

Selected Shorts: Vayikra  
Rabbi Eliot Malomet March 20, 2021 7 Nisan 5781

ויקרא א':א'

(א) וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֵלָיו מֵאֶהֱל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר:

**Leviticus 1:1**

*The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying.* Recall that at the end of Exodus the cloud filled the Tent of Meeting and Moses could not enter. This next phase begins with a kind of separation, distancing, and also a 'drawing near.' This is possibly why the tradition sees in the odd phrasing, "*He called...and spoke*" as a kind of invitation. To the rabbis, זה דרך חבה וזרוח למשה, this is with love and encouragement to Moses. Not only is it an invitation to Moses, it is, quite interestingly, an invitation also, to all of us. We notice the small aleph in the word וַיִּקְרָא Vayikra. The rabbis claim that Moses wanted to write ויקר which means, "he just happened to" a reference to the way God speaks to Bilam. Not wanting to equate Moses with Bilam, God instructs Moses to write ויקרא but Moses writes it with a small aleph in humility.

ויקרא א':ב'

אָדָם כִּי־יִקְרִיב מִמֶּם קָרְבָּן לַה'

**Leviticus 1:2**

*A human from you who will make an offering...*

R. Friedman points out that the use of the word אדם here links Leviticus to Genesis. Further, in the next instance (2:7) the sacrificer is referred to by the word נפש and then in the third instance (2:23) as איש. "Creation and sacrifice are linked. Creation produces life. Sacrifice takes life."

ויקרא א':ג'

(ג) אִם־עֹלָה קָרְבָּנוֹ מִן־הַבְּקָר זָכָר תָּמִים יִקְרִיבֶנּוּ אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּקְרִיב אֹתוֹ לְרֹצְנוֹ לִפְנֵי ה':

**Leviticus 1:3**

*(3) If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall make his offering a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, for acceptance in his behalf before the LORD.* The text compresses a human story. I am moved to bring a sacrifice, but what shall I bring? A large animal or a small one? Bovine or bird? Animal or vegetable? To be completely burnt? Why a male? Where do I take it? Why do I take it there? Why can't I make it in my own space, or in an open space like Abraham

or Jacob? Will my sacrifice – or I – be accepted by God like Abel's, or rejected, like Cain's?

ויקרא א':ד'

(ד) וְסָמָךְ יָדוֹ עַל רֹאשׁ הָעֹלָה וַנִּרְצָה לוֹ לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו:

**Leviticus 1:4**

*(4) He shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, that it may be acceptable in his behalf, in expiation for him.* Some think that the hand-leaning is to "transfer" sins to the animal, or to "substitute" the animal for the person offering. A persuasive explanation: it is to "designate." *Transference* suggests magic (a no-no) and if it was a *substitution* the slaughter of the offering would be the high point. However, the placing of blood on the altar is the climax of the sacrificial rite. "In placing the hand on the animal's head, the offerer attests that this victim is his indeed, that the sacrifice which is about to be presented by the priest is offered in his [the offerer's] name, and that the benefits accruing from it will return to him." (DeVaux). The sanctuary is an island of silence in a cacophony of sound. This is a silent gesture of ownership, not a bellicose declaration.

ויקרא ב':י"ג

(יג) וְכָל־קָרְבָּנוֹ מִמִּנְחָתֶךָ בַּמִּלַּח וְהַמִּלַּח וְלֹא תִשְׁבִּית מִלַּח בְּרִית אֱלֹהֶיךָ מֵעַל מִנְחָתֶךָ עַל פְּלִי־קָרְבָּנֶיךָ תִּקְרִיב מִלַּח: (ס)

**Leviticus 2:13**

*(13) You shall season your every offering of meal with salt; you shall not omit from your meal offering the salt of your covenant with God; with all your offerings you must offer salt.* What is it about salt? Salt is mineral, not organic. Salt has to be mined or "harvested". Eat too much...you die. Eat too little...you also die. Together with sugar and fat, "bliss." Without it, blandness. You kasher meat with salt. Babies were massaged with salt (in some ancient customs) at birth. Salt is minerality, mystery and eternity. And we remind ourselves of its "covenant-ality" every time with say the *motzi* and sprinkle the bread with salt.

