

Rabbis, Priests, and Prophets

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Vayikra* (Leviticus 1:1 – 5:26)

By Marc Goodman

“Vayikra el-Moshe yay’dabeir Adonai eilav mei’ohel mo’eid.”
“Adonai called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting.”

***Parashat Vayikra* – a Summary**

Parashat Vayikra describes the laws of sacrifice.

- **Olah** – the burnt offering. The parashah describes the procedure for selecting and slaughtering the animal and how the offering is to be burned on the altar. The Olah is to be completely consumed by fire at the altar.
- **Minchah** – the meal offering. The parashah describes the procedure for selecting and preparing the fruit or grain for sacrifice. Unlike the Olah, only a small portion of the Minchah is to be burnt at the altar. The remainder is to be consumed by the priests.
- **Zevach Shelamim** – sacrifice of well-being. Like Olah, Zevach Shelamim is an animal sacrifice, and the parashah describes the procedure for selecting and slaughtering the animal and how the offering is to be burned on the altar. The parashah does not say who gets to eat the Zevach Shelamim, but it commands a general prohibition against eating fat or blood.
- **Chatat** – sin offering. Chatat is to be offered for the inadvertent commitment of a forbidden act. Like Olah and Zevach Shelamim, Chatat is an animal sacrifice,¹ and the parashah describes the procedure for selecting and slaughtering the animal and how the fat is to be burned on the altar. If the guilty party is the [High] Priest or the community at large, the remainder of the animal is to be burned outside the camp. The parashah does not describe what to do with the remainder of the animal if the guilty party is other than the High Priest or the community at large.
- **Asham** – guilt offering. Asham is to be offered for what can be characterized as property crimes committed by one individual against another. The person must first make restitution and then make a Chatat offering consisting of a ram.

***Vayikra* – a Question**

The Hebrew name for each of the books of Torah corresponds to the name of the first parashah in that book. Accordingly, the Hebrew name of the book known in English as Leviticus is *Vayikra*. *Vayikra* is the shortest and most narrowly focused of the five books of Torah, dealing mostly with the ritual

¹ *The Torah – A Modern Commentary*; Edited by W. Gunther Plaut; Union of American Hebrew Congregations; 1981; p. 774. Bernard Bamberger indicates that it can also be a meal offering.

observation of what is today known as Temple Judaism. Temple Judaism disappeared with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., thereby preventing the Jewish people from performing most of the prescriptions of *Parashat Vayikra* and the book of *Vayikra*. But did the destruction of the Temple also render *Vayikra* irrelevant to the Jewish People? We begin our search for an answer to this question with a look at the authorship and historical context of *Vayikra*.

***Vayikra* – Authorship and Historical Context**

Most biblical scholars today believe in the Documentary Hypothesis, which holds that Torah represents a collection of accounts from multiple sources woven together and embellished by the Redactor (known as the R source) around the time of the return from the Babylonian exile (ca. 520 B.C.E.). In the Appendix to *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Richard Elliot Friedman identifies P (the Priestly source) as the author of all of Leviticus except for 23:39-43 and 26:39-45.²

Friedman argues that the entire P source was written between 722 B.C.E. and 609 B.C.E.,³ during or after the time of King Hezekiah. Hezekiah ruled during the fall of the northern kingdom. It was a time of turmoil, and Hezekiah restored order to a chaotic world. He and his allies in the Aaronid priesthood smashed idols and centralized the priesthood (and the offering of sacrifices) at the Temple in Jerusalem.⁴

P wrote about more than just the priestly laws of *Vayikra*. P embedded the law codes of *Vayikra* in an unbroken narrative that starts with the very first words of Torah and continues through the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. The P narrative lends historical legitimacy to the Aaronid priesthood, whose practices it prescribes and documents.

***Vayikra* – Contemporaneous Writings**

As is often the case during tumultuous times, the Hezekiah era was witness to great literary outputs including much of the book of Isaiah. It produced the books of *Micah* and *Hosea*, which are contemporaneous with P and which appear to contradict or at least conflict with P regarding the priesthood and Temple sacrifices.

Micah – The book of *Micah* rejects the notion that Temple sacrifices will appease and please God. After asking if God will be appeased by sacrifices

² Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); p. 252.

