

Living in Two Worlds: The Legacy of Vayikra

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This week, we began reading the book of Vayikra, or Leviticus. Although sometimes characterized as the “priestly instruction manual,” it also contains ritual commands for the laity, including dietary and sexual practices, as well as moral commandments about treatment of the poor, the widow and the orphan for example. With Vayikra, we leave behind the familiar narrative portions of the Torah, the psychological turmoil of the larger than life characters of Genesis and the liberation narrative of Exodus, and are obliged to immerse ourselves for several months in a text that is devoted in large part, although not entirely, to a detailed account of ancient rituals that are foreign to our experience and often challenge our sensibilities. Most of the rituals Vayikra describes are linked to the Temple, in the form of priestly sacrifices and offerings, an ancient system of communing with the Divine that holds little meaning for us moderns.

In his introduction to his translation of Vayikra, Everett Fox talks about its instructions as maintaining separations, representations of the profound human need to separate life from death, to protect the living from contamination by the forces of death through animal sacrifices that stand in for human mortality. Although we modern Jews no longer subscribe to a sacrificial system to deal with issues of life and death, we nevertheless have a long, distinctive, rich and equally if not more complex tradition of ritual practices that were elaborated in great detail during the Rabbinic period, after the destruction of the second Temple. This complex array of ritual practices gives structure to our system of communing with the Divine.

Our annual sojourn in Vayikra invites us to consider the meaning of ritual in our personal lives and especially its role in our identity as a Jewish people. As modern Jews, our relationship to ritual defines not only our personal relationship to our God, but also our place in Jewish and non-Jewish society. Within the Jewish orbit, our choice to affiliate and the communities with which we then choose to affiliate are largely defined by our relationship to ritual.

As Jews “living in two worlds,” in Mordechai Kaplan’s words, our ritual beliefs and practices separate us from our non-Jewish, especially Christian neighbors, and so these practices constitute yet another “separation,” albeit of a different type. It is this particular role of ritual that I’d like to focus on this morning.

As some of you may know, I have for many years studied with a group in the Longwood Medical Area. We basically find great teachers who are willing to meet with us at 7:30 on a Tuesday morning for a period of 6-8 weeks at a time, and we study whatever that teacher is most enthusiastic about teaching. Last fall, we had the opportunity to study with Rabbi Leonard Gordon of Temple Mishkan Tefillah on a rather unorthodox topic, the New Testament. Oxford Press recently published a remarkable volume called “The Jewish Annotated New Testament.” It has extensive notes and commentaries on the New Testament by Jewish scholars, and provides a uniquely Jewish take on these texts, seeing them in the context of their time rather than their often unfortunate evolution and interpretations through the centuries.

Rabbi Gordon pointed out to us in the beginning of our course that reading the New Testament is one of the best ways to learn about the life of our Jewish ancestors during the first century as portrayed by contemporary writers. Ancient Palestine during that period was in turmoil, with a brutal Roman occupation, the lingering influence of Greek culture on the elites, and perhaps most important for us, the rise of diverse political and religious factions within the Jewish community.

To briefly summarize, the Romans conquered Jerusalem in 63 BCE and established their rule of Palestine. Jesus is thought to have been born in 4 CE and to have lived until 29 CE. Paul of Tarsus was a key figure in all of this, and particularly interesting to us as Jews since he lived and wrote in the middle of the century and was a contemporary reporter of life in the Jewish community during these times. Paul was initially a Pharisee (who we can think of as the progenitors to the rabbis) and, until his conversion on the Road to Damascus, opposed those Jews who had chosen to follow the Jesus cult. After his conversion, he undertakes his mission in the 40's and 50's, travelling the Mediterranean and visiting communities of Jews and Gentiles who adhere to this cult of Jesus as the messiah or whom he seeks to convert. Paul, who according to the Jewish commentary always thought of both himself and Jesus (whom he never actually encountered) as Jews, is likely the most important figure (after Jesus) in the history of Christianity.

In 70 CE, after Paul's time, the Romans destroy the Temple and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai flees Jerusalem with his followers and founds the scholarly center at Yavneh, beginning the development of Rabbinic Judaism.

In reading Paul's letters and the parts of the Gospels we read in class, I was struck by the centrality of "the Law" to his argument, and the importance for Paul and his contemporaries of one's relationship to the "Law," which for them meant the Torah and/or Jewish ritual observance. Paul's radical innovation, which may well have been the single most important move to establishing Christianity as a major force in the world, was that adherents were permitted believe in the divinity of Jesus (still within the context of the Jewish god), without obligation to follow the dietary laws or to circumcise.

In Galatians, he makes the case that the Law was only a temporary "fix," a spiritual bridge to allow people to get from Abraham's covenant with God until the redemptive arrival of Jesus:

"Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian for I Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. *And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*" Galatians 3: 23-29.

Once Jesus arrived as the redeemer, the law was no longer necessary to expiate sin (one of the functions outlined in Vayikra) or to provide a connection with the Divine. In Paul's reimagining, God made the covenant with Abraham and gave us the Torah and the ritual laws to take care of our sins while we were awaiting his messenger. But now that the messenger has arrived, the Torah has been superceded, its primary role being to forecast the arrival and saving grace of the messenger.

