

April Fools

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The Book of Leviticus has the most wonderful way of making April fools out of all of us! It's a book that has so much in it and yet, at first appearance may seem to be entirely outdated because it is preoccupied with the minutiae of sacrifices! It is true, that sacrificial system is distant from the Judaism practiced today, thank God, but at its heart, it still deals with issues that are very much essential to the religious enterprise.

When you really stop to think about it, you realize that Sefer va-Yikra, that is the Book of Leviticus, is at the center of the Torah, not only spatially but in many ways, spiritually. More than any other single book, va-Yikra sets the tone and establishes many of the central themes of Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism throughout the ages.

Now you know that Leviticus concerns itself with the regulations of the priesthood, the proper performance of the sacrifices in all of their variety, the atonement of sins, and many issues regarding cleanliness and health. Each of these facets is connected to the Covenant between God and the people of Israel, and it is the priest's obligation to facilitate an ongoing relationship between the people and God.

By establishing an ideal or sacred community, va-Yikra recognizes that deeds speak far more eloquently than mere words and that living in a holy community can provide a sense of God's presence far more profoundly than mere ethereal approaches.

Admittedly, I'm not turned on by the fact that at the center of the central book of our Torah there is an all-too-detailed preoccupation with animal and vegetable sacrifice. It isn't exactly what gives me my religious jollies, either. But when we think of religious devotion, perhaps we all too easily picture silent meditation, the idyllic appreciation of nature while at the seashore, or skiing at the top of the mountain during Mardi Gras time, or perhaps even a commitment to ethical living that is inspired within us when, in the fullness of life's beauty and benefits, we see and help someone who is needy.

Life is not neatly packaged that way, however. It isn't a setting in which we are fully in control. As we have seen in this post-Katrina period, we are, you and I, subject to having our world pulled out from under us and turned into confusion and turmoil at any point out of our control. Life is inclusive of tragedy of staggering proportions, bitter disappointments, trivial pettiness, jealousies, violence, rage, and just bad luck and accidents.

When we examine who we really are, we discover that we are made up of many layers of feelings, drives, and convictions. Only at our most superficial level are you and I completely cheerful, polite, and optimistic. At the deeper levels of the human psyche, we have contradictions and impulses we may or may not entirely understand. I'll bet that all of these competing levels of drives within us require some mode of expression, sooner or later. And God help us if we attempt to deny them and stifle them, because they will come to the surface in all of their truth or destructiveness and ugliness, sooner or later.

What I'm saying is that you and I are psychically and emotionally as disturbing and as complex as the very sacrificial system described in the Book of Leviticus. Those

sacrifices performed by the priests in the ancient temple on behalf of our Jewish ancestors may well have expressed the deep rage and the feelings of inadequacy, and vulnerability, of guilt, or of longing that you and I continue to feel until this day. No! By no means am I advocating a return to the sacrifice of bullocks and pigeons. In our age, however, this period of sanitized religion amidst everyday violence can also thwart our ability to fully answer the needs that we feel at our deepest core.

Have you ever heard anyone say, or perhaps you've said it yourself,

Rabbi, I've never joined a synagogue, and we don't practice our Judaism at home, but I've always had this deep, warm feeling for being Jewish at my heart. I know that I've always been a good Jew.

Have you ever heard that? I know I have in countless variations as Jews have rehearsed those lines through the years.

Well, at least the people that brought their sacrifices to the temple, whether it was a sheaf of wheat, or some precious oil, or a pigeon, or a turtledove, or some kind of a larger animal, at least they were people who wanted to follow through with their faith. They weren't just cardiac Jews with warm feelings in their hearts, which are so easy to claim and so easy to slough off by inaction. I mean, you've got to mean it to shlep to Jerusalem from Tiberius, change your clothes, buy a bullock, and sacrifice it via a priest with a handsome honorarium!

Bubby's matzah balls and warm feelings are important a component of Jewish identification and faith, it is true. But, I wonder sometimes if warm feelings are enough? Our Torah portion offers a useful distinction between the role of warm fuzzies and the necessity of tangible feelings and the need for tangible signs and actions that nurture and transmit those feelings across the generations and through the community.

Last night, we talked about the need for leadership and for people who really mean what they pray – to stand up and to serve the congregation and the Jewish people. Are service and leadership and volunteerism today's new sacrificial altar? I believe it may well be seen to be that. Are you willing to sacrifice and make visible tokens of your religious sincerity by giving to God and to people some of your free time? Are we willing to put up from our material wealth more than we have, in order to show our sympathy with those who are in need, or to help assure the future of Temple Sinai?

All of these questions are worth pondering, especially as we come now to the Book of Leviticus.

And speaking of the sacrificial system, the Talmud remarks, "It doesn't matter to God whether one brings much or little, so long as one's heart is directed toward Heaven." It seems to me that the key phrase of the Talmud is that part which says the heart must be directed toward Heaven. That doesn't just mean thinking of God as our big buddy in the

sky, eager to approve our friendship on any terms. Rather, to quote from the Mishnah, it means a willingness to “make God’s will your will.”

Take the bullock off the altar and remove the sacred oils and the turtledoves as well. What matters in 5756 is moving up God’s agenda instead of our own. That’s the sacrifice that we are called to make – the only one that will tell where our hearts really do lie.

Amen