

Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Approaching Pesah, Part 1: "Turning the Heart"

Two seemingly disconnected texts offer an insight into the experience of Pesah. On Shabbat Hagadol (the Shabbat before Pesah, this year on March 23), the haftarah from Malachi ends with the powerful words, "before the coming of the great and awesome day of God I will send you the prophet Elijah; he will turn the hearts of parents to [their] children, and the hearts of children to parents" (Mal. 3:23).

The gulf between the generations is no more and no less filled with angst and anguish in modernity than in ancient times. If finding love and understanding between parents and children were easy, we would not need the prophet Elijah to bring it about. Among my own memories of seder are no small number of bitter family fights, and I hear many similar reflections from friends and students all over the world. So each year, this haftarah invites us to at least reflect on what it might take to turn the hearts of the generations toward each other.

A different context is presented by the tradition that connects Pesah with *Shir Hashirim* (the Song of Songs). It is chanted (with a beautiful, lyrical melody) during the synagogue service, but is also recited by many at the end of the seder. There is no explicit mention of Pesah in this short book—indeed, there is no direct mention of God. There are two pathways of understanding, each in some way following from a compelling statement of Rabbi Akiba: "The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy [*kedoshim*] and *shir hashirim kodesh kedoshim* the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (Mishnah Yadaim 3:5).

There are some teachings that the text is an allegory for the love between God and Israel that was born in the Pesah story of liberation. Alternately, we recall that Pesah is always in the spring, universally seen as the time for love and lovers. My friend and colleague in London, Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, reflects on the presence of love and hope in the landscape of Bosnia: "The Song of Songs celebrates more than the joining of one man and one woman; the act of generation is itself a meeting of generations: 'I seized him and did not release him until I had brought him to my mother's house to the room where I was conceived' (3:4)" [*The Eternal Journey: Meditations on the Jewish Year*, 163–165].

Approaching Pesah, I invite you to turn again to these ancient texts embedded in our sacred calendar to challenge and inspire us. They compel us to explore our deepest relationships—those between parents and children, between lovers, and with God.

Especially this week, I remind readers that a slightly expanded version of this essay can be read online at learn.jtsa.edu with links to musical clips that will, perhaps, expand and deepen some of the points.

I am always interested to hear from you in response to these essays. In the coming weeks, we will look at several aspects of seder night. I can be reached by email at sabarth@jtsa.edu.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yikra 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Charlie Schwartz, Director of Digital Engagement and Learning, JTS.

Animal Sacrifice on an iPad: Finding Meaning in Va-yikra

The calf flies up in the air as if catapulted by an unseen trampoline, followed in quick succession by a pair of doves, a cruse of oil, and a surprised-looking goat. With a deft swipe of a finger across the screen, each offering is "sacrificed" in front of an animated "Tent of Meeting," complete with a cartoon splash of blood and decapitation. This rather irreverent digital adaptation of the sacrificial service can be played and enjoyed in [Leviticus!](#), a new mobile game published by [G-dcast](#). Lest details of this ancient form of Jewish worship be neglected, players are penalized for "sacrificing" non-kosher animals or animals unfit for sacrifice, and a bonus level allows players to sprinkle blood across the altar as described in the fourth chapter of Va-yikra.

In spite of its use of technology, high production value, and smooth gameplay, *Leviticus!* does not focus on finding meaning as one might expect in a 21st-century educational game. Ironically, this educational stance puts *Leviticus!* firmly in line with the classic pedagogic tradition of introducing children to the study of Torah through the arcane practices of the sacrificial cult described in Va-yikra. As Va-yikra Rabbah 7:3 states, "God said that since both sacrifices and children are in a state of purity let the pure occupy themselves with the pure." That is to say, mere engagement with the surface level of the text, "the pure occupying themselves with the pure," is the essential educational goal of one's first encounter with Torah, without any focus on deeper meanings.

