

Parashat Vayikra
Towards a Macro-Cosmic View of Leviticus
By Rabbi Molly Karp

“God called to Moshe and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them “When a person from among them would bring near (*yakriv*) an offering (*korban*) to Adonoi from the cattle, from the herd and from the flocks you shall bring near (*takrivu*) your offering. (*korbanchem*)” Leviticus 1:1-2

These opening verses of Leviticus, *Vayikra*, contain the Hebrew root *krv* four times, referring to both the person who approaches God, and the offering that s/he brings near to God in order to approach the Holy Presence. What we generally translate as “sacrifice” is literally something that we bring near to God in order to come near to God’s presence.

Vayikra is the central book of the Torah. It is a catalogue of instructions for Israel about how to find, approach, and retain God’s presence in our midst. In the opening words of the book God calls to Moshe; Leviticus calls on all of us, teaching us where we might find God’s presence. This D’var Torah will take a macrocosmic view of *Vayikra*’s teachings.

Parashat Vayikra, along with *Tzav* and *Shemini*, deals with the different kinds of offerings, and the ordination and installation of the *Kohanim*. God does not desire that we lay down our lives on the altar; rather, our offerings replace us, allowing us to draw near to God’s presence. The *Kohanim* are also our proxies, accepting and bringing the offering near to God on our behalf. Thus both God and Israel are protected from the consequences of those who would draw too near to God’s presence. The deaths of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, serve as a cautionary note regarding these dangers.

Shemini suggests that our bodies are analogues to the altar, instructing us to eat only what we may place on it. *Tazria* and *Metzora* continue this idea of the relationship between our bodies and the sacred space, instructing us to separate ourselves from the Holy Space when we have emitted or been in contact with reproductive fluids, or death. The beginning and end of life belong to the Divine domain; we may not approach the Divine through sexual expression or ancestor worship.

Acharei Mot explains how, in the first *Yom Kippur*, the sacred space is annually purified of these contacts with sex and death, in a riddance ritual that includes the scapegoat. *Acharei Mot* ends with Chapter 18, which, together with Chapter 20, addresses sexual morality and worship, instructing us how to behave in our most intimate and private moments with each other and with God.

These chapters envelop *Kedoshim*, the Holiness Code, the heart of *Vayikra*, the heart of the Torah, which describes how to be holy – how to treat each other as made in the image of God, and ways of approaching God that are forbidden. Here we find perhaps the most famous verse in Torah: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am *Adonoi*” (Leviticus 19:18).

Emor addresses the conduct and qualifications of the Priestly families, Israel's representatives to God, and describes the sacred calendar. Besides showing us how to find God's presence in time, it also shows us how to find God's presence, especially in the land. This conjunction of sacred space and sacred time – the observance of the sacred calendar in the land where God resides, suggests God's presence squared. Perhaps the instructions here for the *Ner Tamid*, the Eternal Flame, in the *Ohel Mo'ed*, Tent of Meeting, serve as a reminder of this. The section ends with a cautionary tale about defiling the Divine Name, and committing murder, suggesting an analogous relationship between the two.

The twin portions of *BeHar* and *Bechukotai* focus on laws for the promised land. We learn how to treat the land that is God's extended sacred domain, and the rules regarding the sacred cycles of sevens that echo the first *Shabbat*, reminding us once again that God can be found in both time and space. We learn the rewards for observing these laws, and the consequences for ignoring them.

Leviticus teaches us to approach God's presence through our gifts to God, the food we eat, our worship, sexual morality, holy relationships with others, observance of the sacred calendar and respect for the land as sacred space. There are thus many possibilities to find and approach God in virtually everything we do. It is my prayer that we are able to find God when and where we seek, and that we see the divine spark that is in ourselves and each other as well. God is there for us to find – it is for us to do the seeking.

Rabbi Molly Karp offers an extensive catalogue of courses for adults. You can learn about these courses at www.rabbimollykarp.com, and contact her at rabbimollykarp@gmail.com.