



The Conservative Kehila in Zichron Ya'acov

## **Parashat Vayikra: The God of the Mundane**

Dear Friends,

Bible scholars identify four unique voices in the Torah. They do not consider these voices Divine, of course, but I do: the first voice is that of the God of nature, and He is the star of the book of Bereishit. The second voice is the God of “the spirit”. This is the God of the Exodus, the Burning Bush and of the great miracles that accompanied Bnei Yisrael on their formative odyssey. The third voice is heard primarily in the book of D’varim, and it is the voice of the God of ethics, justice, and social order. The fourth and final voice is that of the God of the priests and of the religious establishment.

This week we enter deep into the world of the fourth voice - the God of priesthood. Vayikra is not the final book of the Torah, it is the middle one, but scholars claim that the Divine voice that emerges from it was the last to be heard. And even though there is no Temple and we no longer offer sacrifices on an altar, still, the priestly voice shaped Jewish civilization as we know it far more than any other voice in the Torah. It is etched deep in the Jewish DNA to this very day.

What does this voice tell us and what does it command us to do?

The God of Vayikra is the God of the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure. It is the God of the Mishkan and of the Temple, of ceremony and of ritual.

This God demands precision in worshipping Him, and abstention from emotion and spontaneity.

I know this description is not one that many readers will identify with. It is not suitable for anyone who is repelled by institutionalism. It is a distant and impersonal God. On the face of it, this is a very orthodox God. Perhaps the biggest insult that we can direct at this God is that He sometimes sounds like the god of the Israeli chief rabbinate. Anyone who is not fond of Halacha and ritual; anyone who does not like words like “must” and “obligated” will find it difficult to identify with this particular aspect of the Divine.

How, then, did this voice take over the Jewish discourse? How did the God of priesthood manage to marginalize the God of nature, the God of the spirit, and the God of morality and justice?

The God of Vayikra governs and regulates the relations between humans and their God, between heaven and earth, between what is human and what is exalted. Offering sacrifices (the first three parashot of Vayikra), later to be replaced by prayer from a siddur, is perhaps the clearest expression of these relationships. But many other central themes are also expressed in later parashot.

- In Parashat Kedoshim we read about the agricultural laws pertaining to giving tzedakah to the poor - leket, pe'ah, and shichecha - three ways of leaving produce in the field, to be collected by those in need. We also read there about "not setting an obstacle in the path of the blind" and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."
- In Parashot B'har and B'chukotai we read about the laws of Shmitta, letting the earth rest and be renewed.
- In Parashat Achrei Mot we learn with whom it is permitted and with whom it is prohibited to have sexual relations.

These edicts are not left to the generosity of our hearts, our spontaneity or our good will. They too, like the sacrifices and the rituals, are Divinely ordained.

The priestly God knows our weaknesses. He knows that one minute we are full of good will, and in the next we are tired, withdrawn, and blind - to our fellow human beings and to the exalted. One moment we are full of love and compassion, and the next we don't see anyone but ourselves.

Therefore, the God of the priests is the God of spiritual discipline. Rather than counting on nature "doing its thing" or on momentary inspiration, it demands constant commitment. We do not pray to Him in moments of inspiration. We do not give tzedakah when we feel lucky or when we want to earn a few good points in heaven or on earth. We are obligated every day and at every moment, even when we don't feel like it.

The God of Vayikra is universal. He places the Buddhist monk on a meditation cushion at sunrise every day; He gathers the family together for a joint meal at seven in the evening, even if they're not hungry. He is the God of the gyms and the joggers. He is the God of diets and of medical prescriptions. He is the God of codes of manners and etiquette, who does not care if we got up on the wrong side of the bed. He is the God of small rituals - teeth brushing morning and evening, the first cup of coffee before the day begins, and children's showers before bed at night.

Turns out that He is not the God of the orthodox or of the chief rabbinate after all. We all worship Him. We all need Him to keep our sanity.

I admit, most of my life I did not like this God, but something within me is drawn to Him daily. This is the God who makes order in our lives. He is sometimes like a pedantic kindergarten teacher, sometimes like a strict principal, and many times like an intimidating military sergeant. Without Him our lives would fall apart. Without him we would end each day in great confusion and turmoil.

Fortunate is the person who does not have need of Him. Truly! I, for one, thank Him every morning:

Blessed are you, God of Vayikra - the God of the priests, the God of the mundane, the God of the "must" and "have to's" - who has been there for me when I neglected to be there for myself ; who loved me even when I did not feel love; even when I saw no-one but myself; who forced me to seek moments of holiness, even when I only cared to wallow in the mundane.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha