



THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT

PARSHAT VAYIKRA: HOW TO READ THE BOOK OF VAYIKRA

SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

- I. The book of Leviticus is particularly difficult because it suffers from two basic problems.
 - a) For one, unlike Genesis and most of Exodus, there's very little storyline - It's like a hodgepodge of laws and rituals about unclean animals, priestly inductions, sacrifices, sexual immorality, with holidays and some social justice thrown in for good measure.
 - b) Aside from the fact that there is little to no narrative to make the book easier to follow, the subjects of holiness, purity and sacrifice are extremely difficult to relate to.
 - i. How is this book relevant to us in the 21st century?
 - ii. We're going to offer you a guide to the book that will help navigate the basic meaning and relevance inherent in Leviticus.
 - iii. Each week, we'll take an even closer look at a particular topic and try to get to the bottom of these strange laws in a way that is both rationally compelling and spiritually meaningful.

- II. Before we jump into the book of Leviticus, let's take a look at how the book of Exodus ends and sets up our story.
 - a) The last verses of Exodus talk about the cloud of glory coming down to rest in the Mishkan now that it had been completed.
 - i. We are then told about how the cloud of God would rise up to lead Israel in the desert and signal that it was time to continue their journey.
 - ii. And that's where the book ends.
 - b) So what you would expect to hear, right at the beginning of Leviticus, is an account of the next place Israel traveled to. If the cloud is leading them, where did they go next?
 - i. Except, in the book of Leviticus, they actually don't travel.
 - ii. In fact, for the entire book of Leviticus, Israel stands still
 - iii. You never hear about them traveling once.
 - iv. And to make matters even more strange, these verses at the end of Exodus are repeated almost identically much later in the Torah, nine chapters into the book of Numbers.
 - v. Why is that story repeated?

- III. So here's the secret, and the beginning of a key to understand the book of Leviticus.
 - a) These two sets of verses about the cloud and the journeys in the desert are actually the same story.

- i. They're bookends, one at the very end of Exodus, and the other toward the beginning of the book of Numbers.
 - ii. In between them lies the book of Leviticus.
 - b) The Torah is marking off a portion of text to tell us that the storyline is about to take a diversion.
 - i. Instead of hearing about the next event that happens to Israel, the next place they travel to, we are going to hear about the consequences of the last major event that happened in Exodus.
 - ii. That event is mentioned in the final verse of the book of Leviticus and gives us a clue as to what the entire book of Leviticus is about: "These are the commandments, which God commanded Moses for the children of Israel in Mount Sinai." (Leviticus 27:34)
 - c) God's revelation at Sinai is that major event in the book of Exodus.
 - i. In His desire to come closer to humanity, God had decided to directly reveal Himself and make His presence known to Israel in the form of a cloud atop Mount Sinai.
 - ii. But God wanted to come even closer to humanity.
 - 1. His presence wouldn't stay high out of reach on a mountain, the cloud would descend directly into the midst of the camp where Israel had erected the Mishkan, a place for God to dwell amongst them.
 - 2. The cloud would go before them, and lead the people in the desert, where they would set up camp around the cloud.
- IV. The book of Leviticus is therefore a consequence of this new closeness achieved at Sinai.
- a) Everything that happens in this book happens at the Israelite encampment at the foot of the mountain.
 - b) Now that God perpetually dwells amongst them, Israel will need to keep new laws and rituals out of sensitivity to the divine presence, and in recognition of the high-intensity of the closeness of the relationship between them.
- V. Here is the basic structure of the book:
- a) Parshat Vayikra begins to tell us about the day to day services that would take place in the mishkan.
 - i. If the Mishkan in Exodus represented God's will to live amongst us, the rituals in Leviticus describe what that day to day living looks like.
 - ii. In Vayikra we are instructed in korbanot.
 - 1. Korban is often mistranslated as "sacrifice," but the Hebrew root of the word is kuff, resh, bet, karov, which means closeness.
 - 2. And the idea here is that these animal or grain offerings would somehow draw Israel and God closer together.
 - b) Tzav and Shemini continue with the induction of the priests, and the final dedication ceremony of the Mishkan itself.
 - i. In one of the only narrative portions of the book, we hear about how the first korbanot, the first offerings are brought and how all the work in building the mishkan culminates in God's gracious acceptance of those first offerings.

