PARASHAT VA-YIKRA

First Part in Triennial Cycle

Vayikra (Leviticus) 1 – 2:16

Plaut 756; Hertz: 410; Eitz Hayim 585

About a dozen years ago, I gave a d’var on Parashat Va-Yikra. The parashah begins with Chapter 1, and Verse 1:2 is on sacrifices. Therefore, I spent much of the d’var discussing sacrifices at the Temple and then saying that it was important to know about them but not necessary to study them in detail. I thought about giving the same d’var again today, but I dropped that option. Instead, I will focus on the *Book of Va’Yikra* as a whole. If anyone deserves credit for my decision, it is Rabbi Steven Garton, who gave a course on the *Book of Va-Yikra* (Leviticus) a few years ago—I think it was six weeks on Zoom---that several of us at Adath Shalom took. It gave me a whole new approach to reading Va-Yikra and still influences my d’var today.

Rabbi Garten began by asserting that we really should read these chapters of the Torah, at least once every three years. After all, it is not just Torah in the general sense of Jewish learning but *The* Torah in the specific sense of the first five books of Moses. We would be out of step with most other Jewish communities if we ignored this part of our tradition. Moreover, the Temple and the sacrifices are not just part of our tradition; they are also part of our history. There really was a Temple, and the Temple really was served by priests, and those priests really did offer sacrifices. The Temple and the sacri-fices are mentioned in every Amidah, and it would be inconsistent if we decided not to read about something that is included in the central prayer of our service.

Every modern siddur that I looked at has an introductory section on the *Book of Va-Yikra*, which is Hebrew for “He called,” and is the first word(s) in the text. “He” of course refers to God. The English name, Leviticus, refers to Levi, a son of Leah and Jacob, and the ancestor of the priests. The book also has a second Hebrew name, *Torat Kohanim*, which means instructions for the priests and gives a good indication of what the book contains. That introduction in *Eitz Hayim* (p. 584-5) writes that the Book is an explicit answer to the Prophet Micah’s implicit question, “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God am holy.” The answer of how Israel was to live as a holy nation is the burden of Va-Yikra. Moreover, it is not interpreted solely with respect to ritual and religious activities, but equally with respect to personal, economic, and social activities.

According to *Eitz Hayim*, “Two concepts embody the primary message of Leviticus.”

As I will clarify in a moment, I count it as three concepts. First, the Israelites are one community united by a common destiny and a holy way of life. Then it adds, but I would say “Second,” we are not to worship any other God. Note that the text does not say that there are no other gods. As I will discuss this May when I give my adult ed program on the Prophet Isaiah, it was not until Second Isaiah that *absolute* monotheism, not just monotheism for Jews, was established. Returning to *Eitz Hayim’s* “second,” we were granted our Promised Land—the Land of Canaan—as an eternal land, but, and this is my third concept, only if we Jews, “follow the laws of God and remain faithful to His covenant.”

Even the late Rabbi Plaut, who was a thoroughly Reform rabbi and scholar, found things to praise in the *Book of Va-Yikra*. He comments in his chumash (first edition, p. 733) that the Book “reveals drastic developing concepts of religion and morality within the Bible itself.” Shortly after this statement, he writes, “Most important, perhaps, is the fact that these materials were accessible to all the people.” They were not kept secret and available only to a limited and typically conservative few. Remarkably, unlike the first two books of the Torah, the third contains only limited narrative portions. It is, once more quoting Plaut (p. 734): “essentially a compendium of law.”

The Book of Va-Yikra is 27 chapters long. Not surprisingly, the first seven chapters are about the different types of sacrifices, and the next several about the priesthood and the services they were to lead. Then the Book moves to kashrut and to issues of purity and impurity. The first 16 chapters—over half the Book--have little to involve or interest modern Jews, which is not to say that we should skip them but rather that we should think about how they constituted the origins of Judaism. The people remained Israelites, but gradually they were becoming Jews.

One qualification to all of the foregoing. Though almost everything found in the *Book of Va-Yikra* appears elsewhere in the “P” (for priestly) portions of the Torah, “it is not a completely unified and ordered code.” Those words come from Rabbi Plaut’s chumash (p.735), and he makes the case for that statement very well. As just two examples, Chapters 11 to 15 deal with ritual defilement, but they do not mention the most important source, which is contact with a corpse. And the materials dealing with appropriate and inappropriate things to eat are scattered through several books in the Torah. As Rabbi Plaut concludes, the Book was not written by a single author but rather a compilation drawn from various sources and at various periods of time.

However, that conclusion does not apply to the whole Book. Starting with Chapter 17 and continuing through 26, almost the rest of the Book, one finds a change of topic, albeit not a complete change as it still involves holiness. These ten chapters are subtitled “the Holiness Code,” and these 10 chapters are written with a different content, style, and mood from the first 16 chapters (and from the 27th chapter.) This is where one finds some of those well-known precepts, such as “Love your neighbour as yourself” and “Proclaim liberty throughout the land” even though few will know they come from a Jewish source

This perspective finds its way into aggadic comments in the Talmud:

The Holy One said . . . , “Better to me is one day that you engage in Torah before me than one thousand sacrifices.1[[1]](#endnote-1)2

And:

Torah study is superior to building the temple.1[[2]](#endnote-2)3

No doubt this perspective reflects the views of later generations of rabbis as they began to gather in their academies. A stronger point is made half a millennium later by Rambam (Maimonidies) and by Abarbanel who see sacrifices as a concession to a naive people not ready to accept the full implications of the mysterious God that Moses presented to them.

Also indicative of the fact that few of those provisions had any application by the Middle Ages, they do not appear in the *Shulchan Aruch*, the book for Jewish homes that was published in 1563 in Israel and in Venice two years later. They must have relied on the pair of anecdotes in *Sim Shalom*: one (pg. 15) where Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai tells Rabbi Joshua not to grieve over the destruction of the Temple because we can equally well gain atonement through deeds of loving kindness; the other (pg. 17) where Rabbi Elazar states that charity is greater than all the sacrifices.

Judaism, which had first injected an element of equity by providing for low-cost as well as expensive sacrifices--in effect, from each according to means--then went further and, by emphasizing the importance of prayer, created a truly democratic religion within which everyone had access to God. Sacrifices could only be offered by one tribe in one location in a specific ritual. Words could be offered by anyone at any place in any way.

As expressed by Eskanazi and Weiss in *The Torah: A Women’s* Commentary:

For P. the priests (kohanim) and the Tabernacle are the exclusive intermediaries (and guardians) with regard to God’s holiness. H, however (the Holiness Code), focuses on the people themselves as the vehicle for God’s holiness.

Apropos, the editors have no problem asserting that, though only one woman is mentioned by name, women are as responsible as men for observing the strictures and obligations of the Book of Va-Yikra, and in the Holiness Code one finds a number that are applicable only to women.

In conclusion, and in observance of the Rabbinic view that Torah portions should not end on a downbeat, a view that I think should be extended to Divrai Torah, let me read one final excerpt from Rabbi Reuven Hammer (p. 46):

The God of Israel needed nothing from human beings, but He required much of them -- love, mercy, righteousness, and justice: “to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). Anyone who followed those precepts could come before Him at any time and in any place with words alone. (P. 46)

To which, one can only say, *Amen,* and *Shabbat Shalom*

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)