

to do good and to do the very opposite of good, if we never caused pain to those we love—Leviticus would not speak as powerfully to the contemporary situation.

For all the differences between us and our ancestors (even our parents!) where love, friendship, and marriage are concerned, Leviticus to my mind remains relevant, even invaluable. The longings and fears that individuals and couples bring to relationships remain constant. “Am I really a good enough person for anyone to want to love or marry, or attractive enough to for anyone to be interested in me?” “Do I have it in me to be faithful to one partner for life—or to my own highest ideals?” “Is this really love I am experiencing, or just desire?” “Can we, whose imperfections are glaring, hope to do a better job raising children than our parents?”

I find myself bringing insights from Leviticus to those who confide such doubts to me. Of course, marriage is hard; it takes a lot of work, and one may fail nonetheless. It requires the support of a caring and just community. Loving relationships can be exhilarating and depressing, wonderfully clear and hopelessly messy, all at the same time. They can make life holy—and cause great pain. I attest humbly that my wife and children are by far the greatest gifts I have in this world, and that the Torah, another of my greatest gifts, helps me mightily to love them. The problem with marriage as with life, I say (this too very much in the spirit of Leviticus) is not that the years drag on but that they speed by much too fast.

The Jewish wedding ceremony expresses these truths eloquently through poetry and ritual. The seven blessings recited under the huppah connect the human beings who are about to join one another on life’s journey to humanity as a whole, going back to Adam and Eve, and to the Creator of humanity. The self-respect and dignity the couple bring to the task of loving one another are linked to the Source of dignity, Whose image we human beings bear. The couple are called “loving *re'im*” in a clear echo of Leviticus 19:18, and the relationship that the wedding ceremony sanctifies is described with six different words for joy and four for various aspects of love. Leviticus, devoted to ritual at every turn, would not be surprised that the Jewish wedding captures a complexity of thought and emotion that language and law cannot.

I am immensely grateful for this book of Torah and for the instruction to love at its heart.

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ויקרא תשע"ח



Leviticus on Love

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This week’s commentary is part of a special series for 5778, in which Chancellor Eisen reflects on the main themes of each of the five books of the Torah and their meaning for contemporary Jewish life.

I was on a small cruise ship with my family in Alaska this summer, when a couple whom I had come to like and admire asked me with great respect a question that Jews have been hearing from Christians for many centuries, one that had been put to me more than once by students at Stanford: “How can Jews worship the God of the Old Testament, so full of harsh judgment and wrath, and so unlike the God of the New Testament, who calls to human beings in love?”

I explained—patiently, I hope—that I, like most Jews I know, do not experience God or the Hebrew Bible that way. The prayers we recite overflow with expressions of love and injunctions to love. At the very center of the Torah, in chapter 19 of the book of Leviticus, we find (v. 18) the instruction that Jesus said was the most important of all: to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Rabbi Akiba too called this “the great principle” of Torah. Love is an integral part of the regimen of holiness to which Leviticus calls its readers: not taking vengeance, treating strangers and the needy well, offering sacrifices properly on the altar, observing the Sabbath, and performing dozens of other acts of justice and kindness. Every one of these commandments is a gift of God, Who reaches out to Jews and all other peoples in love, and Whose loving instruction—Torah—guides us in loving our neighbor.

The conversation on the boat made me consider that Christians and their clergy (and theologians) seem to talk more about love than Jews do. The reason is perhaps related to the fact that we and our rabbis (and even our theologians) also seem to talk less about *God*. It’s as if modern Jews find both these subjects too daunting to broach. We want to be credible when we teach Torah in this complex and rapidly changing world. Biblical notions of love (or of God!) can sometimes seem woefully outdated or even primitive. Our conception of marriage has evolved from what it was even a few short years ago. It is certainly not self-evident, reading Leviticus 19:18, who

should be counted as a “neighbor,” or that one owes neighbors more than all others.