Unfortunately, the lack of depth and meaning in *Leviticus!* leaves the player with the sense that the sacrificial service of the Temple has little relevance for today's Jews outside of a view of Jewish tradition laced with irony; irreverence without the requisite reverence. To that end, I would like to offer three of the many approaches to Va-yikra that might help infuse our reading of the book with meaning beyond flying goats and calves.

Sacrifice as the Ideal Form of Worship

The most traditional approach to sacrifice, the one most embedded in traditional text and prayer, views sacrifice as the ideal form of worship. From this perspective, were it not for the destruction of the holy Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, the Jewish People would be offering sacrifices much as described in Va-yikra and subsequent books of the Torah. It is this view that resonates in the traditional prayer found in the *'Amidah* to "restore the service to the inner sanctuary of your house," and that God will accept "the fire-offerings of Israel and their prayers with love and favor." It is also this understanding of Va-yikra that motivates controversial groups like the Temple Institute to research the Temple service with the goal of one day reestablishing sacrificial worship on the Temple mount.

This literalist view of sacrifice has often been deemphasized in the theology of the Conservative Movement. The prayer calling for the reestablishment of sacrifice found in the traditional *'Amidah* is slightly changed in *Siddur Sim Shalom* to "Restore worship to Your sanctuary. May your people's prayers be accepted with love and favor," thus eliminating

direct reference to animal sacrifice while keeping language relating to the reestablishment of Temple worship. This liturgical shift hints at a second approach to Temple sacrifice.

Sacrifice as a “Divine Ruse”

In his book *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition*, the Jewish philosopher Rabbi David Hartman (z”) explains Maimonides’ rationalist approach to sacrifice this way: “The prophecy of Moses arose in response to the seductions of idolatry. Because Israel was similar to all the nations it was vulnerable to pagan influences. The Bible legislated the qorbanot and many other laws in order to gradually wean the community from idolatry” (73).

For Maimonides, sacrifice is not an end unto itself, but rather a means to slowly move the Israelite People away from the idolatrous ways. The ultimate goal of sacrifice becomes that of developing a more pure form of worship focused around prayer and the contemplation of God’s nature. The laws of Va-yikra come to subdue the power of ritual sacrifice that had its origins in idolatry. Writing about these laws, Maimonides states in his *The Guide for the Perplexed*, “All this was intended to restrict this kind of worship [sacrifice], so that only the portion of it should subsist whose abolition is not required by God’s wisdom” (3:32).

From our modern perspective, this understanding of sacrifice creates a series of intriguing questions that help provide meaning to Va-yikra. Maimonides raises the question of which elements of sacrifice are rooted in idolatry and which are necessary to achieve true worship of God. Which parts of the service must be maintained, and which must be abandoned? In an introspective fashion, this perspective raises the question of whether or not we as a people have moved beyond the need or desire for animal sacrifice in our worship of God. If the answer to this question is that we have not, what might be keeping us mired in the world of idolatry?

Sacrifice as a System of Symbolic Ritual

The third approach to the sacrifice detailed in Va-yikra arises not in opposition to the first two approaches, but as a synthesis of both. In this approach, the complex ritual embedded in the sacrificial cult can be viewed as arising from a deep-seated human desire to be in the Divine Presence. With this understanding, the network of people, actions, objects, and sacrifices of the Temple service were developed out of a particular human or ritual need. While this desire to experience God’s Presence may no longer be satiated through the sacrificial cult, the need itself is still present in us and our communities. Each element of the sacrificial service then takes on the possibility of becoming a metaphor of it. In a description first brought to my attention by Chancellor Arnold M. Eisen, the anthropologist Mary Douglas views Va-yikra as “philosophizing by sacrifice.” Our job as we make our way through Va-yikra becomes to carefully study the nature of the sacrifice in order to uncover the philosophy behind it. This process has the potential to transform every aspect of the Temple service into potent metaphors and symbols for our modern world.

