

Torah Thoughts Vayikra

5779:

Of all of the radical changes that Judaism underwent with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, perhaps none was as far-reaching as its democratization. Prior to the year 70 of the Common Era, it was mainly the priests in Jerusalem who interceded with God on behalf of the people. After the Temple fell in that year, prayer took the place of sacrifice and individuals addressing words to God became the norm.

As we begin the third book of the Torah this week, Leviticus or *Vayikra*, we begin to see just how the sacrificial system worked, in all of its fascinating (yet bloody) detail. In the ancient period, the sacrifices were at the center of biblical religion, and they also occupy the middle of the Torah. *Vayikra* was also the book of the Torah that Jewish children were first taught in their primary education. So, despite the fact that it was probably originally compiled as a sort of 'priestly handbook,' it became part and parcel of the Torah as a whole, part of the tradition that all Jews have a share in.

Though we have lacked an active priesthood for nearly two thousand years, we continue to study the ancient culture in which the *kohanim* were the primary actors. We do so, in part, because Jews are to behave as a nation of priests, not in the sense of being prepared to resume animal sacrifice, but rather as a community whose every member has the power and ability to address themselves to God through their actions and their prayers. When we study the book of *Vayikra* we should remind ourselves that, unlike the biblical period, we can all draw closer to God through word and deed.