



Parashat Vayikra

Live and Let Leviticus: A Call to Gay Men

by Rabbi Joshua Lesser on Saturday March 24, 2007

4 Nisan 5767

Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26, Shabbat

I remember my first pair of rollerblades. More specifically, I remember the bloody mess I was the first time I gave them a try. I couldn't figure out the brakes and there was a hill and a busy street—you can figure out where this is going. Never was I so grateful to hit a telephone pole. The second time I bladed I fared better, that is until a piece of rusty wire got caught in the wheels bringing them to a sharp halt. The rules of physics being what they are, I fell on my face. Slapstick being as reliable as physics, my fall brought me injury in the form of much laughter. The next time I was invited to go rollerblading, I stopped and stared at the skates. Were these skates nothing more than simple instruments of cruel pain? Could I give it another go? Or should I simply be done with them all together?

This week we begin the book of Leviticus with Parashat *Vayikra*, and although Leviticus begins innocently enough, with a listing of the various sacrifices performed in the Mishkan, as LGBT people, we all know where this book is heading. Much like my rollerblades just the title Leviticus inspires dread and fear in gay men that has caused us to disengage with the entire book, and for some, Judaism altogether. And so it is ironic that Leviticus begins with the word *vayikra*—"And God called." Ramban cites a midrash that connects Leviticus with the end of the book of Exodus where we find a complete description of the Mishkan's construction and that it was worthy of the *Shechinah* (God's Presence). So magnificent and awesome was God's glory within the Mishkan that Moses was terrified to enter. Thus, the call from God in this portion was an invitation to Moses and the Israelites to come inside—signaling to them that the Mishkan was built for their mutual relationship.

Similarly, Ramban also notes that the word for sacrifice is connected to the Hebrew word that means, "to draw close." In this light the sacrificial system is one of the primary ways that the Mishkan was to be used to enhance the biblical human-Divine relationship, Ramban sees this sacrificial system as a ritualistic way to build a meaningful relationship with the Divine. In other words, when we discard Leviticus wholesale because of its foreign rituals or its later prohibitions, we risk missing the emphasis of how ritual can bring us closer to Judaism, community and God (or godliness).



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For gay men in particular, this is a real danger in today's Jewish world. In the rabbinic commentaries, much to do is made about the way the first word of this portion is written—the last letter of “*vayikra*” is an aleph, which in the Torah is written smaller than the other letters. While the rabbis speculate how this is connected to Moses' humility, I wonder if the aleph might stand for the first call that God speaks to humanity, which begins with the aleph in question. In Genesis, God calls to his first human creations, “*Ayeca?*”/“Where are you?”

Indeed, I often find that I have the same question for gay Jewish men in Jewish communal life: Where are you? Having served in different LGBT communities, I have found that, while gay Jewish men aren't exactly nonexistent, they participate in smaller numbers than lesbians, and additionally, it seems gay Jewish men wait until they are older to make affiliations within Jewish communal life. In one rabbinical school class, we were taught that, as rabbis, we could expect to attract members of our demographic most significantly. In other words, a married woman rabbi could expect to have substantial participation from other married women. However, at my particular synagogue, this has not occurred—instead, we have attracted large numbers of people from all demographics but my own (gay Jewish men in their 30s). While this may be too anecdotal to draw strong conclusions, I couple this particular piece of anecdotal evidence with the fact that I consistently meet gay Jewish men in social settings who seek me out to share their experiences of having been made to feel unwelcome in their synagogues, their families. Many express disdain for Judaism and God altogether mentioning the prohibitions in Leviticus. Intertwined in these discussions is often a sense of lingering shame.

Upon reading the list of sacrifices in *Vayikra* while considering Ramban's theory that they served to draw people, within the context of their community, closer to a sense of the Divine, I conclude that somehow these sacrifices served to remove the barriers that kept people distant from a sense of the Divine. As a result of this reading, I have wrestled with the question of determining how the self-imposed barriers could be removed that prevents gay men from feeling more connected with their Jewish community and to God. In what ways could we engage ritually to enhance our Jewish spiritual lives? While I think this question is relevant for all people, I think for gay men the answers are different.

While it is critical that the larger Jewish community work to remake itself so that it is more accessible to gay Jewish men, it is our responsibility as gay Jews to undertake our own self examination. We have the ability to identify those things that have blocked our connection to God and to ritual. Unless the answer is utter rejection, we must do our inner work. Leviticus and its sacrificial systems are buttressed by a calling to take personal responsibility and cultivate vulnerability. Giving an offering, in particular the act of sacrificing the life of a sentient being, brings us face to face with the fragility of life moment to moment. Rabbi Kerry Olitsky points out that the sacrificial system demanded an entirely embodied process. One had to engage all of one's senses to participate. Taken together this is incredibly vulnerable.



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Moreover, even more intensely vulnerable is that the heart of the issue demands gay Jewish men to embrace their sexuality and acknowledge that not only are we holy as human beings, but our bodies are holy and our sexual connections can be holy. To wrestle with this is to also acknowledge when our sexual acts are not holy. As gay men can we make ourselves vulnerable enough to invite a sense God's presence in our sexuality? To do so, is a sacrifice not in the sense of giving something up, but rather creating room for godliness to dwell.

Asking gay Jewish men to be vulnerable in order to read and engage with Leviticus, which is arguably the core of ritual Judaism and holiness, when it is the source of direct pain and alienation may be unreasonable. Certainly, there is some danger in this, and the possibility of re-wounding may even be likely. However, there is also much to be gained by making peace with this book that contains the infamous 18:22 and 20:13 verses because it also contains much more—Leviticus also includes some of Judaism's most compassionate and beautiful teachings that can serve to awaken the desire to infuse our life with the awareness of the glory of God's presence. As this portion reminds us, God's perpetually call to us, despite fear and harm. The question that remains is, can we, as gay men make ourselves vulnerable enough to hear it? And if we do that, can we sacrifice the baggage that keeps us distant so that we may answer from the authentic place within us that longs for God in our lives.



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