

Parsha Vayikrah **Leviticus Chapters 1-5**

Vayikrah is the first parsha in the Book of Leviticus. If you read the previous parshot in the Book of Exodus, you will see that the Israelites, having left Egypt and having just received the Ten Commandments from Moses at Mt. Sinai, now settle into a more structured mode. They are instructed in civil laws, moral laws and basic justice. They are told how to build the Holy Tabernacle and the implements used in it by the High Priests (Aaron and his sons).

The original name for the Third Book of Moses was Torat Cohanim, or The Laws of the Priests. Rabbis were referred to as Priests by the Israelites. Like most Torah portions, the name of the parsha is usually its first word. In this case, both the parsha and the Third Book of Moses are named by its first word, Vayikrah, which means “And (the Lord) called”.

Since most biblical scholars believe that the first two books were written by a person who wished to elevate Moses and the Patriarchs, they also believe that Leviticus was written by a person who wished to elevate Aaron and the Priests. The Book of Leviticus is presented just 4 chapters after the episode of the Golden Calf in which the Children of Israel displayed a loss of faith in God. But there were Israelites who had faith, even though they knew they would not enter the Promised Land, and they felt it incumbent upon themselves to convince the rest of the Children of Israel that in spite of what they had done, they still were THE CHOSEN PEOPLE. So these writings exist to make us remember that as Jews we are different, that we have a special relationship with God, and that we need to make an ongoing effort to maintain that relationship.

The priests were the means that the average Israelite could reach God. While we know the priests were not infallible, a key to Leviticus is recognizing that by following the special customs described therein, the Children of Israel could distinguish themselves from the other peoples in the region and create a unique civilization that somehow endures to this day.

The first half of the Book of Leviticus deals with animal sacrifice, which was an essential part of human worship. **The concept of prayer did not exist at this time!**

Note that the Israelites practiced ONLY animal sacrifice. God did not think highly of tribes who sacrificed human beings. Although the rituals pertaining to each type of sacrifice are extremely complex, they contain no magic or unusual spiritual chants. This is not witchcraft in any form. Every item in the ritual was chosen for a specific reason.

Actually, sacrifice is a bad translation. When we bring cows, sheep and goats to the Temple in Jerusalem, the Hebrew word used is "*karban*." As Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (19th century German leader) points out, the root for *karban*, which is "karov", can best be thought of as "being close." No word in the English language approaches a good translation, though conceptually it relates to being a "gift." So sacrifices correspond to a way of getting closer to God by giving him a gift of something that you value. As I understand it, the wealthier you were, so was the level of your sacrifice, which could therefore range from an ox or a lamb, to a bird, perhaps sheaves of wheat or barley mixed with oil and frankincense, or an item as simple as fruit.

I am not sure how slaves who were recently freed from bondage in Egypt could have accumulated such different levels of personal property, and while I have never read of social issues arising from this disparity, it makes me pause and think about the notion in this day and age of "privilege".

Bimbam.com presents an interesting analogy. These old world sacrifices are similar in today's world to welcoming your new neighbor by knocking on their door and giving them a gift, or inviting them to a cookout or just for drinks. It is part of the concept of getting closer, and it is your choice as to how lavish you want to be.

As I noted earlier, this parsha describes in great detail how to select and prepare a sacrifice to God. While the husband might prepare the food for your modern cookout, only Aaron and his sons performed the actual sacrifices, which were classified as follows:

- The *olah* or "burnt offering" was a voluntary sacrifice that had a high degree of sanctity and was regarded as the "standard" offering. The entire animal, except for its hide, was burned on the altar. (1:1-17)
- The *mincha* or "meal offering" was a sacrifice made of flour, oil, frankincense and salt that was partly burned on the altar and partly given to the priests. (2:1-16)
- The *zevach sh'lamim* or "sacrifice of well-being" was a voluntary animal offering from one's herd, sometimes brought to fulfill a vow. (3:1-17)

- The *chatat* or "sin offering" was an obligatory sacrifice that was offered to expiate unintentional sins. This offering differs from the others in the special treatment of the blood of the animal. (4:1-5:13)
- The *asham* or "penalty offering" was an obligatory sacrifice of a ram that was required chiefly of one who had misappropriated property. (5:1-26)

Sacrifices did not begin with the Tabernacle in the desert. In Genesis and Exodus, we read that Adam, Cain, Able, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses all offered sacrifices, so the concept is not new but the exacting rituals are.

After the destruction of the first Temple, prayer eventually replaced sacrifice. Just as there were 3 sacrifices per day (morning, afternoon and night), there are many Jews now who pray 3 times a day, and our prayer books reflect the different prayers for each time. While our Reform text only has different prayers for Friday evening and Saturday morning, an Orthodox or Conservative text will include the afternoon non-Shabbat evening service along with its slightly different prayers.

As is our custom, we will now put the Torah aside before continuing on with the Haftorah portion. After we all sing the opening blessing, we'll look at it and search for its connection to our parsha.

The Haftorah comes from Isaiah 43-44, and deplores Israel's current neglect of sacrificial worship and their turning towards idolatry. It is addressed to Jews who have been exiled to Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple in 586BC. Since Isaiah lived no later than 700BC, chapters 1-39 are felt to have written by Isaiah and chapters 40-66 by someone else. The writer tells the Israelites that they have acted very poorly towards God, but that their God is full of compassion and will redeem them, thereby once again glorify himself in Israel. Although the Israelites of this time were not able to worship God with sacrifices, the deeper connection between the Torah and Haftorah lies in understanding the importance of any type of appropriate worship in maintaining one's relationship/closeness with God.

Now let's sing the final Haftorah blessing and conclude our service.