Examples of the complex symbolic power of Va-yikra have been expertly described by my colleagues in the numerous Torah commentaries now hosted on learn.jtsa.edu: From Rabbi David Hoffman’s description of the *hattat* offering as demanding that we take responsibility for our actions and the world in “[Sin, Ritual Pollution, and Divine Alienation](#)” to Rabbi Abigail Treu’s belief in “[Finding Inspiration in Bullocks and Bloodstains](#)” that Va-yikra serves as an example of a world grounded in ritual and community that we seek to re-create in our daily lives, the potential to find symbolic meaning in Va-yikra—to uncover the “philosophy” of our ancestors—is almost endless.

While lacking deep meaning, the game Leviticus! is not entirely without merit. After all, the Hebrew word for sacrifice is *korban*, whose root means “to come close,” suggesting that the role of sacrifice is an encounter between God and humanity. Leviticus!, with its

engaging and humorous depiction of sacrificial worship, might serve as a first step toward that encounter, as long as we are willing to go deep and read Va-yikra with an eye toward finding God’s presence in the ancient text and in our modern world, animated flying goats and all.

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A Taste of Torah

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

Bridging the Particular and the Universal

With the opening of the book of Leviticus and its keen focus on sacrifices this coming Shabbat, many laypeople and clergy alike begin an exegetical struggle for connection and relevance. JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen describes the annual crisis well, commenting that

Leviticus is not terribly popular among American Jews . . . Take on the task of assigning members of a prayer or study group to lead discussions on upcoming portions of Torah, and you will have no difficulty finding volunteers for most sections of Genesis or Exodus. Turn the pages of the calendar to the winter months, however, arrive at the blood and gore of sacrifice and the details upon details of purity and pollution, and you will find that interest in the weekly portion has withered. (*Taking Hold of Torah*, 71)

Though the chancellor acknowledges this difficulty, he rightly encourages us to dig deeper in the text and in ourselves as “Leviticus aims to heighten and sanctify ordinary experience” (ibid., 71). Where may we find a vivid example in Parashat Va-yikra that opens this cryptic text to “sanctifying ordinary experience” in the modern world?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch latches on to Leviticus 1:2, “Speak to the Israelite people [*b’nai Yisrael*] and say to them, ‘When any of you [*adam*] presents an offering of cattle to the Lord, he will choose an offering from the herd or from the flock.’” Here, we immediately notice a tension between the particular reference to the Israelites and the universal *adam* or humans. Hirsch writes,

the subject of the Children of Israel is extended by *adam*, humans, and thereby, at the very portal of the laws given for the Jewish Temple, an inscription is made which opens this Temple to all men—not exclusively to Jews. Every human being can bring his offering here . . . Rashi, too, takes the word *adam* here in its most general sense including non-Jews (Hulin 5a). Accordingly, it is not just “the progress of Solomon’s advanced illuminating theories” which first extended “the narrow Mosaic ideas of God and the Temple” to that cosmopolitan outlook. The very first word gives the Temple the most universal mission, and with this one word expressed that which came to be a prophetic proclamation through the mouth of Isaiah: “I will bring them to the Mount of My Sanctuary, I will make them rejoice in My House of Prayer, their elevation offerings and their meal offerings will find favor on My Altar, for My House will be called a House of Payer for all the nations.” (Isaiah 56:7) [*Commentary on Leviticus*, 5]

Hirsch’s explanation is sensitive and insightful. Just as we arrive at a book of Torah that seems to underscore Israeli particularity, a closer, more careful reading yields the opposite observation. *Korbanot*, sacrifices (or more literally, “that which brings one closer to God”), are an institution open to Jews and non-Jews alike. Torah legislates to the Jewish community, but also opens itself to inclusiveness and universality. That is the beauty of our sacred tradition. May each of us aspire to rooting ourselves in our Jewish particularity while at the same time building bridges to other religious communities.

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