- ii. The people only placed the offering on the altar -- it was God who provided the fire, and who chose to accept it: "And a fire went out from before God, and consumed the offering. And when all the people saw it, they sang in praise and fell on their faces." (Leviticus 9:24)
- iii. This story is a powerful symbol of the new partnership and the close relationship forged between Heaven and Earth.
 - 1. The two-way relationship where there is a human gesture and a responding Divine gesture was so deeply moving to the people that they fell on their faces and sang.
 - 2. It's an emotionally uplifting event that we try to capture and perpetuate in our daily prayer as we offer ourselves to God and He answers us in turn.
- iv. With the divine presence rooted firmly in the camp, Israel would need to conduct itself with extreme sensitivity.
 - 1. Their relationship with the divine presence would be deliberate and meaningful, and therefore, could not be causal.
 - 2. Shemini, therefore, continues with a tragic story of two priests, the sons of Aaron, who casually tried to enter the holy of holies and didn't survive.
- v. After this tragic insensitivity to the divine presence, we learn about purity laws, a way in which Israel can exhibit the requisite sensitivity toward living together with God.
 - 1. He tells Moses: "Warn the children of Israel to be careful of their impurity; that they die not in their impurity, when they make impure My Mishkan that is in their midst." (Leviticus 15:31)
 - 2. Thus, we hear about the pure animals that Israel is allowed to eat, and the impure animals that they are commanded to stay away from.
- c) Tazria and Metzora discuss purity laws concerning life and death, through birth, leprosy, and bodily emissions. And when a member of Israel is in a state of impurity, they must leave the camp and purify themselves before they can re-enter the neighborhood of the divine presence.
- d) In Acharei Mot, we are introduced to the ceremony of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, where Israel can gain forgiveness and be purified once a year.
 - i. On this day, Israel is able to achieve a level of divinity so pure that the closeness between God and Israel is at its highest.
 - ii. Israel's terrestrial cloud meets God's heavenly cloud in the holy of holies, the only time the Kohen Gadol, the high priest, is ever allowed to enter.
 - iii. After Yom Kippur, the Torah moves from its discussion of ritual purity to talk about moral purity laws, which are necessary to keep in order to live before God. We hear about sexual purity, the boundaries of sacred relationships that should not be transgressed in order to maintain that state of purity.
- e) In Kedoshim, God tells Israel directly: "Tell Israel that they must be holy, because I am holy." (Leviticus 19:2)
 - i. Israel is asked to go a step beyond purity in to holiness.
 - ii. We learn that holiness is achieved both through the relationship with God, and through justice and kindness toward our fellow man.

- iii. The text therefore continues to tell us about moral holiness, and we find that hating your brother in your heart, cheating in business, and dealing falsely brings impurity into the world and cannot be tolerated by the Divine presence.
 - iv. We are told that honest scales and measures, and kind treatment of those on the fringes of society, cause Israel to be a state of holiness and closeness with the Divine presence.
 - f) And after hearing about moral holiness, the text continues in Emor to describe the holiness of the priests, and mikraei kodesh, holiness in time, or holidays.
 - g) In Behar, we hear about holiness in time and space with laws that pertain to sanctifying the land itself - There are laws about keeping shemittah, the sabbatical year, and yovel, the jubilee in the land of Israel.
 - h) Bechukotai ends the book with a covenant: "If you go in the ways of My laws, and keep My commandments, and do them; then I will give your rains in their season, and the land will yield her produce, and the trees of the field will yield their fruit." (Leviticus 26:3-4)
 - i. In the same way that God's presence dwells with the people in the desert, and in the way that God's presence brings sustenance from the sky and water from a rock, God's presence will dwell with His people in the land of Israel.
 - ii. So long as they are sensitive to the laws that allow God and Israel to dwell together, Israel will receive water from the heavens and abundant food from the earth.
- VI. If we understand the structure and flow of this book, the laws within are not random, devoid of any personal meaning to us.
- a) The book teaches us how to be a holy people, dedicated to God.
 - b) We learn how to relate to life and death, how to keep ourselves spiritually pure, and we learn the necessary conditions toward setting up a just society, a moral society founded on kindness to others and sensitivity to the Divine.
 - c) In some ways, the book also discusses an ideal time, where we might entreat God to accept our offerings, and where He might answer us, directly and before our eyes.
 - d) And while we cannot experience that same joyful song that Israel sang, or the awe of perpetually experiencing closeness with the divine presence, we can commit ourselves to that ideal.
 - e) We can keep the commands in this book in an effort to achieve purity and holiness, as we attempt to grow closer to Him. And while we might not hear God answer our prayers in an awesome fire, we might look for His answer in the many gifts of our lives, and in the depth of our hearts.