

Leviticus: The Democratisation of Holiness

God's Call

Of all the Mosaic books, *Vayikra*, Leviticus, is the one most out of step with contemporary culture. Many find it difficult to relate to its concerns. It opens with an account of sacrifices, something we have not experienced for close to two millennia. Its preoccupation with ritual purity and defilement seems to come from another age, and with the exception of the menstrual cycle, has little contemporary application. The long account of *tzaraat*, usually translated as leprosy, is a good example of the difficulties the text poses. Are we talking about a disease, a defilement, or a punishment, and how, in any case, is it relevant to a spiritual life and our relationship with God?

Little happens in Leviticus. There is not much narrative and the little that does exist is troubling. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, die on the day of the consecration of the Tabernacle simply, it seems, because of an act of misplaced enthusiasm. Even when Leviticus speaks about ethics, it does so in a perplexing way. The great chapter 19, with its majestic summons – “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” – mixes moral imperatives with ritual and seemingly irrational commands, like the prohibition against wearing clothes of mixed wool and linen, in a way that challenges conventional ideas of logic and coherence. The

mindset of Leviticus is far removed from that of secular culture in the West in the twenty-first century.

Yet Leviticus is a – perhaps even the – key text of Judaism. It is here that we read for the first time the command to “Love your neighbour as yourself.” It is the source of the even greater moral principle, “You shall love [the stranger] as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt.” It is Leviticus that forbids us to take vengeance or bear a grudge, taking a stand against the psychopathology of hatred and violence. It contains one of the most remarkable of all religious ideas, that we are summoned to be holy because God is holy. Not only are we created in God’s image. We are called on to act in God’s ways.

At a more practical but no less profound level, Leviticus sets out an entire infrastructure for justice and equity in political and economic life. It is Leviticus that sets out the parameters for employer-employee relationships. It humanises slavery and sets in motion a process that must end in its abolition, however long it takes. It speaks about debt relief and the return of ancestral land in the Jubilee year. This is the text that inspired the modern-day programme of international debt relief known as Jubilee 2000.

When the Americans rang out the message of freedom in 1776 by sounding the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, they were expressing the mood of the verse engraved on the bell, Leviticus 25:10, in the translation of the King James Bible: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

Leviticus is the central book of the Pentateuch, the Torah. This makes it the most important of the five. Biblical literature often works on the principle of mirror-image symmetry (chiasmus), structured in the form of ABCBA. In any work so patterned, the climax is not at the beginning or the end but in the middle. At the centre of the five Mosaic books, Leviticus is the axis on which they turn.

It is also the purest expression of one of the most important voices in the Torah, the priestly voice, the sensibility the sages call (it is their original name for the book) *Torat Kohanim*, “The Law of the Priests.” We hear this voice elsewhere at key points in the Torah. One is the first chapter of Genesis 1 – “In the beginning God created” – which describes creation in the language of the priest. Another is Exodus 19:6, just before

the revelation at Mount Sinai, with its mission statement of the Jewish people: “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This is a priestly vocation. Despite the importance of the prophets to the religion of Israel, it is to the role of priest, not prophet, that God summoned our ancestors and summons us. The very name given by tradition to the Mosaic books – Torah – is a priestly word.

Leviticus was the book with which Jewish education traditionally began. For many centuries, as far back as Talmudic times, it was the first text Jewish children studied, their introduction to the word and will of God. “Let the pure come and study purity,” say the sages. They want this above others to be the book first engraved on Jewish minds and inscribed in Jewish hearts. Again this is odd when we consider the rabbis’ view of their own provenance, the opening line of Mishna Avot: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets.” The rabbis see themselves as heirs not to the priests but to the prophets. In truth, they were a creative synthesis of both.

It will be my argument that you cannot understand Judaism without the priestly voice. Judaism, from the Torah onward, is a conversation scored for many voices. Why this is so I will explain below, but that it is so is undeniable. It is this internal diversity, this complex harmony and occasional discord, that gives Judaism its dynamism, its ability to defeat entropy, the rule that says that all systems lose energy over time. Among the Torah’s voices, the priestly sensibility is the dominant one, despite the fact that Moses, the dominant figure from Exodus to Deuteronomy, was not a priest.

It is this sensibility that communicated the absolute and austere monotheism that made Judaism unique in the ancient world and singular even today. It insists on the total difference between humans and God, but it also knows how to bridge it by aligning our will with His. It is the priestly voice that tells us that human beings are created in the image of God. It speaks of the integrity of difference and the importance of respecting it. It takes abstract ideals and turns them into codes of behaviour that transform lives. The book of Leviticus is a sustained meditation on what holiness is and how it can be translated into life. Indeed it is the priestly voice that identifies God with life and refuses to consecrate death.