Paul also seeks, importantly, to achieve a different balance between the Jewish religion's attention to ritual practices and attention to social justice, emphasizing latter

over the former. In the waning days of the second Temple, there apparently was significant corruption among the priestly class, and early Christianity had a clear social reform agenda. Setting aside the theology, many of Jesus's teachings and Paul's message to his followers strike a modern chord, arguing for a primary emphasis on decency and morality in human interactions, without concern for the ritual practices. In some ways, Paul was the ancient equivalent of a liberal Jew, arguing that the religion should emphasize social justice and not be overly focused on ritual observance.

So the Jewish community essentially split, not just along the lines of those who believed that Jesus suffered for the sins of humanity, was resurrected and offered the promise of same to his followers, but importantly in terms of the centrality of ritual practice. This was especially true for the Gentiles whom Paul and his colleagues sought to convert. Jewish adherents were more likely to continue to maintain their ritual customs.

By promising redemption and access to a benevolent, monotheistic God without the onerous burden of the Law, Paul's move turned out to be a brilliant recruiting strategy as he sought to spread his message to the Gentiles. Seen in that context, the New Testament is not just a religious document but a political document, designed to attract members not only from among the Gentiles, but also from Jewish communities in Palestine and throughout the Roman empire. Moreover, by liberating followers from the obligations of ritual observance, he can redirect them to an emphasis on moral behavior.

Against this backdrop, our ancestors, the 1st century Jews from whom we are descended, chose to resist this appeal, which had to have been tantalizing. In choosing their path, our ancestors would have to have made a deliberate choice not only to reject the Jesus as Messiah narrative, but also to recommit to Torah, to the spirit if not the letter of Vayikra, in the face of Roman oppression, in the face of a wildly popular movement that would relieve people of the burdens of ritual adherence, and in the face of the brutal destruction of the Temple, the seat of the ritual practices detailed in Vayikra. This preservation of ritual, moreover, needed to integrate emphasis on the commandments involving social justice. Remarkably, 2000 years later, the basic Jewish ritual practices of the first century remain mostly intact and recognizable today in Jewish communities all over the world (the laws of kashrut, circumcision, reading the Torah on Shabbat and twice during the week).

What occurred in the 1st century was a profound schism in the Jewish community, and part of our legacy (and some might say responsibility) is the preservation of and reverence for these defining ritual practices. The rabbis believed deeply in the importance of these ritual practices, and sustaining them through the generations is a frequent trope. When we recited the shema today, we said "v'shinantem l'vanecha", you shall "teach them [the commandments] intently to your children."

Encountering these ideas in my class triggered a kind of epiphany about "living in two worlds", appreciating just how profoundly what Paul and his followers on the one hand and our rabbinic ancestors on the other set in motion two thousand years ago shapes who we and our Christian neighbors are today. And setting theology aside, how much each of our identities and our religious consciousness is shaped by our relation to "the Law."

For practicing or just identified Jews, many of these ritual markers are so familiar that we barely give them a thought. Whether or not we choose to keep kosher, pork has visceral significance, an enduring recognition of the separation between *tahor* and *tamei* in Vayikrah. In my father's Jewish retirement community, the kosher kitchen was voted

out by the residents, who did not want to give up shellfish. Yet when a resident requested that pork be allowed on the menu, there was an uproar among these elderly Jews, most of whom would not have considered themselves particularly observant. Vayikra. One of the hottest new restaurants in Brooklyn is called Treif. Located on the edge of Williamsburg and the ultra-orthodox community, it cheekily specializes in shellfish and pork. Treif is owned by two young Jewish chefs (were they not Jewish, it would never have succeeded). Its existence and choice of location makes a rather ugly statement to its religious neighbors, but also testifies to the residing truth that this ritual prohibition is deeply embedded in the consciousness of Jews, including ironically those two chefs. Vayikra. Jews who themselves would have little interest in shabbat observance nevertheless feel powerfully that their child should have a bar or bat mitzvah, that the child should be called to Torah just as their ancestors were for centuries. Vayikra. Jewish parents may or may not choose to have a brit milah, but will nevertheless have their sons circumcised medically. Vayikra is in our DNA.

Our legacy and I would argue gift from our ancestors who chose to resist the popular appeal of the new Jesus sect, is our ritual practices, which we have remarkably managed to preserve (and continued to argue about) for centuries, albeit with constant transformation as Kaplan so well understood. Our enduring relationship to “the Law” is embodied in our daily lives in ritual practices that separate us as fundamentally from Christianity as our theological differences. Just as we may find it hard to comprehend investing an historic character with divinity, our Christian friends, family and neighbors undoubtedly find it hard to comprehend the power of our myriad rituals and our reverence for this scroll, with all the rituals attached to it.

To what extent are we defined as Jews by our tribal connections to the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis, by the families into which we were born, and to what extent by Mosaic law and the core message of Vayikra that is embedded in our consciousness, however much or little we choose to practice it in a liberal Jewish world where we have infinite choice?

So in the time remaining, I invite you to consider the role of our Vayikra heritage as Jews living in two worlds. Does it serve to separate and is that a positive or a negative? Does it feel to you more like a gift or a burden? Do we need to choose between mitzvot of ritual observance and mitzvot of social justice? What is our obligation and interest as liberal Jews living in two worlds in sustaining these ritual practices?

Shabbat shalom.