lord is here; we can feel God’s presence.” It is not uncommon to hear people describe their relationship to God as though He was a “good buddy” they “hang out” with all the time. Today, “coming near God” seems to be a very common thing that requires very little effort or a special place.

This would sound very strange to ancient Israelites, Jews of the First and Second Temple periods, and the Jewish Jesus. They didn’t just “hang out” with God. They viewed Him with awe and “coming near” required a commitment, effort and an investment. This may be why it was the first lesson Jewish children learned when the Temple stood and at the beginning of their education. Evidence from the Tannaic period¹ (10-220 CE) indicates that this practice was followed still,² which means that it would have been during the time of Jesus. The first *textscroll* (textbook) children were given contained the first eight chapters of *Vayikra* (Leviticus) the first five chapters of *Bereishiyt* (Genesis).³ Rabbi Judah asked for permission to prepare these scrolls for use by children.

Why began a child’s education with the study of Leviticus? *The reason is that secular and religious life in ancient Israel were permeated with a concern for holiness and a proper guarding of what was sacred.* Holiness and sacredness, expressed in various forms of the root *qds* (QODOSH – holy), was joined with the related category of purity. In each case there was an opposite category. For holiness, the opposite was profane or common, and for purity it was impurity.⁴ *“To come near God” was not a common act, it was holy, and required purity.*

Leviticus is a book about holiness and purity. "Rav Assi said: 'Why do young children commence with [the Book of] The Law of the Priests, and not with the [Book of] Genesis? Surely it is because young children are pure, and the sacrifices are pure; so let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure.'"⁵

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The first lesson for a child is "how to come near God." It is a holy and sacred act that requires that one be taught what must be done. The first lesson reveals much more than just how to do it though; it reveals a great deal about God. In the Hebrew text, the name YAHWEH is used, but we will use the euphemism Adonai, just like the children were taught. Now let's join the class and study the first lesson with them.

Adonai called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting. He said, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When anyone among you brings a QORBAN to Adonai, bring as your QORBAN an animal from either the herd or the flock. (Lev. 1:1-2)

The first thing we learn is that "Adonia called to a man." *He is not a remote deity separated from His people. He knows and calls a specific man.* He gave that man a mission -- *Speak to the Israelites.* Moses is to teach the Israelites what Adonai reveals to him. But, Adonai did not speak to every Israelite and leave it up to them to interpret what He said. He spoke to Moses and he gave him the responsibility for communicating and dealing with questions.

*What was the first thing that Adonai wanted the Israelites to learn? He wanted them to know how to bring a **QORBAN** to Him. QORBAN is commonly translated either as *sacrifice* or *offering*, but neither accurately expresses its Hebrew meaning. Sacrifice implies that the person bringing it is being deprived of something in order to satisfy another's need. Offering implies that the recipient of the gift requires a tribute that will somehow appease His wrath or make Him receptive to the pleas of the one giving it. The root of QORBAN is **QRV**, which means "to come near." The person bringing a QORBAN is bringing it so he can "come near to Adonai."⁶ He isn't being deprived of something to satisfy a need of Adonai, to appease Him, or get Him to do something for him. *He is doing it because he wants to for no other reason than "to come near Adonai."**

³ "If his QORBAN is a burnt QORBAN from the herd, a male without blemish, he shall bring it to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. He shall bring it so that he may be accepted before Adonai.

