

This week's parashah is Vayikra; the opening portion of the book of Leviticus, and because it is the first Shabbat during the month of Nisan, the month in which Passover falls, there is a special maftir, *haChodesh*, 'this month,' which I'll discuss more in a few minutes. After the cosmic wonder of the Sinai experience, the lavish materials of the building of the mishkan, the Tabernacle; the switch to the daily right of sacrifices, in all of their literal gory detail can seem like a bit of a comedown.

Sometimes Leviticus seems more like a cookbook than like a holy text. Consider, for example, verses 6 through 8 of Chapter 1, with apologies to the vegetarians: "The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into sections. (7) The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and lay out wood upon the fire; (8) and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall lay out the sections, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire upon the altar. (9) Its entrails and legs shall be washed with water, and the priest shall turn the whole into smoke on the altar as a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to Hashem." This could be a description of a barbecue – but here it's of a holy act.

Or Consider Chapter 2, verses 4-6, describing one of the ways of bringing a *mincha*, a meal offering: "(4) When you present an offering of meal baked in the oven, [it shall be of] choice flour: unleavened cakes with oil mixed in, or unleavened wafers spread with oil. (5) If your offering is a meal offering on a griddle, it shall be of choice flour with oil mixed in, unleavened. (6) Break it into bits and pour oil on it; it is a meal offering." Basically, a recipe for flatbread.

As mundane and detailed as these offerings are, for the most part, we live our lives in the realm of the mundane. We are not always at the top of the mountain, receiving revelation. And as Rabbi Shefa Gold writes, “How can we sustain this connection, this state of holy freedom, [cultivated through Exodus, revelation at Sinai and the building of the mishkan]? This is the question addressed by the book of Leviticus.”

The test of our holy consciousness is not how we behave when having a sublime experience at the top of a mountain – it’s whether we can make mixing our daily bread into a holy experience.

The key to this challenge is the very notion of korbanot, the system of animal and grain offerings that are generally translated as “sacrifices.” But whereas the word “sacrifice” connotes renunciation, giving up, the word “korban” comes from the root kuf-resh-vet, “karov” meaning “close.” To bring an offering, in the Hebrew is ‘I’hakreev” – to bring close. And though some offerings were entirely given away, including the olah, the animal offering whose description I just excerpted; most offerings were shared between the bringer, the priests and, in some symbolic way, Hashem. So the point wasn’t that one had to give up the animal one had raised or the grain one had grown, but rather, to sanctify the experience of slaughter or harvest, of preparation and of consumption.

Dena Weiss of Hadar points out that these regular offerings, brought mindfully by ordinary people, are the essence of creating a sacred community and marking sacred time. She writes, “There are rules and expectations that are not about you and what you are feeling, but rather about what needs to be done to keep the world functioning, to keep the mishkan in operation. There is an element of

Divine service that is about being obedient, and more so, about being reliable. This reliability is also critical to building a relationship with God. Deep relationships are built on a foundation of trust, regular communication and regular contact. Eating dinner with your family every night is not supposed to be exciting, it's supposed to be grounding. When you ask your spouse the same set of questions at the end of the day, that is a foundational ritual. Being dependable isn't always interesting and it isn't always fun, but it is also indispensable."

I would suggest that it's not just grounding, but also potentially transformative. I mentioned earlier that this is Shabbat HaChodesh, which is read on the first Shabbat during the month of Nisan. We read from Exodus 12, wherein God first tells Moses, "Hachodesh hazeh lachem rosh chodashim" - this month for you shall be the first of months." This statement is the first mitzvah, the first commandment, given to the Jewish people as a people. God is telling the people through Moses that as of this point, they are to mark their calendar according to God's time, not by Pharaoh's time. This month of Nissan, the month in which they will be liberated, is to be the first month.

Of course, at this moment, they are still in Egypt. They are not yet free. But as I have discussed in the past, an important step in our ancestor's spiritual journey towards liberation was the ability to shift their internal clock, so to speak, and begin to envision themselves living a sacred calendar. They had to prepare a proto-Seder meal while still being captive, and imagine their liberation.

I imagine that some of us could relate, right now, to that challenge. Though we are, thank God, not captives in Egypt, we are nevertheless living constrained lives, and perhaps many of us are feeling a little trapped. So the challenges that face us as we prepare for Passover are not necessarily the challenges of overcoming lofty spiritual goals, but rather the challenge of, to put it bluntly, not having a breakdown while we are confined in solitude or stuck entertaining our children with limited resources. So our challenge is to hold the aspiration of turning the preparation of every meal, of every snack, of preparing for Pesach without extended family, into a *korban*, a sacred offering, an exercise in mindfulness that brings us closer to the divine. We might be constrained, but like our ancestors, we too can let our consciousness reach for that sense of liberation time.

We will not, of course, always succeed in this, but that is why it's called a spiritual practice. Leviticus reminds us that the act of preparing a meal for people we love each and every day is no less sacred than the act of taking a special retreat. It may, in fact, be the most sacred thing we can do.

So I invite you to write in, if you feel like it: what is something totally routine and mundane, that you will try to make sacred with your intention this week?