

POWER OF COLLECTIVE RITUALS

A commentary on *Parashat Vayikra*

By Dr Keith Kahn-Harris

There is no way around it. Deep in the midst of Leviticus, *Parashat Vayikra* is challenging territory for anyone looking for easily transferable moral and ethical lessons for today's world.

Parashat Vayikra is an intricate and technical description of the laws for Temple sacrifices. We learn of sacrificial offerings of meal and animals – how to do them and what they should consist of – and their use for the expiation of various kinds of guilt and sin. Notwithstanding the yearning for the rebuilding of the Temple that permeates some contemporary Judaism, *Vayikra* takes us back to a world that seems alien to today's Jews. Indeed, some Judaism today try to avoid fully engaging with this world, through limiting references to Temple sacrifices in the liturgy and through passing quickly over *Parashot* such as this.

An alternative strategy might be to drill down into the core purpose of Temple sacrifice to try and find an ethical/moral bedrock beneath. After all, sin and guilt are hardly consigned to the past and while post-Temple Judaism deals with these intrinsically human failings differently, it still has to deal with them. Still, even such an approach – which tries to find eternal, transcendental meaning in Torah by focusing on the 'values' it promotes – would find it hard to see the relevance for social justice and human rights in *Vayikra*.

What I would suggest instead is that *Vayikra*, and the Temple sacrifices it details, offers much more than a source of moral/ethical lessons under a veneer of pre-modern cultic ritual. In fact it is precisely those seemingly alien rituals that offer an *anthropological* kind of truth that can inspire thinking about how the work of social justice can be pursued.

The Temple offered a collective experience, even

when (as much of *Vayikra* details) it offered a space for the individual expiation of sin and guilt. It offered a spatial focus for the Jewish people, a place where holy work was done, an intense concentration of spiritual and moral work. There is something valuable here.

The unmediated relationship between individuals and the divine that forms the backbone of post-Temple Jewish theology and practice, is stark and even lonely. Of course, collective rituals still take place, in the home and in the synagogue, but we have lost much of the intense drama that the Temple offered, as well as the sheer power of the mass focus on a single space.

Yet the work of improving the world and making it a more just place can benefit from precisely the kind of powerful collective ritual focus that the Temple represented. Of course, this isn't completely absent from the world. Protest marches, despite being of sometimes dubious practical efficacy, remain popular precisely because they channel the power of the mass. The Nuremberg trials, and to an extent more recent human rights court cases, offer rituals that are no less intricate than the Temples in their pursuit of the apportioning of guilt and atonement of sin.

The question is, what specifically Jewish ways might there be for creating modern rituals than channel the power of the collective in the work of social action? The Temple may provide some inspiration here, not in its offerings of animals and meal, but in its unashamed drama, in the power of the fear and humility that it embodied.

Vayikra therefore provides a forceful challenge to the common assumption that ritual and law 'gets in the way' of the human need to deal with the brokenness of humanity. It is in the scrupulous detailing of how ritual is performed that we are offered a path towards remaking the world.

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