

Dvar Torah for Vayikra, chapter 1, specifically, 1:4. By David A. Epstein, Ph.D.

This morning I'd like to talk about the fourth section of chapter one of Vayikra. This section consists of a list of how one atones for one's sins. Forgiveness only comes after the offering of a blood sacrifice. This seems so far from our modern-day lives that one contemporary commentator put it this way: "Don't read Leviticus. Nobody else does." Section four is a highly specific set of instructions on why and how to kill animals.

We've made changes to how things work now. We tend not to offer blood sacrifices in order to atone for our transgressions. The seat of law and place of fines is no longer in the temple, it's in a secular court. As opposed to fines, any sacrifices *we* make are generally in cash, and generally *in honor* of something, with labels on them: in honor of someone's birthday or wedding anniversary; in memory of someone, to mark occasions. You don't see *this* in the shul bulletin: "To the rabbi's discretionary fund for the sin I committed in coveting my neighbor's snow-blower." No, and for other transgressions, we have, in this nation, a legal system that has taken over the functioning of the priests in this regard. Does this obviate Leviticus entirely? Hardly: Leviticus is still a text refined and tested through a thousand generations, and we should look at it in terms of what it *does* have to offer us with regard to making amends for our mistakes. It is an instruction book concerning what people bring as offerings to the Lord. It provides instructions to the priests, and expectations the sinner may have in terms of forgiveness. I'm not a lawyer, but I can see that this reads like a contract. Contracts exist to clarify the terms and conditions of a relationship. In this case, Vayikra tells how to demonstrate your adherence to the covenant, through all your violations of it. It's our recipe for forgiveness before other people and before the Lord. And the priestly class depended on this recipe for their own maintenance. In our ancestors' lives, Vayikra describes taxes on something supremely reliable: human frailty.

First is the obvious: we will *make* mistakes, commit wrongs, do things for which we should seek, and shall be granted, forgiveness. One needs to accept this notion fully, as a working proposition about ourselves, our neighbors, our children and our parents.

If you are such a person, with a given transgression, here's what you have to do to fix things. Keep in mind that what we're after in all of these instances is the upholding and maintenance of the covenant. The covenant is an agreement between a people and a deity. But the covenant is made *manifest* by one's actions in this world, in human terms, among your fellow human beings.

Jews are commanded to pray in a group. This is our fundamental approach, and it shows that our covenant with the deity requires our appearance first as a social order. Affronts to that order—wrongs we commit—are, in contrast, dealt with as individuals. Why don't we appear in a group to seek atonement? We do, especially at High Holy Days. But for the transgressions that occur the rest of the year, there is, in Leviticus, a prescribed process. In Leviticus, one appears on one's own before the priests, offering a sacrifice. You fix your relationship within the group, first.

Notice how in each offering, there is a specification that the cow, the lamb, what have you, must be of a certain quality: "unblemished." Why? There is a profound aspect of our human nature here, codified within this part of Vayikra. The very notion of an

“unblemished” creature challenges our usual ideas about creation. Traditionally, only Hashem is perfect, and nothing in creation is without imperfection. So this instruction is really to strive towards something unattainable. Imagine what would happen if this were not the stipulation. “Well, I was late paying my worker, and I’m supposed to go down to the altar and give them an unblemished lamb. I’m bringing *this* lamb, which isn’t as good as the other one I have, but it’s good enough.” It’s a slippery slope. And pretty soon, what had been a struggle to offer in sacrifice becomes a pittance offered in place of something better. And then everyone becomes acquainted with a priestly class that has had to accept lower quality goods, and people lose respect for both the clergy and for the texts and practices the clergy represents. And, ultimately, the people whose faith is evinced by this interaction think less of themselves, too, since their beliefs don’t ask enough of them. Imagine if our synagogue officials had to make do with what we sometimes drop off for a food drive. This is a key point: if you are not made to stretch, financially, ethically, even socially, your religion is less valuable to you. If any human practice ceases to challenge us, we soon outgrow it.

How have things changed in our culture? We maintain the words, but the deeds are different. What we donate to the food drive is temperamentally, if not qualitatively, different from what we do to atone for our sins. If you are acting within today’s justice system and paying a fine, which is essentially what’s being depicted in Vayikra, you’re not doing what was done in biblical times. We have separated accountability *for sins* from accountability *to laws*. Is this a good or a bad thing? I can see why our American founding fathers did this, so as to preserve certain liberties. But I can also see where it left a flawed system of accountability. Nowadays the righting of wrongs is less a matter of repairing the social fabric, and more a matter of paying the piper. Our justice system takes on a life of its own, and that tie to the social system is more tenuous. In a sense, the justice system has more responsibility for the transgressor, and we, the people, have less obligation to understand and reabsorb the transgressor into our social system. It’s easy to see why we have, in this nation, more people ostracized and isolated in prison than at any other time in history. Our state and federal justice systems are not made accountable to our social fabric. The goal is now deterrent of crime and excision of the criminal. I make no claims for how to fix this. But I do see how the ancient system had greater accountability back to the rest of the people in society.

