

This week's parashah is Vayikra, the first parashah in the book of Leviticus. And this whole book deals with the ritual details of how and when one makes an offering; specifically a sacrificial offering of an animal or grain. Keep in mind that in ancient Israel, such sacrifices were the core of communal religious life, in much the way that our gathering – even these virtual gatherings, now – are the core of our communal religious life now.

Tomorrow morning, Mia Turjeman will broadly be discussing the concept of *korbanot*, animal and grain sacrifices and the power and problematics of *korbanot* as the basis for spiritual life. SO I want to focus in particularly on section of the Torah portion that I find quite fascinating, and dare I say generous, despite the distinct possibility that our eyes might usually glaze over from all of the different sacrificial descriptions by the time we get there.

The section that intrigues me is the first few verses of Chapter 5 of Vayikra, towards the end of the parasha. In translation, they say:

If a person incurs guilt— When he has heard a public imprecation and—although able to testify as one who has either seen or learned of the matter—he does not give information, so that he is subject to punishment;

Or when a person touches any unclean thing—be it the carcass of an unclean beast or the carcass of unclean cattle or the carcass of an unclean creeping thing—and the fact has escaped him, and then, being unclean, he realizes his guilt;

Or when he touches human uncleanness—any such uncleanness whereby one becomes unclean—and, though he has known it, the fact has escaped him, but later he realizes his guilt;

Or when a person utters an oath to bad or good purpose—whatever a man may utter in an oath—and, though he has known it, the fact has escaped him, but later he realizes his guilt in any of these matters—

when he realizes his guilt in any of these matters, he shall confess that wherein he has sinned.

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And he shall bring as his penalty to the LORD, for the sin of which he is guilty, a female from the flock, sheep or goat, as a sin offering; and the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for his sin.

The verses go on and they make an exception for someone who cannot afford a sheep or goat; that person can bring two turtledoves or pigeons. And further along, if the person cannot afford two turtledoves or pigeons, they can bring a tenth of an ephah of flour- which would be equivalent to about 9 cups of flour- the same amount that I use to make challah almost every week.

As Chizkuni states explicitly, the Torah does not want to require that people go into debt in order to atone for this kind of transgression, which is one way in which I find this passage “generous.” But for so many other kinds of transgression, Torah doesn’t offer this kind of “sliding scale” atonement. What makes these particularly different?

Da’at Zekenim claims that in this case, a person has not derived any benefit, even inadvertently, by transgression. There is no presumed great benefit to forgetting to testify in a court case (though I can imagine instances of bribery). There is certainly no benefit to accidentally touching a creepy crawling or a dead body.

But I would also add – with thanks to the observations of those who attended Torah study yesterday – that what we have heard is not a case of anyone even really doing anything morally wrong, but of stumbling across something entirely innocently, and then forgetting to fulfill the responsibility that creates. That might sound confusing in the abstract, so I’ll clarify:

As in the first verse, someone has witnessed something, perhaps a crime, or they have witnessed the whereabouts of the person accused of the crime. The witness hasn’t done anything wrong; but now they have an obligation to testify when a call goes out for witnesses. For whatever reason, this person failed to answer that call. When they realize their failure, they are supposed to atone by bringing this offering.

Similarly, there is nothing morally wrong with tripping over a creepy-crawly or touching a dead body; in fact, in the case of the latter, we honor people who do that work. And yet, in ancient cultures, it was recognized that that kind of contact rendered a person ritually impure – let’s say they just felt “icky.” It’s not a moral problem, but when this happens to a person (we’ll learn later in Leviticus); they are supposed to remain in a state of impurity for the rest of the day and not touch sanctified objects in the meantime. But Chapter 5 is describing a situation wherein someone touched the creepy crawly and then *forgot*, and presumably touched a sanctified object or did another forbidden behavior before they purified themselves.

Rabbi Avital Hochstein picks up on one similarity between these seemingly disparate situations, when she writes, “We don’t always choose the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We do not necessarily choose a state of impurity, we do not necessarily choose to know, and we do not necessarily choose to see this aspect or another of our society. We do not always seek awareness regarding the wrongs taking place around us. But not having chosen does not exempt one from responsibility. Just as if we find ourselves in a state of impurity we need to purify —whether we chose this state consciously or not, so also not wanting to know does not exempt one from action when one has knowledge.”

Hochstein’s words reflect the responsibility we hold after even inadvertent contact with something “icky” (whether physical contact or witnessing it).

I want to tease out another similarity in these cases, which I think reflects the generosity in Torah. Torah assumes that we will, in the natural course of our lives have uncomfortable encounters, whether witnessing something that shouldn’t happen, or touching something that ideally, we shouldn’t touch. That’s fine; Torah doesn’t expect us to be in a state of innocence and purity all the time, and Torah provides the instructions for what to do when we have that kind of

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encounter: in the case of the witness, testify. In the case of the contact with creepy crawlies; restricts one's other contact until one gets pure. (The former makes a certain moral sense; the latter should particularly make sense to us in the age of coronavirus.)

But these verses show – not only does Torah assume that sometimes we'll witness something we'd rather not see; that sometimes we'll touch something we'd rather not touch, but it also assumes that sometimes we'll forget or miss the opportunity to make it right after that happens – that we will compound impurity with error about how to deal with it. And these verses offer us a way to fix such a situation: bring a sacrifice. Can't afford the sacrifice? Okay, bring a cheaper sacrifice. This is what I find astoundingly compassionate about these verses – not only the acknowledgement that we all come into contact with “impurity” such as it is, but the acknowledgement that when that happens, we might *also* make a mistake in how to deal with it. And even then, there is a ritual way to fix it.

Read in that light, this is an extraordinary statement about *teshuvah*. We will be imperfect. We will have icky encounters, and then we will fail in our responsibilities that our icky encounters have created. In such a moment – and I'm sure we've had such moments – we might be inclined to just stew indefinitely in our own sense of failure; our own sense of ickiness. But these verses suggest that even then, we can still confess and have complete atonement.

I am not suggesting that today any of us should be sacrificing animals or even 9 cups of flour. But I do hope we can internalize this message of Torah: Mistakes happen, sometimes even twice in a row. Don't stew in it alone; talk about it, bring it to the community, and let it go.

Shabbat shalom.