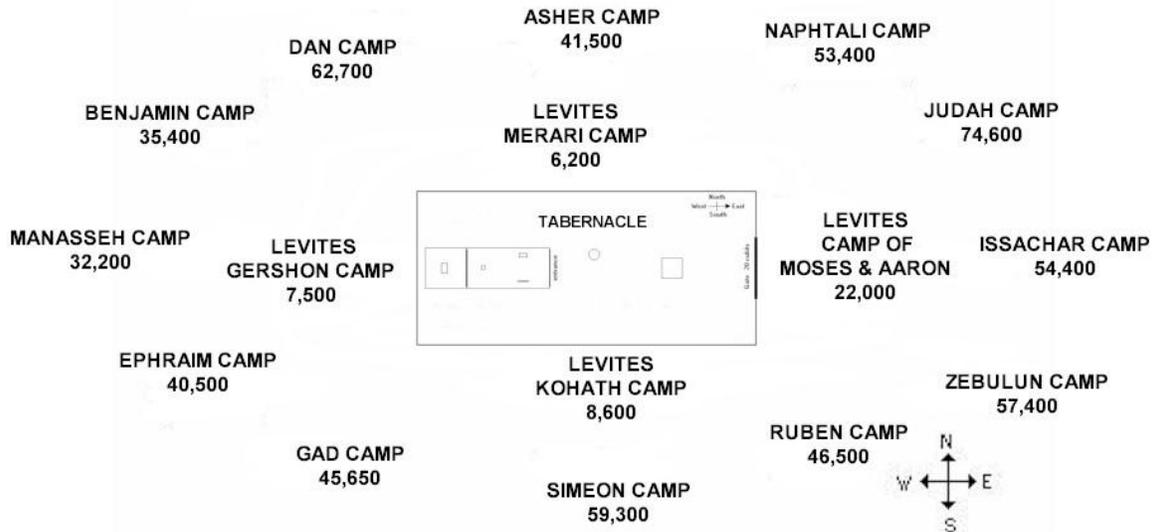
The QORBAN must be a male animal from the herd that is ritually pure, which means it has none of the following blemishes:

" . . . blind, injured, maimed, warts, festering or running sores, deformed, stunted, bruised testicles, crushed testicles, torn testicles, or cut testicles."⁷

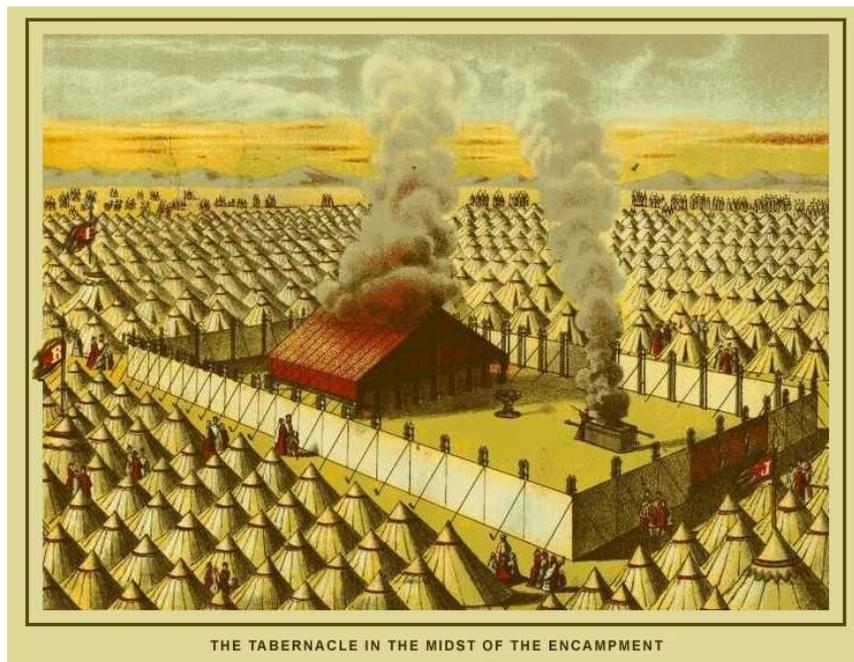
The man had to closely examine every square inch of the animal's body to make sure it had none of the above blemishes. After he has selected the QORBAN he

must bring it from the herd to the Tabernacle. Our minds skip across the words “bring it” without grasping the effort required to actually do it. Look at how the Israelite camp was laid out.

