

PARSHAT METZORA
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In his book *“Taking Hold of Torah,”* Chancellor Arnold Eisen of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America writes: “The Book of Leviticus is not terribly popular among American Jews of my acquaintance. Take on the task of assigning members of a prayer or study group to lead discussions on upcoming portions of the Torah, and you have no difficulty finding volunteers for most of the sections of Genesis or Exodus. Turn the pages of the calendar to the winter months, however, arrive at the blood and gore of sacrifice and details upon details about purity and pollution, and you will find that interest in the weekly portion has withered.”

Eisen goes on to write that: “Leviticus seems so repetitive, so anachronistic. It strikes us as a primer for Priests, a lecture intended for others on which we can at best eavesdrop. Indeed, the book is in many cases offensive to contemporary convictions of sensibilities. One wants simply to get through it, to escape the confining precincts of the Tabernacle for the openness of the wilderness: the gripping stories in the Book of Numbers.”

Even regular attendees at the Synagogue find the Book of Leviticus to be exactly what Professor Arnold Eisen describes. It is difficult for us to get into the concept of sacrifices, the work of the Levites and Priests, the complex concepts of purity and impurity and the exacting details of the Tabernacle service.

And our Torah reading of today, Metzora, is no exception. The portion contains three major sections: We are instructed concerning the purification of the Metzora. The word tzara’at is translated by most translators as leprosy but it is commonly understood by scholars as some form of skin disease. There is described for us tzara’at or mold in the walls of a house and the manner in which the house is judged impure and then made pure. And finally, there is a section concerning menstrual impurity and sexual discharges painstakingly described for us. It is not the most riveting of religious literature.

Chancellor Eisen suggests that it is very easy to live in the grandeur of the Book of Genesis, to be enamored by the Books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and to be elevated by the stories standing at Sinai and on the edge of the River Jordan. Yet, the Book of Leviticus is found in the very middle of the entire Torah for a reason. He suggests that: “It is a teaching about the everyday, our everyday included. Leviticus aims to heighten and sanctify ordinary experience. It wants us to focus on the possibilities for love and good stored up in daily life, and tries to accomplish this in a vision of community that is symbolized, and prepared for, in ritual.”

In other words, the Book of Leviticus is really what everyday life is really all about – the ups and downs, the moments of sanctity and the times of ordinariness. It details the heights of spiritual and intellectual purity and the doldrums of depressive impurity of thought, emotion and action. It is impossible to live life in the rarified air of

Sinai, it is essential to live life, and a sacred one at that, in the murkiness of everyday decisions, for it is in everyday life that Judaism believes that sanctity is found. We are asked to live in this world, be part of it and experience it. We are asked to sanctify our relationships with both our loved ones and the stranger, build holy alliances with those who work with us and those we find in distress, we are bidden to create sacred space out of the most ordinary of human habitations and holy time out of everyday living.

The Book of Leviticus allows us to look at life in the framework of our relationship to G-d, in the food we eat, in the sexual relations we have, in the everyday business of bettering ourselves and recognizing that we periodically, if not more than that, commit transgressions which are sometimes intended, and many times, unintended. This Book, in the middle of the entire Torah, reminds us that holiness can be found in everyday life. It talks to us about Kashrut, it speaks to us about proper sexual relations, and it bids us to take an account of our activities, in the marketplace and in our home. It instructs us to create holy space, time and energy out of the most mundane activities.

Rabbi Irwin Kula in his book, *“Yearnings: Embracing the Messiness of Life,”* writes: “We relish order, neatness, and resolution. We forget that life has no straight lines or easy paths. The process of becoming is circuitous, to say the least. Yet so many of us expend endless energy wishing and trying to make it otherwise. We long for those happy times of satisfaction, even celebration, a feeling that all is well, balanced, and fulfilling. During these times we can look back on our lives, even the tough times, and see all that led us here is somehow necessary and right. Life does have a purpose, after all.”

He continues stating that: “We can’t help but be surprised when those happy times don’t last. We believe families are supposed to get along. Jobs are not supposed to be lost. Faces are not supposed to get wrinkles. We judge people when they ‘don’t have it together,’ especially ourselves. In short, most of us think life is supposed to work out the way we hope it will, or even expect it to. We secretly want the kitchen to finally be clean. And yet, if the kitchen was always clean, there would be no meals.”

Rabbi Kula informs us that life is very messy and it is very difficult sometimes to get our arms around that messiness. He writes: “Jewish wisdom teaches that our yearnings generate life. Desire animates. As the prophet Amos says, ‘Seek Me and live.’ Jewish wisdom urges us to go for it, to seek answers to our deepest questions, to search for spiritual and personal fulfillment while knowing we will never finally get there – oh, but the discoveries we’ll make along the way! We are meant to live, to search with intention. When we can uncover our deepest longings for intimacy, pleasure, creativity, and self-understanding, life yields illumination and happiness. Far from being a burden, our desires themselves become a path to blessing.”

That is what Leviticus wants to teach us. It attempts to make sense and order out of chaos and messiness. No, we may not be able to appreciate all of its laws and stipulations. Yet, an overview of the book allows us to see order created out of chaos and meaning out of messiness.

There are no shortcuts. In fact, when we try to take them we usually make the wrong decisions. In his new book, *"I'm God, You're Not,"* Rabbi Larry Kushner tells the story of a rabbinic colleague who had to get from the city out to his Congregation for a wedding. He left himself plenty of time, but not enough for a major accident that turned the Long Island Expressway into a parking lot. This was before cell phones and there was nothing left to do but sit, sweat and pray. Salvation, he recounts, appeared in the form of a funeral procession moving along the lane. He decided to pull rabbinic privilege and cut into the long line of cars. Proud of his ingenuity and good fortune, he glided through the traffic, exiting the highway in just enough time for the wedding. Unfortunately, as he pulled into the Temple parking lot, he saw in his rearview mirror that the last half of the funeral cortège had also followed him to the wedding.

Leviticus teaches us that shortcuts usually do not get us anywhere. Even if we think we have been successful we will learn, over the long haul, that we are not. If we wish to come close to G-d, there are elaborate rituals encompassed in the sacrificial system; if we want to live holy lives, the entire Chapter 19 of Leviticus, the Holiness Code, informs us how to do it; if we want to live in spiritual purity then we must ennoble our lives to follow the pattern of the instructions of Leviticus. And, if we are to have holy relationships, then the sexual mores recounted for us in the Book of Leviticus is essential for us to inculcate in practice.

As he reads the Book of Leviticus, Professor Arnold Eisen states that he can sense G-d's presence in certain precious but fleeting moments. This, I believe, is our task as well. There is a reason that Leviticus is found in the middle of the entire Torah. Far more than any other of the books, it deals with real life, with its peaks and valleys, order and chaos. May we learn of its principles to ennoble our lives in our everyday activities, even as we attempt to comprehend the difficult concepts of ancient days.