

## Sacrifice - Maurice Harris (from *Leviticus; You Have No Idea*)

Leviticus presents a series of laws and ritual procedures that tie several intimate and essential aspects of human life together. It focuses on eating, sex, family, work, rest, money, illness, birth, death, and basic social ethics. As a catalog of ancient rituals and taboos, it seems strange to us in our twenty-first-century era. And yet, at its core, Leviticus sought to give the ancient Israelites a framework for living their daily lives with a sense of the sacred. It's a deeply personal, social, and spiritual handbook guiding an ancient people through the most embodied elements of their lives. As a religious progressive, there are values that Leviticus advocates that I object to, no doubt. But alongside my critical and evaluative response, I find the areas of human life that Leviticus addresses to be areas that we, in the modern world, struggle to handle with a deep sense of the sacred, as we understand it. Our response has been to desacralize many of the aspects of human life that Leviticus regulates. The result has been that we've rightly objected to some of the misguided values that Leviticus imposed, but we've not replaced those values with new ones that would represent our generation's best effort to define how we can honor the sacred in these areas of our lives: eating, sex, work, rest, etc. In overturning Leviticus entirely, we've created a society in which we live with the absence of a shared sense of values and of the sacred in these areas of our lives. To some extent, that's opened the door to excess and amoral extremes.

The refrigerator section at the supermarket really is a manifestation of a society that has lost all regard for the sacred involved in eating. The homes we fill with hordes of cheap goods made in Asian and Latin American factories testify to our lack of concern for whether sacredness was part of the work processes that took place in the creation of these consumables. Our hyper-productivity and penchant for technologically aided multi-tasking is the result of a society that has no guiding sacred norms at all around rest, in contrast with Leviticus' concerns for the Sabbath and for other cycles of work and rest in nature.

As Rabbi Jack Cohen put it, "[The modern world) is not a pretty picture, ... unprecedented violence, cruelty,... satiety that breeds boredom, purposelessness and all the other manifestations of social malaise and ennui that cast doubt on the quality and worthwhileness of human existence Yet to respond by holding stubbornly to the past is futile." Leviticus challenges us to be better people in the routine, embodied, intimate aspects of our lives. The challenge is not for us to find a way to turn back the clock and re-embrace its beliefs and rules for all of these areas of life, but rather for us to affirm what the authors of Leviticus noticed about life: namely, that the daily, embodied, personal routines of life are imbued with sacred potential Our task is to use

the best insights and knowledge we have in our era to try to arrive at a set of values governing these aspects of our lives that affirm the sacred within us. Leviticus reminds us that freeing ourselves from the mis-judgments of our ancestors in these arenas is only part of the work. We still learn from Leviticus that these parts of our lives cry out for our attention.