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20 March 2026 / 3 Nisan 5786
Parashat Vayikra

Loving Leviticus

I became a vegetarian the year after I graduated college. Jessica had stopped eating meat several years earlier, and I admired the moral simplicity of vegetarianism. If I can eat happily and healthily without animals dying, then that's a better way to be. I missed certain products at first—especially chicken parmesan—but eventually came to embrace vegetarianism as an identity. I don't begrudge others their choices; after all, I do eat eggs and dairy along with my plants, fungi, and synthetics. Everyone has their compass and their comfort zone when it comes to ethical eating.

Now I want to be on record as a vegetarian because I'm going to say something rather controversial: I love Leviticus. Yes, that's the one with all the animal sacrifices in it; and yes, it's my favorite book of the Torah.

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Everyone agrees that Leviticus has its gems. "Love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18) is a classic, of course, along with the Liberty Bell's "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (25:10). But extended meditations on animal sacrifice tend to give Leviticus a bad name. Here's one example from this week's reading:

> You shall lay a hand upon the head of your offering and slaughter it at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall dash the blood against all sides of the altar. Then present from the sacrifice of well-being, as an offering by fire to the Eternal, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is about the entrails; the two kidneys and the fat that is on them, that is at the loins; and the protuberance on the liver, which you shall remove with the kidneys. Aaron's sons shall turn these into smoke on the altar, with the burnt offering that is upon the wood that is on the fire, as an offering by fire, of pleasing odor to the Eternal (Lev. 3:2-5)

Passages like these cause most readers' eyes to glaze over, and they serve as undeniable reminders that the Torah comes from a vastly different time and place. And yet, I contend, there is deep wisdom embedded in Leviticus, interwoven into its exhaustive details.

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In Chapter Five, for instance, from this week's *parashah*, we read of the Israelite who realizes they've transgressed a ritual law—they've touched something impure, perhaps, or failed to honor an oath. They bring as a guilt offering a goat or sheep, which they slaughter themselves. The priest arranges the ritual of the sacrifice, and the proper parts are burned, with the remnant saved as food for the priest. In this way וְנִסְלַח לוֹ, they are forgiven.

Now, if they can't afford a sheep, they can bring instead a pair of turtledoves or pigeons. And if they can't afford even that, then a small portion of choice flour will suffice. We learn from this that forgiveness depends not on the expense of the sacrifice but on the intention of the heart. The offering is a symbol of regret and, more importantly, a sign of commitment to the rules and regulations of ritual purity.

Notably, this chapter also considers *moral* failings from a ritual perspective. Those who acquire ill-gotten gains by deception, robbery, falsehood, or fraud are guilty, we are taught, of a *ritual* transgression. They are required to bring a ram without blemish—or its equivalent—as a reparation offering. וְכִפֶּר עָלָיו הַכֹּהֵן לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְנִסְלַח לוֹ, "And the priest shall make expiation for them before the Eternal, and they shall be forgiven" (Lev. 5:25). However, *before* offering this sacrifice, the guilty person must *also* repay what was stolen along with an additional one-fifth of the value. Their penalty is paid both to their neighbor and, metaphorically, to God.

This moral reckoning is striking on a number of levels. First, a transgression against another person is *also* a transgression against God. Second—as we are reminded on Yom Kippur—transgressions against God cannot be forgiven until people have made peace with one another. And third, once debts are repaid and God's forgiveness is achieved, the matter is closed. Relationships are restored, and the guilty person returns to a normal life with no further burdens to bear.

To this lesson we could add many more from this week's *parashah*: about the admission that everyone, from great to small, makes mistakes; about the covenant of salt and the way it preserves the relationship between human and divine; or about the "language of love,"[1] as Rashi terms it, when God calls to Moses from the Tent.

But what about the sacrifices? Do we just ignore them in order to get to the really good stuff? No. They lie at the heart of what Leviticus has to teach us, and understanding them from the inside is essential to understanding the very essence of Torah.

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First, it's critical to remember that the same hand that wrote about the fat around the entrails and the protuberance of the liver also penned "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).[2] According to these priestly texts, bringing an offering to the altar is having a one-on-one audience with the Creator of the

[1] See Rashi's comment to Lev. 1:1.
[2] From a source-critical perspective, both of these are P texts.

Universe. You enter God's home-on-earth, share a metaphysical meal, and leave with divine favor and forgiveness. If you're surprised that God cares about the intricate details of ritual slaughter, you should also be surprised that God cares about the personal affairs of your own life. But Leviticus teaches that God cares about both.

This care emerges from God's unending and tremendous love for all creatures, especially human beings. You'll recall that the beautiful world God created back in Genesis was quickly flowing with blood as "the earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:11). God wants to destroy all life but is held back by Noah's righteousness; and after the floodwaters recede, God makes a new decision: God will become even more intimately entangled with the affairs of humankind, helping us to build a society of laws that creates the conditions for flourishing and peace. The first rule given to Noah is that human beings are permitted, for the first time, to eat meat (Gen. 9:3), but this license comes with a restriction: אַךְ־בָּשָׂר בְּנַפְשׁוֹ דָמוֹ לֹא תֹאכֵלוּ, "Yet you must not eat flesh with its life-blood in it" (Gen. 9:4). This is because, as we will learn in Leviticus, "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev. 17:11). Indeed, we are not permitted to spill any blood except in the context of sacrifice. According to these priestly texts—and let's note that other parts of the Torah will disagree—you may only eat meat that has been properly offered as a sacrifice. Otherwise, the killing of domestic animals is strictly forbidden (Lev. 17:3-4). This prohibition is the foundation for the entire sacrificial system. It might look like Leviticus is a terrifically blood book; but in truth, it's the book with the highest regard for animal life and the most reticent to authorize their death.

Finally, let us recall that all of these texts are just that: texts. These passages unlock our imagination and transport us to the abode of God. We need never touch a hair on an ox's head to grasp at least the theory of sacrifice; and in time, the literariness of these texts outlasts the practice of sacrifice itself. Leviticus transforms ritual into text, setting the stage for the Rabbis centuries later to develop Jewish prayer out of the ashes of the Temple. It is a masterpiece, part of a collection of intricate and elaborate tapestries, woven into our people's most treasured work of art.

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Leviticus is not only an underdog; it also serves as the Torah's theological heart and soul. The sacrifices it details express its deep regard for life and evoke the possibility of a personal relationship with God. Perhaps this explains the tradition of starting a Jewish child's learning with the "Torah of Priests,"[3] and perhaps this inspires us as well to give this book a second look. It is a holy book focused on holy things, and it can lead us, I believe, to holiness.

[3] See Vayikra Rabbah 7:3.