



Parashat Vayikra

Holding God Accountable for LGBT Marginalization

by Noach Dzmura on Friday March 19, 2010

Nisan 4, 5770

Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26

In *Parashat Vayikra*, Moses begins to outline the sacrificial system of ancient Israel, through which the equilibrium of Israel's relationship to the Divine is maintained. Through Moses, the Lord specifies the species (cow, sheep, goat, dove or pigeon), sex and purity of the animal to be sacrificed. Then Moses describes the ritual procedure:

- first the penitent transfers his sin to the animal through a laying-on-of-hands
- a priest kills the animal, and Aaron's sons splash blood to the four corners
- priests skin the carcass, cut it up into portions and cook it in the fire
- the inedible bits – legs and entrails – get washed and incinerated
- if the sacrifice is made properly, the aroma is pleasing to God

The sacrificial system operated on at least two levels, one through which animals were killed as recompense to God for human errors (and also to bring awareness of someone's sin to the community, since sacrifices were public offerings), and a second level through which the labor of the priestly class received its tangible wages: food in exchange for duty at the sacrificial altar. (Although I can't imagine how palatable food with all that sin in it would be) The psychodrama of sacrifice was the overt level of meaning. The visual images of the upturned neck of an innocent being, a rapidly slashing blade, the dashing of blood to each of four ritual corners, and a huge bonfire in which the sinful body is burnt to a crisp, can provide a powerful inducement to leave sin behind. Feeding the priests was a more covert level of meaning, the level at which the support of a lower class hides the presence of a higher class.

Implicit in the sacrificial system is the idea that Israel will sin-an entire economy is built on it. The priests would starve if Israel failed to sin; the people who sell unblemished sacrificial animals would go bankrupt. And when Israel does sin, this is the mechanism through which imbalances can be resolved.



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There are more reasons than the fact that the Temple was destroyed to explain the lack of a sacrificial system within Judaism in the present day. Sacrifice expresses an understanding of the Divine and Hir relationship to Israel in which we no longer believe. Transferring errors to a sacrificial other doesn't actually repair the damaged relationship between Israel and God. The Rabbis instituted a practice of regular prayer to replace the sacrificial system after the Temple was destroyed. For those of us who don't pray, ethical action and efforts to negotiate peace between ourselves serves as our system of checks and balances. Our actions toward one another to make reparations, our openness to the possibility of renewal and transformation stand today in lieu of the ancient sacrificial system.

If we fail sometimes to meet our obligations, perhaps the Divine might fail as well? If things get out of balance, is it always human failure? Does God have any obligations or responsibilities toward humanity? Can God make a mistake in Hir behavior toward humans? The lesson of the Golden Calf tells us that God can change Hir mind because of the intervention of human beings. Because of Moses intervention, God did not destroy humanity and start over again from scratch. Even from our most ancient texts, the Jewish God is not infallible – the Jewish God grows and changes. Human and Divine grow and interact together, a hybrid, unified entity.

What the sacrificial system neglects (and what prayer neglects as well) is the idea that God can sin against humankind, and what actions the Divine might undertake to restore an imbalance in the other direction. What might God offer as a sacrifice for Hir sins? How does S/he pray for our forgiveness and intervention in Hir affairs?

There is no cow, no goat, no flock of turtledoves -no psalm, no *vidui* (confession) – that could hold all of God's sins against the LGBT community. Of course one can say it's not God's fault but humanity's, that part of us is inhumane to another part of us. Certainly it is not God but humans who are responsible for limiting the mainstream expression of gender to two through a misinterpretation of Genesis 1:27. Certainly it is not God but humans who are responsible for limiting the mainstream expression of sexuality to heterosexual through a misinterpretation of Leviticus 18:22.

I don't think we should let God off so easily. We should hold God accountable for the errors of compulsory heterosexuality and the gender binary. These are not solely human errors, if God has anything at all to do with us. If my statement above is true, that God and Human are a hybrid unified entity, that, in fact, everything is God, what do we ask God to give us in reparation for Hir sin? Money won't work because God doesn't use it, and the argument can be made that S/he is already spreading money around – it's not Hir fault that inequities exist-that's up to us to fix. How about a miraculous revision of history to even up the score, making pansexuality normative and homo and heterosexuality just two possible variants on either end of a spectrum; or perhaps making genderfluidity the norm, with male and female just two possible variants on either end of a spectrum? I can dream, but I know that one's not going to



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happen, either. Miracles are stories we tell one another as we remember; they do not happen as events unfold, but over time the miraculous accrues as we add layers of meaning and history grows dim.

If I am to believe in truly re-envisioning a system of checks and balances to replace the one-sidedness of the sacrificial system or prayer (the replacement system), where the Divine and humans are collectively held responsible, I have to believe such a system already exists. Since it's notoriously challenging to discern the movements of the Divine, (and in fact to me, Divinity seems like a Force that moves humans toward compassion) I have to assume that such a system is already in place and functioning. My task becomes locating the moment of Divine reparation in existing behavior. So if God is making reparations already, to whom are they being paid? What do they look like? Where do I hear God's voice, such that I might recognize that S/he is attempting to make recompense, to return home to me from Hir straying?

I hear Hir making an offering for Hir redemption every time a community supports its LGBT members. God is adding one more small payment on the huge debt S/he has incurred every time a transgender person is acknowledged as belonging to the gender s/he claims. Every time a gay or lesbian couple in DC gets married. Every time a transgender child is allowed to dress in the clothing s/he chooses, God is doing *tshuvah*. S/he's not off the hook yet, and S/he won't be until every one of us is free, everywhere. S/he has a very long way to go. But I believe one day S/he will complete this *tshuvah*. And we must hold Hir to it by telling our stories, being out, living queer – and hence providing Hir with opportunities to move humans toward compassion.



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