³ Friedman, *op. cit.*, p. 210. The Northern Kingdom fell in 722 B.C.E. King Josiah (Hezekiah's great grandson) died in 609 B.C.E.

⁴ Rabbi Nossan Scherman, *et. al.*, editors ; *The Stone Edition Tanach*. First Edition (New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1996), II Chronicles 29:1 – 32:33.

and burnt offerings, *Micah* famously answers, “What does Hashem require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”⁵

Hosea – The book of *Hosea* compares Israel (actually Judah) to an unfaithful wife. *Hosea* describes a litany of Israel’s offences before God and goes so far as to claim that the priests actually encouraged sin so that they (the priests) might eat the sin offerings. “The sin-offerings of My people they [the priests] consume; and for their [the people’s] iniquity his [the priest’s] soul yearns.”⁶

Vayikra – More Questions

The Rabbis resolved the apparent contraction between Micah and P by saying that what Micah meant was that the Temple sacrifices were not enough. God also demanded ethical behavior. The Rabbis generally took Hosea’s complaint about the iniquity of the priests as a cry for reform. But did Micah really mean that sacrifice, while necessary, was not enough? Did Hosea really believe that the priesthood was merely in need of reform? Is it possible that these prophets actually questioned the basic value of the priesthood and Temple sacrifices? How did the Rabbis ultimately square the views of these prophets with the views of the priests?

“Old Religion” Vs. “New Religion”

The Prophets around the time of Hezekiah represent a very significant paradigm shift. All contemporaneous Ancient Near East “religions” revolved around long-standing sacrificial cults, and Temple Judaism was not much different in this respect. Micah and Hosea expounded early formulations of what has come to be called “ethical monotheism,” which claims that God demands ethical behavior, not cultic sacrifices. “Old Religion” seeks to pacify and/or curry favor from its gods with gifts that appeal to human biological needs. At least to the extent that “Old Religion” gods have human needs and desires, “Old Religion” gods are cast in the image of their human worshipers. The “New Religion” god transcends the biological needs of its human worshipers. The “New Religion” god demands that its human worshipers adopt its transcendent values of mercy and justice.

Rabbis, Priests, and Prophets

The Rabbis who wrote the Talmud didn’t view Torah in terms of J, P, D and E. They understood Torah as the word of God revealed to and recorded by Moses, and they viewed all of the mitzvot as commanded by God and therefore equally incumbent on the Jewish people. But the Rabbis also viewed the Prophetic writings as the divine revelation of God. So how did they reconcile the “Old Religion” of the priests (P) with the “New Religion” of

⁵ Scherman, *op. cit.*, Micah 6:8.

⁶ Scherman, *op. cit.*, Hosea 4:8. Bracketed insertions are the author’s.

the Prophets (e.g., Micah and Hosea) with respect to the Temple sacrifices prescribed by *Vayikra*?

The Rabbis declared that the Temple sacrifices applied only to the Temple in Jerusalem and that their actual performance was to be held in abeyance until its restoration.⁷ But this resolution left them with a major unresolved issue. The non-performance of the *Vayikra* Temple sacrifices leaves us with unfulfilled mitzvot. The Rabbis demonstrated their spiritual genius in resolving this apparent conflict.

The Rabbis believed in a compassionate version of the ethical monotheism described by the Prophets, but they understood the transformative power of contact with God's awe afforded by the Temple sacrifices described by the priestly author of *Vayikra*.⁸ The Rabbis replaced the Temple sacrifices with prayer. Through prayer the Jewish People could experience the awe of the God that demanded that they to do justice and love mercy.

The Rabbis showed the Jewish People how to maintain the relevance of *Vayikra*.

***Vayikra* in the 21st Century**

Today's Jews continue to pray to God. Although individual reasons for prayer may differ, drawing closer to God is almost certainly primary among them, just as it was a primary reason for our ancestors to offer sacrifices to God. The interceding millennia have not changed the human need to connect with God, but they have changed the way we go about it. The means by which Jews will attempt to draw close to God thousands of years from now is not knowable, but it is almost certain that they will continue to do so.

⁷ They also argued that the restoration of the Temple would coincide with the coming of the Messiah, whose presence would obviate the need for Temple sacrifices.

⁸ The Hebrew term used for the priestly sacrifices prescribed in *Vayikra* is *korban*, which translates as to draw near or approach.