

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Andy Shugerman

Leviticus Rabbah 1:7

ד"א ויקרא אל משה מה כתיב למעלה מהענין פ' משכן כאשר צוה ה' את משה משל למלך שצוה את עבדו וא"ל בנה לי פלטיין על כל דבר ודבר שהיה בונה היה כותב עליו שמו של מלך והיה בונה כתלים וכותב עליהן שמו של מלך היה מקרה בקורות והיה כותב עליהן שמו של מלך לימים נכנס המלך לתוך פלטיין על כל דבר ודבר שהיה מביט היה מוצא שמו כותב עליו אמר כל הכבוד הזה עשה לי עבדי ואני מבפנים והוא מבחוץ קראו לו שיכנס לפני ולפנים כך בשעה שאמר לו הקב"ה למשה עשה לי משכן על כל דבר ודבר שהיה עושה היה כותב עליו כאשר צוה ה' את משה אמר הקב"ה כל הכבוד הזה עשה לי משה ואני מבפנים. והוא מבחוץ קראו לו שיכנס לפני ולפנים לכך נאמר ויקרא אל משה

Another interpretation of "The LORD called to Moses . . ." (Lev. 1:1). What is written prior to this? The section about [the building of] the Tabernacle, [with its repeating phrase]: "just as the LORD commanded Moses."

This may be compared to [the parable of] a king who commanded his servant, telling him, "Build me a palace." On everything he built, he wrote the name of the king; he built the walls, and wrote on them the name of the king; he built pillars, and wrote on them the name of the king; he roofed it with beams, and wrote on them the name of the king. After some time, the king entered the palace, and on everything he saw he found his name written. The king said: "All this honor has my servant shown me, and I [alone] am inside, while he is without! Call him so he may enter the innermost chamber."

So, too, when the Blessed Holy One said to Moses, "Make Me a Tabernacle," [Moses] wrote on everything he made, "just as the LORD commanded Moses." Said the Blessed Holy One: "Moses has shown Me all this honor, and I am within while he is without! Call him, that he may enter the innermost [part of the Tabernacle]." Therefore it is said, "And the LORD called to Moses [from the Tent of Meeting] . . ." (Lev. 1:1).

The rabbis who composed midrashim often assumed the roles of literary critic and of storyteller, occasionally at the same time. In the passage above, the anonymous author of this interpretation spins a tale of devotion and intimacy based on two simple insights from a close reading of this week's and last week's Torah portions. This rabbinic text also challenges us to consider how and where we find God today.

The phrase "just as the LORD commanded Moses" appears eighteen times in Exodus 39–40. That tabulation, especially with such an auspicious total figure, inspires many midrashim about the meaning of such intense repetition. Here the recurring phrase explains the setting for the opening verse of Leviticus, in which God calls to Moses "from the Tent of Meeting." The parable depicts Moses as "the servant," faithfully following the king's instructions and demonstrating this fidelity with plaque-like dedications to honor his master. The grateful king reciprocates by inviting his servant to join him in the palace's "innermost chamber."

This allegory expresses the rabbis' understanding of Moses as the paradigmatic community builder, who creates personal and public space in which to encounter God. The "palace" Moses erects is sacred because of his commitment to the One who commands us to place such space at the center of our lives and at the heart of our communities. May our Pesah cleaning rededicate us to these spiritual homes.

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Rabbi Marc Wolf

Vice Chancellor and Chief Development Officer
(212) 678-8933
mawolf@jtsa.edu



Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yikra

Leviticus 1:1–5:26

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Parashah Commentary

This commentary was written by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

Four months ago, an Orthodox rabbi here in Israel made headlines by urging his yeshiva students to resist any orders to evacuate settlements in the West Bank. In his book entitled *Revivim*, Rabbi Eliezer Melamed writes, "a simple halakhah is that it is forbidden for any person, whether a soldier or an officer, to participate in the strictly forbidden act of expelling Jews from their homes and handing over any portion of the Land of Israel to enemies . . . Those who violate this violate several commandments of Torah" (*Ha'aretz*, November 18, 2009). Rabbi Melamed's directives rightfully caused a stir in all segments of Israeli society. And indeed, his misguided wisdom merited the criticism of Prime Minister Netanyahu who declared that "refusing to obey orders means the breakdown of the state. It must not happen, and we will do everything possible to put an end to it." Israel's Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, also took Melamed to task for undermining Israeli democracy. While one may be sympathetic Melamed's opposition to the expulsion of Jews from the biblical land of Israel, the rabbinic tradition teaches *dina demalchuta dina*, that "the law of the land is the law." Melamed's position *vis à vis* his students is one of significant influence and power. Indeed, his words had the potential to cause significant bloodshed. Melamed's reckless disregard for the Israeli government, and indeed for his students, demonstrated a lack of responsible leadership.