ISRAELITE CAMPS

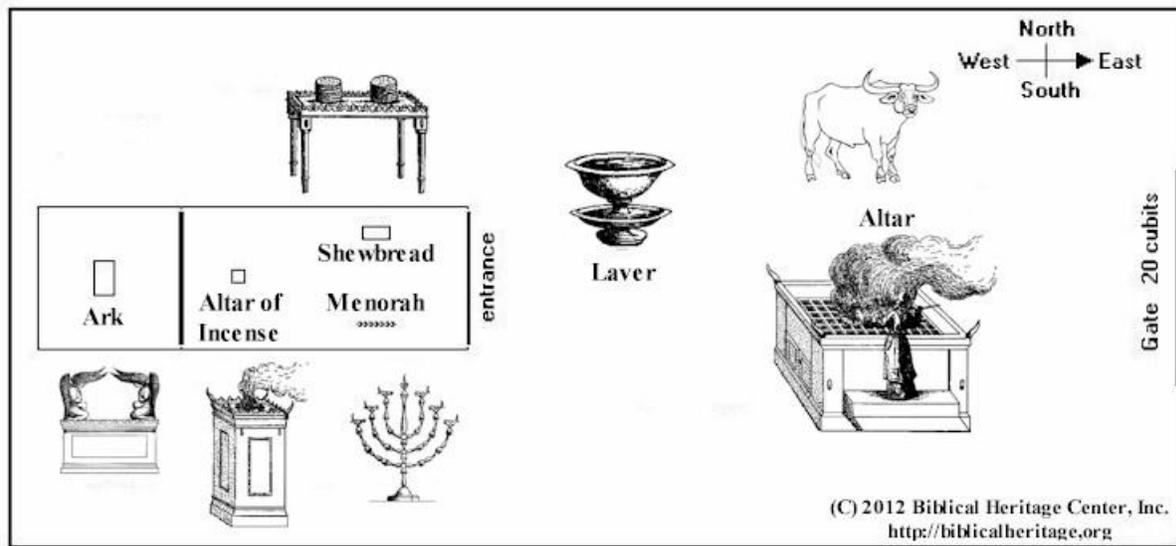


The numbers under the name of each tribal camp is the number of males, one month old or older, and doesn't include females or servants. The man would have to go to where the animals were grazing beyond the outer border of the camps.



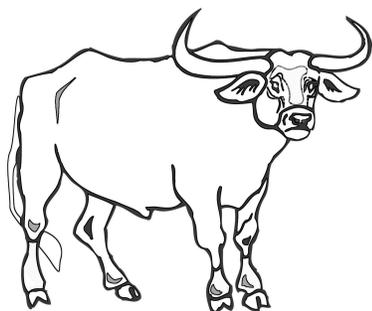
SOURCE - http://www.workersforjesus.com/tabernacle_encampment.jpg

After the man found the QORBAN, he had to bring it back through the camps and all of those people, and take it to the East entrance of the Tabernacle.



At the entrance, he presented the animal to the priests and they also checked to make sure it was a male, without a blemish, and that the man owned it. A man could not bring stolen property to Adonai.⁸ After the priests approved the animal the man walked it through the entrance to the area on the North side of the altar.

⁴ He shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted for him to make atonement for him. ⁵ He shall kill the bull before Adonai, and he shall cause the blood to be presented to Aaron's sons, the priests. And they shall throw the blood upon and around the sides of the altar at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.



He shall lay his hand upon the head. The hand is to rest on its head lightly, not with pressure or leaning on it. Only one hand is used here in contrast to that of the scapegoat which requires that the two hands be used with pressure. It should be noted that any ritual using the hands was always preceded hand-washing. The phrase "*to make atonement for him*" literally means "to make a covering for him."

Put yourself in the man's shoes and think about what you would experience if you had been there. Before you placed your hand on its head you would have ritually washed your hands at the Laver, under the supervision of the priests. Look at the picture of the bull and think about what putting one of your hands on its head would have felt like. After you put your hand on its head you would have recited a blessing. In your other hand you had a knife with a blade that was twice length

of the width of the animal's throat. The blade had been inspected by the priests to make sure it was sharp, smooth, and without any perceptible notch.