I believe that it’s worth pausing, as we prepare to enter the precincts of Leviticus once more, to think a bit about love. Let’s stipulate at the outset that the Torah, as much as philosophers and poets through the ages who have written about the matter, understands that there is more than one sort of love—and believes these varieties of love are integrally related. There is the love that Jacob feels for Rachel (Gen. 29:20). There is the love of neighbor, extended by Leviticus (19:34) to the “stranger.” There is the love of God with all one’s heart, soul, and might, joined in Deuteronomy (6:4–5), and in daily Jewish liturgy, to the proclamation of God’s Oneness or Unity. Elsewhere in the Bible, there is the love of close friends, evident in the relationship of David and Jonathan (e.g. 1 Sam. 20:41–42, 2 Sam. 1:26). And there is the erotic desire—heightened by fantasy and longing—of the Song of Songs, later read by Jewish and Christian commentators as an allegory of human love for God. I doubt the Bible would have exercised the hold it has on millions over so many centuries and cultures down to our own day, were its teachings on love less complex or profound.

Leviticus (like the rest of Torah) claims no monopoly on wisdom or insight. Nor does it address itself only to Jews. The book is in many respects a “manual for priests” on which the rest of us, as it were, eavesdrop. Instruction in the various sorts of sacrifice and how to perform them correctly was no doubt of some interest to the Israelites who brought those animals to the altar, forced thereby to contemplate the fact that they too were mortal, and enabled to express petition, remorse, or thanksgiving.

Contemporary readers, distant from sacrifice and perhaps repelled by all the blood, gore, and priestly technicalities, can still derive meaning from Leviticus’s attention to human frailty and imperfection, its sustained reflection on the importance of ritual, and its understanding of the need for holiness and community. These concerns are universal, common to all human beings of whatever tradition. Only the details of ritual—like the language we speak, the cultural inflection of our love—is particular. Leviticus knows we have much to learn from other sources, as we do from experiences that take place outside the walls of the Tabernacle. It assumes that we will do this when studying its lessons about love.

I read its words very much with Plato’s *Symposium* in mind—specifically the passage in which the goddess Diotima defines love as “the desire to have the good for oneself always” (204e–205a). Plato starts with *desire*: higher and lower, conscious and unconscious. He surely got that right. Note too his insistence—also correct, I think, and very much like that of Leviticus—that we desire not only those we love but the *good* that we hope to attain in and through them. We aim to be

better than we are. We want our friends and partner in life, who know us as we are, and love us nonetheless, to help us do that. And we want this love to be “*forever*.” The content of that wish varies from person to person and culture to culture. Modern adults, “religious” or not, want at the very least to walk on a way that is larger than themselves and perhaps everlasting. They want to be connected to and serve the very essence of things; to live Life with a capital L; to love those held close with love that is from the Source of all things, the Source of love. One can translate Deuteronomy 6:5 as enjoining us to “love *with* the Lord your God.” The human ability to love with *all* our heart, soul, and might is a function of the fact that this love stems from “the Lord your God, Who is One.”

It is clear from the immediate context of Leviticus’s command to love the neighbor (“do not take vengeance or bear a grudge”) that it believes love to be a matter of behavior and not only of feeling. Love does not dwell *inside* individuals but *between and among* them. The Torah, here as always, focuses on the objective realm that people share and the communities they build together. Commentators have long noted that the syntax of the Hebrew directs love *toward* the neighbor rather than *at* them. We first learn to love in this way at home, if we are blessed with loving parents, and we must continually practice the art of love-in-action throughout our lives (this too, if we are so blessed, in large part at home). As one recent book on marriage puts it, connecting internal attitude to external behavior very much in the spirit of Leviticus, “vulnerability [is] what love is all about . . . yielding control, revealing weakness, embracing imperfection, and opening ourselves up to the possibility of loss” (Daniel Jones, *Love Illuminated*).

What is true between adults who love one another acquires still more force when they together (or as single parents) raise children. One hopes with all one’s being that the children will store up love and share it one day with others; that they will be *good* to a degree their parents never managed to attain, and that life will be good to them; that suffering will not come their way. The desire for “*always*” takes on new meaning when children (and eventually grandchildren) join parents, friends, and spouses in the congregation of those we love. Everything matters more, including community. Relationships are more fraught. Love is fiercer. We give more as parents than we ever thought we had or could. We also hold back, in ways that are surprising. We love friends, partners, and parents differently. Life takes on added texture. So too does the prospect of death.

Leviticus understands these things very well, I believe, and offers profound guidance in dealing with them. It is utterly “up front” about imperfection, mortality, and sex—and therefore insists that “holiness”—the book’s key term—must be practiced in daily life, and in the family as much as in the Tabernacle or the community. Were human beings immortal or flawless, were we not plagued by insecurity and self-deception, were we not subject to powerful desires that impel us