The order of the instructions in the chapter is significant. If you sin; if a priest sins; if a whole people sin; when a ruler sins; a regular, common person sins. If you’re looking at the importance of things in terms of rhetorical structure, we, the everyday person, has an even greater responsibility to the covenant than any priest or magnate. We’re not rhetoricians, and we’ve lost, as well, the ability to notice the intended effects of rhetorical organization of a text. So one of my goals here today is to illuminate one of the ways in which this text is arranged, designed, and constructed to elicit certain meanings.

Rhetorically, the order of things in this chapter is arranged in terms of rising importance. We know that because it is not arranged in terms of social hierarchy. The one we expect to be at the bottom, the common person, is displaced to the top, and we are supposed to notice, and notice why. First, a gentle address: If *you* should transgress. Then, directly at the voice conducting the day’s iteration of the Torah: If *a priest* should mess up. Further up: if *a whole people* lose their moral compass. This is a recognition that mob thinking can and does occur, and we had better be prepared, as a whole people, to have a route back, traversing and

taking on forgiveness as we go. Next to last, *if a ruler or leader sins...* This we understand, in the context of the great responsibilities of office. It is also one of those areas where, as a people in this nation, we've suffered by the separation of church and state. We have so many leaders who are caught circumventing the laws: say, Thom Dashiell's tax evasion; Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner's tax evasion; The Illinois Governor's impeachment. And we process them through a legal system variously punishing them or not. But—and this is important—we leave the individual to sort out their own conscience by themselves. Transgressing leaders afool of the courts are either acquitted or punished according to the legal tenets. They do not seek atonement and forgiveness in the eyes of the community. They don't get that forgiveness. They get—or lose—our votes, but not our conscious forgiveness. And equally—or even more importantly, we, the people, have lost our sense that we must be active bestowers of forgiveness. The consequences of this loss of ability include nothing less than a culture and society that is incapable of inculcating and enacting justice. Justice. The cornerstone of our people: *Tzedakah* and *Tukkun Olam*. Justice, and fixing the world. And now we come to the last condition in this chapter's list: Above you and above me, above the rabbis and the priests, above a whole people, above a king or a leader, comes who? You might expect here, logically, to have HaShem. And, in fact, it would explain a lot about the world. But no, at the top of this list is the common person. You or I, and why is this? Because both the foundation and pinnacle of the achievement of our culture inhere in the manifestation of the covenant. And that covenant does not merely *include* every individual, it *relies* upon it. The single most important person in our Jewish culture is also the least important one. This is what is called a paradox. And behind every paradox is, in the words of the poet Robert Frost, *that we may "learn our submission to unreason."* It is not reasonable to give the greatest responsibility to the least prominent citizen. But it is reasonable to recognize that our expectations for behavior *extend* to every person. It is not reasonable for the greatest justice to be promulgated by the meanest commoner. But it is imperative that justice be available to every person.

So, what has come down to us through the ages? Are any of us going to sacrifice a goat, whether unblemished or not? No. But we're going to sacrifice what is meaningful to us. In the current financial depression, our nation is only now embarked upon a series of trials that will make us, as individuals, insular and xenophobic. We will be guarding our resources, suspicious of the motives of others. You may feel that you can't trust the next person. But I would ask you to trust yourself. Seek out opportunities to make meaningful sacrifices. For some of us that will mean a cash donation at a time when we are unsure of the wisdom of doing so. For others of us it means simply noticing where we might give a little more of ourselves. Start simply, with the things that don't cost you anything at all: little kindnesses. A door held open; a smile; saying hello. You want to improve the world? Make the effort to comfort yourself and your neighbor with simple gestures of recognition. Re-cognition. To come to know again what one used to know before. In Vayikra we're taken to an earlier time, where people were more invested in the maintenance of their social fabric. That's still a valid goal. It's as unattainable as ever, as an unblemished lamb. And as worthwhile as ever to strive for. Think about sacrifices as necessary to the maintenance of our social fabric. We're capable of sacrificing much more than we might otherwise guess. Our sins may not demand it, but our times probably do. *Shabbat Shalom*.