

As I studied this week's double parasha, Acharei Mot- Kedoshim, my attention was drawn not to the usual "Greatest hits," – the commandment to be holy, or the commandment, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself," part of what is known as the Holiness code, in Chapter 19 of Leviticus.

Instead, I kept turning back to the prescriptions for ritual slaughter in Chapter 17, part of *Acharei Mot*. This is one of those Chapters that Torah readers love to hate, or at least, love to ignore. It is entirely devoted to the specifics of animal slaughter – where and how to do it, which animals, and what should be done with various animal parts.

To be confessional, I think there are two reasons that I was feeling drawn to the discussion of animal sacrifices this Parashah, this year. One is that I have been acutely aware of my animalness since having a child. Multiple times each day, I look at my daughter as she nurses and marvel that we are just another two of many mammals on earth; there is she is grunting at my breast, not so different from a little piglet or puppy. There we are; mother and baby mammal.

The other is that, as some of you experienced, my mother brought some of her Torah making supplies last weekend and invited many members of the community to handle them, including the partially worked parchment, formerly deer hide, on its way to becoming a Torah. So this question, how do the blood and guts of the animal experience become something holy, is one that has been particularly in my face of late.

Before any vegans in the room leave, I want to say first that I was raised vegetarian. My deer-hide working mother is vegetarian. And to this day, I eat

meat very rarely. My husband is a trained shochet, a kosher slaughterer, who slaughters all of the meat we eat, which is not very much.

And perhaps this is self-congratulatory, but when I look at Acharei Mot, I see an approach to meat that matches how I try to approach it: not total abstention, but meat as a rare, big deal. As Rabbi Maurice Harris wrote in *Leviticus: You have No Idea*: “If we are going to eat meat, it is sacred business that requires us to have a spiritual confrontation with the true implications of the acts involved in putting meat on our table.”

First of all, there is the requirement that a portion of all meat be brought as an offering, not just anywhere, but specifically to the central Tent of Meeting. Then, there is a public presentation of the meat and the sacrifice. There is the prohibition against consuming blood, or animals killed by non-kosher means. There is also, embedded in all of this, a line in verse 7 about how the offerings should be made particularly to Hashem, and that, I quote, “they will no longer make offering to the goat demons after whom they stray.”

Uhhh. . . goat demons?!

Hang in here with me. I started digging to find out what were these “goat demons.” Multiple commentators were matter-of-fact about the existence of goat-demons, sounds like similar to satyrs of Greek mythology. The Italian humanist commentator, Sforino, wrote that they: “were not being equated with deities in any manner, but were considered only as creatures that could be employed by their human masters.” He describes in great detail their physiology and what animated them, and concludes:

“At any rate, when a situation exists when many people find such demons useful and pliable to their wishes, people indulged in offering them blood so as to endear themselves to these creatures and to get them to perform their wishes.”

So what is the difference between sacrificing meat to a goat-demon and sacrificing to God? Sforno’s text implies that, at least according to our ancestors’ understanding, these goat demons could be controlled, their behavior harnessed to fulfill human desire. In other words, an offering to a goat demon was thought of as transactional – in exchange for meat, the demon would obey the wishes of the one making the offering. And this is forbidden.

To extrapolate based on Sforno’s description, what is being forbidden is a relationship with meat that exerts and affirms human control.

And then there is God, whose motives we do not understand, to whom we might make offerings but without the illusion of control. The very title of the parashah, *Acharei Mot*, after the death, is a reference to the deaths of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Abihu, when they made offerings to God that had uncontrolled results.

In contrast to the forbidden offerings to goat demons – and I know, I can’t believe I keep saying the phrase “goat demons,” with a straight face, either! – in contrast to those offerings, the prescriptions of how meat should be handled are designed to remind us of our own animalness, and the mystery of what it means to take a life to feed our own lives. We recognize that we share the same blood with other creatures, and we do not eat it. We set aside a portion to be offered to God, because all life belongs to God. Even if we’re the ones who have taken the life, we recognize that before the vastness of God, we are all so much meat, and so we

offer a share of the meat that we intend to eat, not in an attempt to control outcomes, but in recognition that we will all die.

And of course, we offer the meat in community, within the camp, because it is a big deal to spill an animal's blood and it should only be done in a context of sharing, rather than to satisfy individual appetite.

I think I think that this provides very timely guidelines for how we think about food in general today. Not only because we know as perhaps that our ancestors did not that even a vegetarian diet, even a vegan diet, demands the lives of animals, through habitat loss and pesticide use. But beyond even the more or less visible debt that every meal owes to animals, it is a great gift, and a rare gift, to be able to sit for a meal multiple times a day. Leviticus 17 reminds us to eat mindfully, with gratitude. To remember as we eat that we are as mortal as what we consume. To remind ourselves that even if we did the final steps of preparing the food, the food does not belong to us, no life belongs to us – and so to share food without a quid pro quo expectation of what we will receive in return.

Shabbat shalom.