

Sermon for Parshat Acharei Mot / Kedoshim  
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The Torah – the gift that keeps on giving. This international bestseller gave the world biblical epics, such as *The Ten Commandments*, and epic controversies such as last year's *Noah* starring Russell Crowe.

Now, I need three volunteers. This is based on a bibliodrama and improv session I do called Torah: Live! These three people, based on the information on the cards I just gave them, will now re-enact the entire story of the book of Leviticus – in twenty seconds.

<They do nothing. I point out when we've passed a few parshahs, the halfway point, today's reading, and near the end of the book.>

That's right. Nothing happens. Well, there was the small incident two weeks ago where two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, went unscheduled and uninvited into the tabernacle one night, lit some incense (probably while listening to some desert Beatles music, though scholars disagree about that) and the Big G became incensed.

But that's it. It's a book full of commandments about sacrifices, eating, sacrifices, purity, sacrifices, and... sacrifices. We don't even do most of the stuff anymore today – even less if you're not a frequent diner at the Jerusalem Grill & Bar, who in no way paid me a product placement fee for mentioning them, because it's Shabbat.

So, why do we read Leviticus? To make sure the Kiddush has time to get cold like the rest of the year? (Or warm, if it's supposed to be a cold meal.) Why should we bother with it? Or, to ask it another way, what's the point in trying to extrapolate anything from Leviticus, or even to have midrash about it?

Leviticus might be the most important book of the Torah about which to have midrash. It has almost no story. It has many commandments that simply don't apply today. It is the ickiest of the five books. Therefore, to give it relevance to our lives today, it *needs* extrapolation and midrash more than any other. And from that need can evolve particularly eye-opening extrapolations.

For example, a few weeks ago right here, Josh Rozza talked about the beginning of Leviticus and put forth the notion that the sacrifices weren't for the Big G, but were for the Israelites. Why? What is the Big G going to do with all that barbecue? He's not going to eat it; after all, for that he was waiting until He finished creating The South.

The Israelites were used to seeing others communicate with their deities by doing sacrifices. The Big G gave them something, in a context familiar to them, to help them better relate to the notion of communicating with Him. Even more, many of the sacrifices have to do with things people did, often to or with each other. An unintentional sin offering. An intentional sin offering. An offering of Thanksgiving (though, surprisingly,

not a turkey). The *ola* sacrifice, so named because it's just an offering when you want to say "Holla!" to the Big G.

In today's world, the offering of a sacrifice is virtually unseen, except on the baseball field. But before I digress into baseball sacrifices and why the designated hitter rule is an abomination (even though the first ever designated hitter happened to be Jewish (Ron Blomberg) – another thing the world can blame on us) let's dig into a very specific piece of the ancient process for sacrifices as enumerated in today's *parshah*. If we can find relevant meaning there, we can find it anywhere.

The beginning of today's double *parshah* should sound familiar. It should have made you hungry. Not because it talked about cooking over an open flame, but because you also hear it on Yom Kippur. It describes the sacrifice to be offered by the high priest on Yom Kippur, to atone on behalf of the entire Jewish people.

If you recall, and even if you don't, there are two animals designated as sin offerings: a bull and a goat. The process includes the following:

14 And he shall take some of the bull's blood and sprinkle [it] with his index finger on top of the ark cover on the eastern side; and before the ark cover, he shall sprinkle seven times from the blood, with his index finger.

Very artistic. It goes on:

15 He shall then slaughter the he goat of the people's sin offering and bring its blood within the dividing curtain, and he shall do with its blood as he had done with the bull's blood, and he shall sprinkle it upon the ark cover and before the ark cover.

Messy. This sounds weird to us today, doesn't it? What possible use could the Big G have in someone doing this? "Oh, sorry old boy, you sprinkled the blood with your ring finger. Can't forgive everyone this year. I'm making a list and checking it twice."

Also, nobody is in there with the high priest when he does this part, so how could it be solely because it gives context of communicating with a deity to the people as a whole?

Perhaps we don't know the significance of these exact gestures. The Talmud might have a word, or volume, to say on the matter. Either way, he's commanded to make a big mess that someone has to clean up each time.

But let's consider art for a moment. Art is a part of contemporary culture. Even most of contemporary Jewish culture. It's accepted as having a place in society, even if some of us find some of it to be incomprehensible, uninteresting, or even offensive.

To someone not accustomed to appreciating certain types of art, the art itself or even its process can seem arcane or ridiculous. For example, take Asher Lev. Chaim Potok's

novel “My Name is Asher Lev” is about a post-WWII Hassidic child who from a very early age has a gift for art. He has a compulsion to follow that instinct to the exclusion of all else.

