Harassment-Free Jewish Spaces: Our Leaders Must Answer to a Higher Standard

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Yes, it is awful that he said those things. They are totally inappropriate, but he is a beloved member of our clergy team, a founder of our congregation. We must recognize that he only yells at our professional staff and lay leaders when he is stressed.

She just has trouble with boundaries, but she’s harmless. If we hold her accountable, she may leave the temple, which would be devastating. After all, she donates hours and hours to our synagogue. She is irreplaceable. The staff just needs to avoid her. We will remind her not to go to the staff members’ homes without permission.

We all know his behavior is not right, so we will make sure he does not meet with women alone. He’s going to retire soon. There is no reason to ruin his otherwise stellar reputation. Retirement is just a few years away. Maybe we can encourage him to leave sooner.

He has suffered enough by his sexual harassment coming to light. However, his contributions to the Jewish community are far too numerous not to quote him. Whom else could we cite? And why mention this dark spot on an otherwise sterling career?

Above is a compilation of remarks reflecting many real cases in the Jewish community, conflated here to illustrate a theme. The common thread is a lack of accountability for the productive perpetrator. This is the professional or lay leader in a congregation or institution who is successful in their work, yet has substantiated accusations of sexual assault, harassment, or abusive/bullying behavior against them. They are trusted and beloved, generous with their time and/or money; they excel in their field. And because of their success, their
community will never hold them accountable for their bad behavior—even though it endangers the community’s atmosphere of safety and respect—leaving a wake of damage in their path. Often working to keep the behavior and its negative impact unknown to the wider world, community leaders act as if the bad behavior is an unavoidable tax for the benefits the community reaps from the productive perpetrator’s presence and work. However, Parashat Vayikra teaches us the exact opposite, commanding us to hold our leaders accountable to a higher standard.

Vayikra outlines the rituals for different types of sacrifices: olah (עולה), burnt offerings; minchah (מנחה), meal offerings; sh'lamim (שלמים), well-being offerings; chatat ( зуб), purgation offerings; and asham (اياן), reparation offerings. While on the surface this portion reads like a simple instruction book for the sacrifices, it is infused with foundational values. Holding our leaders accountable for their actions is intrinsic to the biblical design of the ancient sacrificial cult and the accompanying priesthood, as we can observe in the parashah’s commandments.

The Israelite sacrificial cult is designed to function in an atmosphere of radical transparency. After the engaging narratives of Genesis and Exodus, it is easy to overlook the revolutionary nature of Leviticus. The laws regulating the sacrifices were given to the entire people of Israel, not just to the elite class of priests. There were no esoteric, secret rituals known only to the kohanim, the priestly class. Furthermore, sacrifices were performed publicly. As The Torah: A Women’s Torah Commentary explains, “Although Leviticus preserves the priests’ privileged monopoly regarding the service at the altar and its sacrifices, these instructions demystify the priests’ role by making knowledge about their activities known to every Israelite.”

Coupled with the prohibition against land ownership by priests (Numbers 18:20), universal access to the law equalized power in the Israelite community. Kohanim were supposed to facilitate the community’s efforts to draw near to God rather than amass power for
themselves.

The public viewing of offerings also created accountability. The Hebrew term *eidah*, “community,” is related to *eid*, “witness.”² If a priest inadvertently made a mistake or knowingly deviated from the prescribed rites, the Israelites would know because they could witness the offerings in real time. The elevated status of the *kohanim* in the community required that they be held to a high standard. *Parashat Vayikra* demands a rigorous method of atonement for the priests’ misdeeds, whether they were known to the public (Leviticus 4:3) or not (Leviticus 4:13). It should be noted that the Torah also holds chieftains to a standard higher than that of ordinary Israelites (Leviticus 4:22), but not as high as the priests. This portion clearly teaches that the greater one’s status is in the community, the more accountable one must be for one’s actions.

Laws concerning the *chatat*, purgation offering, exemplify the exacting standard required of the priests: “If it is the anointed priest who has incurred guilt, so that blame falls upon the people, he shall offer for the sin of which he is guilty a bull of the herd without blemish as a purgation offering to the Eternal” (Leviticus 4:3). Addressing no less than Aaron and his successors, this text continues with the intricate details required to perform this sacrifice.³ In fact, the priest must offer an unblemished bull, the most expensive offering; his sacrifice is costlier than that of a regular Israelite. This recognizes that the priest’s actions had an impact far beyond his own reputation; his guilt became his community’s guilt.

Reflecting on this passage, Rabbi Shai Held points to the importance of leaders recognizing their failings:

Like it or not, we learn from our leaders—so do our children. A generation whose leaders are incapable of apologizing is a generation devoid of a potentially powerful model; a generation whose leaders respond to charges of misconduct by denying, obfuscating, or shifting incessantly to the passive voice (“mistakes were made”) is a generation whose children learn to offer an honest, straightforward apology for bad behavior only when their backs are against the wall—only, that is, when all other (self-exonerating) tactics have
failed. But a generation whose leaders step forward and say, 
“Yes, I really blew it, and I’m sorry” just might learn the
importance of integrity and accountability.\(^\text{4}\)

Rabbi Held is correct. When our leaders are willing to face
their wrongs and publicly admit the negative impact of
their behavior, they set an invaluable example for
community members of all ages. However, when the
leaders themselves are not forthcoming, the community
must serve as a vocal eid (witness) and hold them
accountable, even when the leader has contributed much
to the community’s success. This is the most important
model for the members of the Jewish community, young
and old. We are commanded, “You shall be holy, for I, the
Eternal your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Striving to be
holy requires the integrity to hold every member of the
community responsible for their actions.

Despite the checks and balances built into the
priesthood by Torah law, power differentials enabled the
priests to amass great influence, sometimes leading to
corruption. The prophet Ezekiel exhorted on behalf of
God, “Her priests have violated My law and have profaned
what is sacred to Me; they have made no distinction
between the holy and the profane, and they have not
taught the difference between the unclean and the clean;
and they hide their eyes from My sabbaths, and I am
profaned in their midst” (Ezekiel 22:26). This indictment
should serve as a warning to the modern Jewish
community. Our professional and lay leaders must never
be considered above the law, Jewish or secular. It is not
enough for our congregations and institutions to have
policies, standards, and procedures to guard against
harassing, abusive, and disrespectful behaviors. The
community must be willing to uphold these institutional
policies and standards, as well as to report wrongdoing to
Jewish professional organizations, which often have
ethical oversight—and, when appropriate, to law
enforcement or other appropriate local, state, or federal
agencies. Unchecked misdeeds undermine the entire
Jewish community, destroying our ability to strive to be a
holy people. The productive perpetrator is perceived as too
valuable, too irreplaceable to be held accountable. However, it is the pain of their victims, the impact on bystanders, and the integrity of the Jewish community that are too valuable to be compromised. Parashat Vayikra demands that we hold our leaders to a higher standard, knowing that their actions affect us all.

NOTES