After reciting the blessing, while your hand was still on the animal's head, you would draw the knife blade gently across the animal's throat, without any undue exertion, cutting through the windpipe and gullet in one smooth motion, with no delay or interruption of the motion. You had to make it one continuous motion, forward and backward, until all of the organs were cut through.⁹ The bull's blood would begin to squirt out from the severed arteries and veins. The sons of Aaron would be standing there with sacred vessels to collect the blood.

Aaron's sons carried the vessels full of blood to the altar. You may want to glance back at the diagram of the Tabernacle on page 4 at the altar. If you have a measuring tape or stick, take a moment to lay out a square with sides that are 7.5 feet long. Then, go to a wall and measure 4.5 feet from the floor upwards, which was the height of the sides of the altar. Now picture the priests carrying vessels of blood and splashing it on all four sides. *A bull has about 6 gallons of blood.* Think about what you would have felt, seen, heard, and smelled from the moment you placed your hand on the animal's head until you saw its blood running down the sides of the altar. *Keep in mind why you were doing this -- "to come near God."*

⁶ He shall skin the burnt offering and cut it into pieces.

The next thing you would do is skin the animal. In order to skin it, you would be required to remove the head and the four legs below the knees. The hide would be given to the officiating priest as his property (Lev. 7:8). You would also remove all of the internal organs and keep the entrails separate.



Next you would cut the carcass into four large heavy pieces, by following the natural divisions of the animal's bone structure. Think about the effort required to do it. While you were busy doing all of that, the priests were busy preparing the altar.

⁷ The sons of Aaron, the priest, shall put fire on the altar and lay the wood in order upon the fire.

The sons of Aaron would go to the Altar of Incense inside the tent to get "sacred fire" and carry it to the Altar by the entrance. They would place the fire on the floor of the Altar and then lay wood above it.

⁸ Then sons of Aaron, the priests, shall lay in order the pieces, the head and the fat, upon the wood that is on the fire upon the altar.

The priests took the head and the four pieces of the carcass and placed them upon the grate above the burning wood. The larger pieces required more than one priest to carry them. In addition to the above pieces, the priests also placed the "fat" on the altar -- *the internal organs consisting of the heart, liver, kidney, etc.* While the priests were doing this you would have been very busy with the next task.

⁹ He shall wash its entrails and its legs with water. The priests shall burn the whole animal on the altar as a burnt offering, a food offering by fire, a pleasing odor to Adonai.

You would have been washing the legs and the entrails, which was no small task. Entrails primarily consisted of the intestines, which in a mature bull can be up to 170 feet long – *a distance of from the goal line to past the 50 yard line of a football field.* Rabbinic sources indicate that you had to wash them three times in order to remove all of the dung.¹⁰ Once again, keep in mind why you are doing all of this – *to voluntarily come near to God.* It wasn't because you were commanded to or because you committed some sin.

The priests burned the whole bull on the altar and it was "a pleasing odor" to Adonai. Take a moment to think about what had taken place and how things looked where you were standing. What do you think the ground looked like where you slaughtered the bull, skinned it, and washed 170 feet of intestines? Smoke was rising in the air from the burning pieces of the animal on the altar. What do you think your nose would have smelled, when you consider everything that had or was taking place? The rabbis suggest that the aroma of the offering pleased Adonai not because of its literal smell, but because it was the final step of a person coming near Him. *One of His people had voluntarily chosen to invest his time and wealth to do everything required for him to come near Him.*

If Moses had not conveyed Adonai's message to the Israelites, this could not have happened. If the priests had not done their part, it would not have been possible. The priest did much more than just what is described above.