Before he’s even ten years old, he’s drawing with a terrific eye for line. One day, simply because he looks and sees the potential, he takes the cold cigarette ashes in their Brooklyn apartment and smears them on his drawing, to give it texture and a new type of contour beyond his drawing. He is asked what would possess him to run his hands through ashes and do that. To Asher, it made perfect sense. He saw the ashes, saw the potential, and did it. To everyone else around him, it had no purpose and no meaning – much as they felt about his pursuit of art in any form. He was supposed to be learning Talmud and following in his father’s footsteps, and not wasting his time with this *narishkeit*.

The novel chronicles that struggle, the one between tradition and instinct. Between decorum and expression. The question of whether Asher’s artistic gift comes from the Big G or from the *sitra achra* (which technically means “the other side”).

Now – before this seems like a gratuitous plug for our performances of the new, ninety-minute stage adaptation of “My Name is Asher Lev,” performing tonight and tomorrow at the JCC – consider the parallel.

Asher draws. He paints, which is little more than the smearing and sprinkling of liquid colors with the intent of communicating something. What he’s expressing depends on the painting. Most everyone around him doesn’t see the purpose or the use of it, but he does it as a means of expression. One that we, in today’s society, generally understand or at least accept the existence of. He is expressing to whoever sees his art.

The high priest, during the Yom Kippur sacrifice, smears and sprinkles the blood from the sacrifices, with the intent of communicating something. In this instance, what he’s expressing is atonement. Not just for himself, but for us all. Most everyone around today doesn’t see the purpose or the use of it, but he did it as a means of expression. One that we, in today’s society, don’t remotely understand or accept. Or even relate to. And he is very specifically expressing it to the Big G.

When I was growing up, some Friday night services would have church groups in the back observing and learning. Afterwards, they asked the rabbi questions. I’d sometimes sit in. Once, someone asked where we do our animal sacrifices. Remember, many of these people had never encountered Jews before, and that’s why they were here. To learn.

Of course, we haven’t performed these sacrifices in thousands of years. No animals are harmed during simple discussion of or reading about them. Our rituals have evolved over time. For example, the Musaf service exists as a substitute for the Musaf sacrifice. Instead of doing the sacrifice, we revisit in the Musaf Amidah what was done. Doing that gives us the opportunity every week to go *beyond* the literal. To ponder the underlying

metaphors, the overarching meanings in our rituals and history – all the more important in giving such things relevance to us today.

Expression is in the eye of the beholder. People draw their own conclusions about everything they encounter, every minute of every day. You're drawing your own conclusions about what I'm saying right now, about my tie, about whether this message is a legitimate drash or an anorexically thin association with my play tonight as an attempt to sell a few more tickets.

For every person who expresses something in his or her unique way, there is someone who will not agree or not like it. Sometimes intolerantly so. There is also, of course, the equal question of being responsible toward others in one's own expression.

But some people's expressions we like, some we dislike. Sometimes we bias our perceptions because of the person who is expressing. "Nothing that person says is worth anything." Which is unfair to not only each unique expression they make, but also unfair to ourselves because we prejudicially deprive ourselves of some potentially wonderful realizations from the good nuggets amid what you perceive as that person's noise.

You can roll your eyes at the notion of a high priest cutting up animals and getting blood everywhere as some ritual that's supposed to convey atonement. Go to someone three thousand years ago, and they'll likely roll their eyes at your devotion to that little electronic box in your pocket right now. Is either of you wrong?

Does this mean that the high priest smearing animal blood around is art? I'm not going that far today, though I won't begrudge you if you do. But it is expression. And expression – in many, varied forms – is something that everyone does. Every day.

It will never stop. It's not going away. So we have a choice: be responsible with it, or not. Be responsible with it, both in how we ourselves express, and in how we perceive the expressions from others. This responsibility helps us all to better interact, respect, and appreciate. All of which also helps each of us as individuals.

And that's just one of many possible messages to draw from just one of many verses that you might find arcane or irrelevant to today's world or to your own life. That was just one. I challenge you to look for others: When your mind wanders during another service, or you're stuck at a traffic light, or wondering why you bother sending your children to religious school, or why you do anything you do with the synagogue or the community... There are many more relevant messages to find, metaphors from which to draw, and this was just one. I challenge you to look for others.

*(My past sermons are available at <http://brookwrite.com/sermon/>. You might also like my monthly Jewish humor column, Rear Pew Mirror, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/rearpewmirror>.)*