

## Slippery With Blood

*Parashat Vayikra is filled with the killing of animals.*

BY RABBI JANET MARDER

Commentary on *Parashat Vayikra*, [Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26](#)

“And Aaron’s sons, the priests, shall offer the blood” (1:5). That is pretty much how parashat Vayikra introduces Leviticus, a book that sits smack in the center of the Torah like a tough vein of gristle that runs through a tender, juicy steak. Most of Leviticus is hard to digest. Vayikra is an instruction manual, and technical writing rarely yields compelling drama or inspiring ethical teachings. The language of our portion is formal, stylized, repetitive, precise.

Yet the dryness of language cannot quite disguise the essential problem with what transpires here: the portion is slippery with blood. Rising up from the page are the screams of dying animals, the pungent stink of smoke and burning flesh.


The priestly passages in the Torah not only arouse anxiety in the squeamish—they often seem to be among the most irrelevant we encounter in our sacred text. After all, the major skills of Levites and *kohanim* (the priests), technicians of the sacred, became obsolete almost two thousand years ago when the Temple went up in flames. While Jews with the status of kohanim survive in our own day, their role is marginal even in traditional synagogues, and Reform Jews have virtually eliminated their special status.

Yet the Torah promises that Israelites who are faithful to the covenant will become *mamlehet kohanim*—a kingdom of priests; it envisions an entire people which serves in a priestly role ([Exodus 19:6](#)).

No doubt many of us would have preferred that the Torah command us to become “a kingdom of prophets,” collectively denouncing the world’s inequities, speaking out for justice and defending

the downtrodden. But it is to the priesthood that we Jews are taught to aspire, and the priesthood from which we must seek instruction in parashat Vayikra. What can we learn from the role of the priests—and from these methodical instructions for the slaughter and dismemberment of animals for ritual offering on the altar?


## Why the Need for Discipline?

If human beings were gentle and benevolent by nature we might not need the stern, disciplinary teachings of the priesthood. The Torah's insight is that priestly service is what our homicidal proclivities demand and deserve. So the descendants of Pinhas, a family whose origins are murderous and full of rage (see [Numbers 25:1-14](#) ), are taught to (re)direct their zealous energies to the service of God. They turn from uncontrolled aggression to the discipline of ritual slaughter, hedged about with myriad laws and regulations.

As officiants at the altar, their killing is tamed and domesticated, their dangerous proclivities neutralized. Stripped of the normal male prerogatives of land ownership and military service, they become, as my teacher Melila Hellner-Eshed suggests, “God’s housewives”—feminized men who dress in skirts and busy themselves with the domestic work of cooking and cleaning in God’s holy dwelling.

Sublimation of aggression may, in fact, underlie the entire sacrificial system of worship. A *korban*, an offering to God, is more than an act of violence. It is violence transmuted into something higher; it is God re-shaping a destructive human drive into productive, creative energy. Through bringing offerings to the altar the fierce passions of the ego are not indulged but controlled and transcended. Animals, valued possessions and markers of wealth, are given selflessly to God—and thus the worshiper learns gradually to overcome narcissism and greed. Animal blood is dashed on the altar, but human blood may not be shed; substitution trains the worshipers to restrain their own innate savagery.

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The opening of our parashah reads: *Adam ki yakriv mikem korban l'Adonai*—“When any of you presents offering of cattle to Adonai” (1:2). A [Hasidic](#)  commentator offers an interpretive reading: “One who wants to become *karov*—close to God—must bring an offering *mikem*—that is, from oneself.” And what is the offering? It is the beast within ourselves—the part of ourselves that is capable of cruelty and brutality, even to those we love (*Itturei Torah*, IV, 1998, p.10). The ritual of [animal sacrifice](#), understood symbolically conveys the struggle of flawed human beings to become more humane.

## Closeness to God

The Israelites approached the altar in order to attain closeness to the Divine—to experience what we today call spiritual elevation, a consciousness of being lifted up to something higher than themselves. They drew nearer to God not by denying the body and its drives but by raising the physical to a sacred purpose. From the rituals of worship set forth in Vayikra we learn that aggression need not be extinguished in the personality in order to lead a holy life; it may instead be channeled in constructive directions and employed for the good.

A Talmudic passage reminds us that certain traits may be inborn, but character is never determined by fate. All human energies are ours to activate as we wish, in accordance with our freedom. Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak observed: “One who is born under the sign of Mars will be a shedder of blood.” Rav Ashi did not see such a prediction as necessarily bad, for as he pointed out, one could “shed blood” for a good cause—by becoming “either a surgeon... a ritual slaughterer (*shochet*), or a circumciser (*mohel*)” (BT **Shabbat** 156a).

So we may aspire, even today, to be a kingdom of priests—a people committed to elevating and sanctifying even the darkest forces within the psyche. If we closely read the seemingly dry instructions and bloody details of parashat Vayikra, we learn that through the discipline of our faith we can redeem what is broken and flawed within ourselves, transforming barbaric urges into opportunities for blessing.

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