**Some Interesting Quotes to Ponder on Vayikra**

Vayikra is an optimistic book. It assumes the world is a well-integrated ecosystem that comes with a troubleshooting guide for when things go wrong. Vayikra doesn't blame people for things

going wrong, it offers a toolkit to restore the ecosystem.

-Dr. Tamara Eskenazi

### **Priest and Prophet**

**The Prophet** is essentially a one-sided man. A certain moral idea fills his whole being, masters his every feeling and sensation, engrosses his whole attention. He can only see the world through the mirror of his idea... His whole life is spent in fighting for this ideal with all his strength; for its sake, he lays waste his powers, unsparing of himself, regardless of the conditions of life and the demands of the general harmony. He remains always a man apart, a narrow-minded extremist, zealous for his own ideal, and intolerant of every other...

It is otherwise with **the Priest**. He appears on the scene at a time when Prophecy has already succeeded in hewing out a path for its Idea. But the Priest has not the strength to fight continually against necessity and actuality; his tendency is rather to bow to the one and come to terms with the other. Instead of clinging to the narrowness of the Prophet, and demanding of reality what it cannot give, he broadens his outlook and takes a wider view of the relation between his Idea and the facts of life. Not what ought to be, but what can be, is what he seeks.

-Ahad Ha'am, *Priest and Prophet*, 1893

Leviticus is usually put into a kind of glass cabinet: it can be looked at, respected, and wondered at, but the real heart of the religion is presumed to be found in other parts of the Bible, especially Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy, and the writings of the psalmists and prophets. The tradition does Leviticus wrong.

-Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*.

How Israel was to realize the divine program is the burden of the Book of Leviticus.

-Baruch Levine, *JPS Commentary*

Following the mighty *acts* of God in Exodus, Leviticus is disproportionately the *words* of God...the entire book of Leviticus is set in one place: at the foot of Mount Sinai. In Exodus, the universe - the land, waters, and sky - is in disarray. Following that, Leviticus is concerned with orderliness, arrangement.

-Richard Elliot Friedman, Commentary

Leviticus, the name of the third book of the Pentateuch has nothing to do with the Levites. In Hellenistic times, the term "Levites" meant priests, and this is what 'Leviticus' means...In Exodus, the priestly texts describe the construction of the cultic implements (Tabernacle and priestly vestments). In Leviticus this static picture is converted into scenes from the living cult. Numbers follows with the cultic laws of the camp in motion...it is no accident that all of the cultic laws pertaining to the Levites are in Numbers, and none are in Leviticus.

-Jacob Milgrom – *Anchor Bible*

Values are what Leviticus is all about.

-Jacob Milgrom

Nevertheless, all these regulations are reflections of a pervasive spiritual seriousness grounded in a comprehensive, coherent conception of reality. This ritual implementation of the monotheistic vision was a battle against the inchoate. Holiness could be achieved and had to be protected, only by a constant confirmation of the hierarchical distinction, by laying out reality in distinct realms and categories separated by barricades of prohibitions.

-Rober Alter, *Translation*

Leviticus may seem strange, but it is the origin. It holds lessons...Leviticus is the classical text of what might be called hard-core Judaism.

-Leon Wieseltier in *Congregation*

### **"Meet the Cohens"**

A wag once observed that P is the only hypothetical author of the Documentary Hypothesis whose last name we know for sure – Cohen. The problem, a modern scholar might add, is that no one knows P's *first* name. And why is that a problem? Because it is certainly possible that two texts, both demonstrating an interest in things priestly, could have been written by two completely different Cohens living in different times and having radically different views. This, in fact, turned out to be what most modern scholars have concluded about the various parts of Leviticus.

-James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*

**SHABBAT SHALOM!**