- **Gershon clans** were responsible for care of the tabernacle and tent, coverings, curtain at the entrance, curtains of the courtyard, curtain at the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, and ropes & everything related to their use
- **Kohath clans** were responsible for care of the sanctuary, Ark of the Covenant, Table of Shewbread, Menorah, Altar of Incense, Altar at the entrance, articles of the sanctuary used in ministering, the curtain, and everything related to their use.

- **Merari clans** were responsible for care of the frames of the tabernacle, crossbars, posts, bases, all its equipment, and everything related to their use, posts of surrounding courtyard & their bases, tent pegs & ropes
- **Moses & Aaron clans** were responsible for the care of the sanctuary on behalf of the Israelites and protect it from trespassers. Anyone other than the priests who approached the sanctuary, unless they were bringing a QORBAN, offering or sacrifice was to be put to death.

In addition to the priests, the person presenting the QORBAN had to do the work of raising his animals. He had to take care of the herd. It probably took a long period of time to be able to produce an animal without a blemish. Such an animal would be the most valuable animal he possessed. As the child will learn when he studies the account of Cain and Abel, God requires the best one can give, not that simply something be brought to the altar. Why would someone give less than their best to God? Jesus would teach that it would be because they loved and valued their wealth more than God.

As the child studies other lessons of the Torah, he will learn that other things are involved too. Jesus apparently had been taught these same lessons too and used an example of the QORBAN in his teachings. He used it to reveal what was even more important than correctly doing all of the steps required to bring a QORBAN to God.

Therefore, if you are offering your QORBAN at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your QORBAN there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Think about this. After all of that work, your QORBAN is ready for the priests to put on the altar, the wood is burning and everything is ready. At that moment you remember that you have committed an offense against your brother or sister, Jesus said, you are to leave it there at the altar and leave. Go find the person you committed an offense against. Take the required steps of making restitution and asking for forgiveness. After you have been reconciled with the person, then go back to the Temple, to the altar, and ask the priests to complete the process of burning your QORBAN. The message is clear. *Until you are reconciled with your brother or sister, just presenting a QORBAN will not bring you near to God.* What is the most important to God, a person burning a dead animal or a person reconciling relationships with his brothers and sisters, who are also Adonai's people? Adonai cares more about the wholeness of His people. He calls that SHALOM. The same message is taught by the Torah, Prophets, Writings, and the rabbis.

Reconciling a relationship, the biblical way, by making restitution and seeking forgiveness to restore it to what it was before can take much more effort than preparing a QORBAN, but it is a prerequisite for coming near God. So, regardless of how you come near to God, keep in mind what is the most important. Praying, reading the Bible and singing must also include repairing the world by reconciling one harmed relationship at a time. **BHC**

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tannaim>

² <http://www.lookstein.org/articles/bible.htm>

³ *Soferim* 5:9

⁴ The Religion of Ancient Israel by Patrick D. Miller; p. 131 (Google Books)

⁵ *Leviticus Rabba* 7.

⁶ *Vayikra*; p. 49.

⁷ Leviticus 22:22-25

⁸ *Vayikra Rabbah* 2:7

⁹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13531-shehitah>

¹⁰ *Tamid* 4:2

November Memorials

In Their Remembrance

In Loving Memory

**PAMELA
STRYKER**

December 11, 1941
November 21, 2000

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

*May the memories of our loved ones
inspire us to seek in our lives those
qualities of mind and heart which we
recall with special gratitude.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May the memories of our loved ones
deepen our loyalty to that which cannot
die -- our faith, our love, and devotion
to our spiritual heritage.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer
Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**JOHNNIE
VERA BOND**

February 21, 1893
November 30, 1985

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete SHALOM
forever!*

Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them by the BHC Memorial Garden and Memorials which are printed in this newsletter. The Memorial Garden is on the website at <http://www.biblicalheritage.org>. Please visit the Memorial Garden the next time you are online and stop by often. If you would like to add a loved one, send their information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. Share your memories about those who mean so much to you with a BHC Memorial.

Even though they have gone on to a place we cannot see, their presence is alive in our hearts today.

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