

**March 11, 2022: Vayikra**

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This week we begin our reading of the book Va-yikra, Leviticus, which details the rites of the sacrificial cult, the dynamics of ritual pollution and purification, and the path toward priestly holiness.

Leviticus is essentially about order. Bible translator Everett Fox describes it as “a realm of desired order and perfection, a realm in which wholeness is to reign, in which anomaly and undesired mixture are not permitted, and in which boundaries are zealously guarded” (Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, 501).

Juxtaposed to this book of order is our upcoming holiday about Purim, which is all about chaos and disorder – a world turned upside down. A question to consider is this: *Which is more authentically Jewish? Chaos or disorder? And how are we to understand the contradiction of these world views?*

Leviticus is about the sacrificial cult. It is from the perspective of the priests, who require discipline, routine and order. Fox comments, “Leviticus is largely concerned with the potential disruption of this utopia [and so] … concentrates on threats to Israel’s life with God.”

The sacrifices are brought to maintain the orderly connection with God. And when we sin, it is the sacrifices that in an orderly way restore us to God. Order rules.

In contrast, Megillat Esther and the celebration of Purim convey a sense of disorder and chaos. Purim, as the third chapter of the megillah mentions, means ‘lots’ (random selection). The rabbis relate the Persian name ‘Esther’ to the Hebrew root s-t-r meaning hidden. (God is hidden in the Scroll of Esther). In the megillah the world is flipped upside down. Consider this:

- (1) Esther replaces Queen Vashti and conceals her Jewish identity in order to marry King Ahashverosh;
- (2) excessive feasting and drinking are featured in the tale; Haman’s plans for annihilating the Jewish people are foiled;
- (3) the Jews take revenge on those who had sought to do them harm; and the non-Jews seek to become Jews.

Observances of Purim celebrate chaos as well – the raucous reading of the megillah (especially when Haman’s name is mentioned), the commandment to drink until one does not know the difference between ‘Cursed be Haman’ and ‘Blessed be Mordechai,’ and the masks that conceal true identity.

The Israelite world view articulated in Leviticus is the opposite of the world pictured in Megillat Esther.

Rabbi Matt Berkowitz writes the following about this contrast:

*First, the Presence of God, so central to the laws delineated in Va-yikra, is apparently absent in the megillah. In the desert, God is tangibly present to the Israelites through the spoken word, the pillar of fire, the smoke and lightning at Sinai, and the camp's tent of meeting. In Esther's Persia, God works behind the scenes, if at all. God's name does not appear in the megillah, and the storyline seems coincidental rather than carefully planned.*

*Second, the order and sacred boundaries which define Leviticus are virtually non-existent in Esther: drinking is accepted practice, Esther marries a non-Jewish king, and the non-Jews desire to become Jews en masse.*

As Jews, we are expected to live exceptionally ordered lives; order, not chaos, is natural to who we are. In Genesis, we are commanded to act in the image of God – that same God who orders the world so brilliantly in the seven days of Creation; that same God who gives us the mitzvot, commandments by which we are charged to live our lives. *So how is it that Purim's chaos became a sacred part of the Jewish liturgical year?*

Perhaps it is the pagan roots of the holiday, tied as they are to the late winter desire to run amok a bit. We Jews have Purim now. Christians have Mardi Gras.

Perhaps the absurdity of Purim reminds us to seize the day before the anxiety of early spring takes hold. Will the crops come in? Will we survive?

The Purim story is about beating the odds. We all need some good tales of beating the odds to buoy our spirits when the odds look bad.

I would add that -- as someone who loves order, structure and ritual -- it feels good now and then to take a free day, to not plan to excess, to try to live in the moment.

I will never be good at it, but I can appreciate its seduction.

Once a year, without harming anyone including ourselves, we are called upon to give up on logic and order. To live in the moment. And to imagine a world where the righteous win, the evil perish, and the wine is good and plentiful.