



The Radical Reinvention of Judaism

For the readers of the *Torah* who seek simplicity, *Parshat Vayikra* may be read as one of the most irrelevant *parashot* of the *Torah*. After all, it speaks in detail about the procedures of sacrifices at the altar and of the roles of the *cohanim* and *levi'im*, which are practices that were largely abandoned by Judaism nearly two thousand years ago. However, and paradoxically, the relevance of this *parsha* stems precisely from its seeming irrelevance, as it guides us to the crucial significance of mutual respect in our community even among the farthest extremes of outlooks.

The context, in a nutshell, is that in previous and coming *Parashot*, the people of Israel are commanded to build a mobile sanctuary, *mishkan*, which will serve as the center of their religious and communal life. In addition, a religious elite of *cohanim* and *levi'im* is mandated to serve the *mishkan*, and their status is to be eternally preserved along the patrilineal father-to-son line. Furthermore, the People of Israel are to carry the *mishkan* to the Land of Israel and to establish a permanent house for it once they settle the land.

Fast forward forty years, and the People of Israel enter the Land of Israel, and a few turbulent centuries later, circa 950 BCE, King Solomon builds the Temple in Jerusalem to serve as a permanent home for the *Aron Ha'Brit* and as a central place of worship for the Jewish People. That temple will be destroyed roughly 370 years later in 586 BCE, and then rebuilt approximately in 516 BCE, only to be destroyed again in 70 CE. Thus, notwithstanding a short interruption of seventy years, the Israelites maintained a Temple-centered existence for nearly one thousand years.

However, the vision of Temple-based Jewish spirituality and ethical society did not materialize. Over time, and certainly during the later Second Temple Era under the Chashmonaic dynasty, the Temple turned into a source of political power and therefore into a subject of power struggle among competing factions, while the *cohanim* turned from holy priests into pawns in the battle among ambitious rulers and their aspiring rivals. At that point, the sacrifices and donations to the Temple were no longer a symbol of religious devotion but, rather, a source of corruption and a means for political influence.

Nonetheless, upon the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jewish People faced an excruciating challenge: not only was the keystone of its religious existence and the symbol of its sovereignty demolished, but an entire social order disintegrated, as the elite of the *cohanim* lost its source of power and multiple practices that centered around the Temple, such as sacrifices and pilgrimage, suddenly became irrelevant.

Not surprisingly, by that point, the sages--spiritual leaders of the community--had mixed perceptions regarding the preservation of a Temple-centered corrupted societal order. That ambivalence is captured in the story of Raban Yochanan Ben Zakkai, who met Vespasian, the Commander of the Roman Legion, which was besieging Jerusalem. Ben-Zakkai prophesized to Vespasian his imminent ascendance to Caesar of Rome. In return, Vespasian asked Ben-Zakkai for his wish. The ensuing request was not to save Jerusalem or the Temple, but, rather to spare Yavne and its sages.

Henceforth, Ben-Zakkai and the sages of Yavne would reinvent Judaism into a mobile and agile civilization, organized to exist without sovereignty or a central religious institution. Against the desire of some leaders to hold on to existing traditions and therefore to condemn the community to a futile existence of mourning, they strove to reinvent Judaism, while eternalizing the memory of the *mikdash*. Their struggles are described in the monumental work of Rabbi Benny Lau, "Chachamim" ("Sages"), as they introduced countless customs (*minhagim*) that later turned into law (*halachot*). Some of these laws we follow until today, such as a regular prayer cycle, symbolic re-enactment of the work of the sacrifices every Friday night at the Shabbat table and the practice of *tzdakah* in place of the sacrifices.

That revolution, which ushered in the era of rabbinical Judaism, is one of the most remarkable and resilient societal transformations of human history. Its astonishing success stems from its ability to withstand not only the catastrophe of the destruction of the Second Temple in that generation, but also to create a societal system that could adapt to withstand the dramatic political, social and technological changes that have affected the Jewish People ever since.

As was articulated a few weeks ago, this revolution will have the capacity to even allow for meaningful Jewish existence on Mars, when such reality emerges.

So, how did that revolution come about? In a nutshell, the school that believed in the legitimacy to interpret the Torah in order to make it relevant emerged in the second century BCE. Its followers were known as the Pharisees, and their preeminent leader was Hillel the Elder, who came to the Land of Israel from the great Diaspora of the time in Persia. His outlook was crystallized by the legacy of the challenges and experiences of Jewish communities, who were living in the absence of sovereignty and in a distance from Jerusalem and the Temple. That condition required them to create the capacity to innovate, which he brought to the Land of Israel.

However, the outlook of the Pharisees was considered heresy by the *cohanim* and by the ruling elites of the time. They were known as Sadducees, and believed in a literal understanding and strict implementation of the commandments of the Torah. That outlook was also self-serving in that it preserved their power and protected the existing order of the time which nourished them.

For nearly two centuries the Pharisees and the Sadducees competed to shape the outlook of the People of Israel and over the power to determine its destiny. Initially, the Pharisees were a small minority, but gradually, as the Sadducees became increasingly corrupted, their appeal and power grew. By the time of the Temple's destruction, the Pharisees were believed to be the majority and were ready to seize the opportunity--created by catastrophe--and to take over the leadership of the Jewish People. Thereafter, they radically transformed Judaism.

Highly relevant lessons emerge in this tale of Jewish history. The first is that Judaism is vindictive against the elites that fail it. Prior to the destruction of the Temple, the *cohanim* were the source of religious power and the leaders of religious practice. Afterwards, those powers were irreversibly taken by the rabbis. This lesson should be remembered every time a rabbi invites the *cohanim* to the *Bimah* to deliver their blessings, *birkat cohanim*. As much as this should be a moment of memory of the *mikdash* and inspiration for a brighter future, it should also serve a symbolic warning to existing elites: if you fail the Jewish People, you, too, will be marginalized to sidelined symbolism.

The second lesson is that as Judaism evolves, it loses not only some of its most progressive factions, but also some of its most orthodox. The Sadducees, the Essenes and the Karait Jews are three examples of communities whose ideological rigidity condemned them to obscurity or even absolute disappearance. The notion that orthodoxy survives and reforming factions disappear is historically false. In fact, the evolution of the Jewish People stems from the ongoing interplay among reforming and orthodox communities, just as the secret source of our collective survival stems from the way in which we blend innovation and tradition within a societal whole.

The third lesson is that Judaism has the capacity to abort traditions that are no longer relevant. This radical capability emanates from the verse: "et la'asont le'HaShem haferu toratecha" (Psalms, 119: 126), which means that sometimes the service of God requires putting in abeyance the commandments of the Torah. In fact, our history includes a few such revolutions, such as the transition from patrilineal father-to-son to matrilineal mother-to-child descent or the writing of the Oral Torah. Another such potentially incubating revolution regards the role of women and the growing circles where rabbinical and cantorial positions are available to them.

Finally, we must remember that the most radical reforming views of today may become, over time, mainstream and even orthodoxy, turning practices that seem outrageous into *minhagim* and *halachot*. Indeed, our tradition recognizes that possibility by introducing the notion that in some cases, two diametrically opposed views can be the words of God, as is said: "*elle ve'elle divrei elokim haim*"--if they are held in the service of God, truth and the community. In other words, yet again, the full picture of our history should guide us to intellectual modesty and to mutual respect across the full spectrum of our community, as we quest to serve the significant existence of our people.