Va-yikra, the third and middle book of Torah, provides an invaluable lesson in recognizing the need for communal responsibility. While this week's Torah reading—and indeed the whole book of Leviticus—is consumed with the sacrificial rites that dominated Israelite religion until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, its lessons on expiatory sacrifices cannot go unnoticed. To be sure, the common Israelite is given a clear directive of how to atone for his sins—be they intentional or unintentional transgressions. More than that, instructions are given to both the religious and political leaders in the case of serious offenses. Leviticus 4:3 teaches, "If it is the anointed priest who has incurred guilt, so that blame falls upon the people,

he will offer for the sin of which he is guilty a bull of the herd without blemish as a sin offering to the Lord.” Far from referring to the *kohen ha-gadol*, the high priest, as infallible, there is a keen recognition on the part of Torah that he too can err and therefore must operate within the framework of the sacrificial system. As the most powerful religious leader in the system, he too must subscribe to its stringencies. Also notable is the extent to which Torah underscores the potential for this religious leader to lead the people astray. His behavior is watched closely by his flock and so the entire nation may fall victim to his waywardness. So too is the case with political leaders. The same chapter of Leviticus legislates, “in case it is a chieftain who incurs guilt . . . he will bring as his offering a male goat without blemish” (Leviticus 4:22–23). The *JPS Torah Commentary* explains “unlike the priest, the [chieftain or] *nasi* was a secular leader, not one who held sacred office” (*JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*, 24). The political power in this leader’s hands also does not make him immune to Torah. He too must be held accountable for transgressions.

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai offers a rich commentary on Leviticus 4:22. The verse opens “*asher nasi yekheteh*,” when a chieftain incurs guilt. Commentators have pointed out how unusual it is for the verse to begin with the word “*asher*” (here translated as “when” but typically meaning “that”). *BT Horayot 10b* relates, “Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai taught [based on this verse], ‘*Happy* is the generation whose political leaders bring an expiatory sacrifice.’” (Ben Zakkai reads “*asher*” as “*osher*,” *happy*). Quite beautifully, then, Yohanan ben Zakkai teaches an important lesson about leadership being invested in the community. There is no place for arrogance or hubris. Absolute power often corrupts absolutely and Torah is keenly aware of this. Moreover, it is not surprising that such a teaching comes from the mouth of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai who was responsible for ensuring a Jewish future after the destruction of the Second Temple. As Jerusalem was under a violent siege and zealous leaders preached against surrender, ben Zakkai understood the need for flexibility. Judaism and life are too precious to be squandered on arrogance. And so ben Zakkai had himself carried out of the city in a coffin in an effort to negotiate with Vespasian and the Romans. “Give me Yavne and its sages,” he declared. It is through his efforts that Rabbinic Judaism flourished. Undoubtedly, ben Zakkai recognized and felt the deep pain in abandoning Jerusalem under siege. But at the same time he recognized that pridefulness would not win the day. He was, no doubt, a leader who would not hesitate to offer expiatory sacrifices.

Parashat Vayikra, at its core, encourages us—as leaders and laypeople alike—to take responsibility for our actions. We must be cognizant not only of our personal space but also of the communal vision. Without such perspective, selfishness and narrow-mindedness will rule the day. Rather than making personal sacrifices for the benefit of the community and nation, we will be sacrificing ourselves to reckless zealotry. May our spiritual and economic sacrifices today bring us closer to humility and closer to God.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Creative tension is ever present in the poles found within Judaism. We are drawn to the balance between *keva* and *kavannah*, that which is fixed and that which is spontaneous; Hassidim fervently debate the Mitnagdim over the line between spirituality and intellectualism; and we are constantly in search of the golden mean between halakhah (law) and aggadah (lore). Another pair of opposites embedded within Judaism is the constant tension between particularity and universality. To what extent should a Jew be zealous in the *particular* observance of Jewish identity? Or is Torah better understood as a Jewish lens into *universal* experience? Interestingly enough, the opening of Parashat Va-yikra alludes to this mindful balancing act between universality and particularity.

The second verse of the opening chapter of Leviticus states, “Speak to the Children of Israel (benai Yisrael) and say to them, when a human (*adam*) from you presents an offering of cattle to the Lord . . .” (Lev. 1:2). Though the laws relating to the sacrificial observances are clearly addressed to the Israelite community, the transition between the particular “*Children of Israel*” and the universal “*human*” is notable. Rabbi Elie Munk writes:

We are taught that the Temple remains open to all, whatever their religion. Everyone can bring an offering there (Hullin 13b). The Temple has a cosmopolitan character, and so the first words of instruction concerning the sacrificial services remind us of this with the word *adam*. This idea is expanded upon in Isaiah 6:7 where *Hashem* proclaims, “I will bring them to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer; their elevation offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable upon My altar, for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, 4)

While the propensity, and often the ideal, in the observant world is to progressively divorce oneself from the “outside world,” Torah, according to Rabbi Elie Munk, comes to teach us otherwise. One’s temple should and must be open to others. Only in such a place may God’s presence truly dwell.

This topic becomes all the more pressing in the weeks leading up to Passover. Pesah is the quintessential festival of particularity. We celebrate the birth of the Israelites as a nation freed from the oppression of Egypt. Given the Torah’s sacred mantra in the aftermath of the Exodus, however, it would appear that the true message of Pesah is more universal and global in scope. For Torah cautions numerous times, “remember that you were a slave in Egypt,” for the Israelites indeed know well the soul of one who is oppressed. Torah mandates that a lesson be learned: the stranger in one’s midst is to be respected, not exploited. Care and respect must not only be given to the particular Israelite, but it must become a universal value.

May our particularity always be a path toward respecting both ourselves and “the other” in our midst.

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