



Parashat VaYikra

"And God Called": The Process is the Message

by Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman on Saturday April 01, 2006

3 Nisan 5766

Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26, Shabbat, 3 Nisan

The blessing that one recites before studying Torah is:

Baruch ata adonai, elohaynu melech ha-olam, asher kiddishanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu la-asok b'divray torah.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, Who makes us holy with mitzvot and gives us the mitzvah of engaging in the words of Torah.

We don't ask the Divine blessing for obeying Torah, or hearing Torah, or even reading Torah, but rather for engaging with Torah. It is the process of engagement – the passionate give and take – that is sacred, not the specific content. In a world in which biblical fundamentalism is on the rise, it's important to note that the Jewish relationship with our sacred text is interpretive. Our task is to take Torah seriously, not necessarily to agree with its literal content. Sometimes when we study Torah, we are struck by the eternal quality of its message; at other times its words seem tightly bound to a particular cultural moment and place. Torah is both ancient and contemporary – that is its gift.

This week's portion deals with the human urge to connect with God. It details several different kinds of animal offerings for the altar. The offerings symbolize profound human feelings such as gratitude, awe, happiness, well-being, remorse, repentance and faith. In ancient Israelite society, different events or circumstances called for specific animal sacrifices carried out in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem according to the ritual guidelines spelled out in this week's portion. Since the final destruction of the Temple in the year 70CE, Rabbinic Judaism has decreed that prayer, study and loving-kindness by ordinary people has replaced the detailed ritual of priestly sacrifice. Thus, this portion illustrates both the timeless quality of Judaism, the human soul's yearning for connection with the Divine, and the evolution of Jewish practice through time, in this case the change from animal sacrifice to a different mode of expression.

Understanding that the Torah is paradoxically both eternal and time-bound is a core insight for



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queer Jews. We know that some of the Torah's words seem homophobic, sexist, insensitive to disabled people, violent, and sometimes merely of a far away time and society. It is tempting to turn away from Torah altogether. Yet, like our forebears with their offerings, we yearn to connect, to engage, to be part of our people and its ancient truths.

Ironically, it is this very reflection, our self-awareness of our complex relationship with Torah, that is the holy sacrifice of our day. We bring to Torah the same profound human struggles – our feelings of desire, shame, pride, loss, hope and thanksgiving – that underlie the sacrificial system described in this portion. But we do not live in the world of the ancients with its ancient rites. We live in the world of communication.

So it is through our mindful study, our discussions with others, and our engagement with the past and the present, that we catch a glimpse of God.



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