

## Reclaiming Leviticus

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So this is Shabbat Tazria, the Shabbat of childbirth: that's the good news. The bad news is, the childbirth material in this week's parashah is actually pretty disturbing. It's from the book of Leviticus, and Leviticus is pretty disturbing. Let's talk about that.

There isn't much narrative in Leviticus: it's mostly ritual, including a lot of icky ritual with animal sacrifice, bodily fluids, moldy houses: don't ask. The book is also politically incorrect. Not only does childbirth confer ritual impurity, but it's Leviticus that contains the ban on homosexuality. Is this book basically an embarrassment to Judaism? Should we just sweep Leviticus under the rug? Or is there some way to redeem this clunker?

The lack of narrative in Leviticus is implicit in the book's purpose. Primarily, it's a manual for priests: here's how you do sacrifice X, here's how you celebrate transition Y, here's how you observe holiday Z. The priestly rituals were a closely guarded secret in other ancient religions: Judaism was the first religion to make the sacred protocols public. There's something to be proud of: declassification. The world is welcome to know what we're up to in our shrines. The second half of Leviticus makes holiness available to the common people as well as the priests, thus democratizing the religion.

Ritual itself is suspect in some people's eyes. Who needs ritual? A lot of atavistic claptrap. But it seems to me that everyone needs ritual: ritual is part of life. I drink my coffee out of the same mug every morning. If I can't find my favorite mug when it's time for breakfast, my whole day is off on the wrong foot. That's not Leviticus, but it's ritual.

Admittedly, the particular rituals of Leviticus are very alien to our sensibilities: they seem to come from another galaxy. For example, our Biblical ancestors marked a special occasion by slaughtering an animal, skinning it, dismembering it, ritually burning certain parts of the carcass, and ritually ingesting other parts. How primitive. We mark a special occasion by getting groceries at the supermarket, peeling the cling wrap off the steak, discarding the excess fat and gristle, throwing the meat on the grill, and serving it on the fine china with the good silver. Completely different.

Leviticus is not founded on analytical thinking. It's founded on metaphorical thinking. The Tabernacle as a metaphor of Mount Sinai. The animal's body as a metaphor of the universe. The priest's body as a metaphor of the universe. Other early and tribal cultures have similar beliefs, and we can get a glimpse of them even in our modern civilization. To return to my dinner party example, we set the holiday spread very carefully, with the fork on the left of the plate and the spoon on the right, with the cornucopia in the center and the host at the head of the table. You may not think of this meticulous arrangement as a metaphor of anything, but ask an anthropologist. This Torah of the dining room has all the hallmarks of an occult priestly metaphysics.

A recurring theme in Leviticus is impurity, contamination, defilement: specifically, defilement of the sanctuary, and its cleansing. Yom Kippur and other purgation rituals, in their origin, did not so much purify the sinner as purify the sanctuary. Leviticus teaches that the sanctuary is defiled through any sin committed by any Israelite anywhere, even thousands of miles away.

Superstition? Actually it's a powerful construct. What if we said, America's sins at Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib have contaminated the Washington Monument: we'd better come up with a ritual to purify the obelisk. That makes an interesting kind of sense. Maybe Leviticus is on to something.

For me, the homophobic verses are the ugliest part of Leviticus. But it's noticeable that the homophobia is found in chapters 18 and 20, concerned with ceremonial constraints. In between them is the beautiful chapter 19, which commands us to be honest in our business dealings, to pay laborers promptly, to refrain from exploiting the disabled, and to welcome the stranger. The arrangement of the arbitrary taboos on either side of the justice material indicates the relative importance of the different themes. Ethics is central.

Chapter 25 is another impressive section: it specifies that the land needs to rest at regular intervals, and that slaves need to be freed at regular intervals. Thus Leviticus shows an early ecological awareness and a dawning theology of social revolution. The famous Liberty Bell text comes from Leviticus 25: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." A troubling element of this week's parashah is that the purification ritual after childbirth is twice as long for a daughter as for a son. Are baby girls twice as dirty as baby boys? More likely, since a girl may herself become a mother someday, the birth of a girl requires a double mother ritual. Modern scholar Beth Alpert Nakhai puts a different spin on this imperative. In a patriarchal society, there was always the danger that daughters would be abused or neglected. Therefore, the Torah gives a baby girl twice as much time alone with mommy during the purification period, so she gets an extra chance to bond with the mother, her main protector. This is what we call a redemptive reading of the text. It may or may not be the original intent, but it certainly makes us feel a lot better.

Leviticus isn't the lightest of documents, and it contains some very painful verbiage. But being a Jewish grownup means engaging the difficult parts of our heritage as well as the easy parts. Leviticus is a challenge, but it's worth the struggle. Lest we forget, Leviticus contains one verse that sums up religion at its best: "You shall not take vengeance nor bear any grudges, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."