

Attitudes to Leviticus

This week is a week of beginnings in our Torah reading cycle. We experience the rare event of taking three scrolls from the Ark this Shabbat. The first is the regular Shabbat portion cycle. This week we begin the third book of the Torah, Leviticus, Vayikrah. Our second scroll is read in honor of the coincidence of the new month of Nisan, beginning on Shabbat. And our third scroll is the final installation of the special unit of Torah readings that are arranged as we lead into Pesach. This final, special reading is called Parshat Hachodesh and it marks the historic event of the start of God-given time to the Israelites in Egypt.

Our regular Shabbat reading, Leviticus, also known as the Law of the Priests, centers on the sacred realm - the pure, impure, holy and profane. Of all the books of the Torah, Vayikrah is the most esoteric. Some students may approach this book, feeling similar to the Talmudic explanation as to why the Torah would include the mitzvah for parents to stone their wayward son, to which, the answer is given - there never was such a case, but the Torah included that injunction as opportunity to learn. We don't perform these mitzvot, but we can learn from them.

Perhaps, the great *yeshivot* and study halls would start children on their course of study with Leviticus as a pedagogic value: the student of Torah must study all of Torah, no matter the degree of application. *Torah Lishmah*, Torah study for its own sake is the highest achievement in the sphere of Torah. If teachers give students a demanding, intellectually challenging goal in their studies, students are more likely to try and reach, rather than settle with the lowest common denominator. By beginning a life of Torah study with Vayikrah, students understand that they are being challenged to study Torah for its own sake.

However, Maimonides laments in his introduction to the Mishna that of all talmudic discourse - the order of *Kodshim*, the sacred realm, has the least original insights. He suggests that the reason for the dearth is because we don't offer the sacrifices daily. Prayer in synagogue has replaced the sacrifices that were offered in the Temple in Jerusalem. So a regular challenge that we face as we move through this book is making the texts and the commandments relevant.

On a somewhat painful note, Nachmanides explains in his introduction to the book of Vayikrah that the goal of this book is to teach the community how to preserve the Divine presence in the Temple. But the painful reality is that when the Temples fell and our exile began, we lost the Divine presence. We live in a state of *hester panim*, the hidden face of God. Then studying Leviticus is to look at a portrait of a world long gone.

Finally, when thinking about Vayikrah, we recall the prophetic mantra, which finds many resonances from the phrase 'why do you offer Me all these sacrifices?' In ancient Israel, sacrifices were so commonplace that they became empty; meaningless gestures. This is the danger of ritual; our sacred task can become ritualized. We put food in our mouths at dinner time even though we are not hungry; we offer a sacrifice to God, even though it is insincere. Solomon wrestled with this idea: 'Righteousness and justice is more desirable to God than sacrifices.' (Proverbs 21:3) Prayer, like sacrifices has the danger of becoming routine. This is the work of the searcher - sanctify the ordinary.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
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