

BLOG > TORAH > AT THE CONFLUENCE OF SOCIAL DISTANCING AND SOCIETY BUILDING ~ BEGINNING SEFER VAYIKRA (LEVITICUS) WHILE COMBATING COVID-19

At the Confluence of Social Distancing and Society Building ~ Beginning Sefer Vayikra (Leviticus) while Combating COVID-19

Posted on March 25, 2020 by Rabbi Jessica K. Shimberg



To say that we are living in strange times would be to state the obvious, and yet, I find myself saying it daily. In the time I am privileged to utilize thinking about such things, I notice that I am primarily looking at the pandemic and human behavior in its wake through two vastly different frames. Depending on how I am feeling and what my experiencing in any given moment, I am balancing both:

- (1) a sense of great concern for the physical and financial health and wellbeing of those of us who have been blessed with these, and an even greater anxiety for those who live in the growing margins of societal health and wellbeing; and
- (2) optimism about the abundant creativity, compassion, and ingenuity of individuals, groups, and communities (even when maintained virtually), and great faith in our resilience, which sparks confidence in our shared ability to maximize the psycho-spiritual and intellectual health and wellbeing of kol yoshvei tevel / כל יושבי תבל (all who dwell on the planet) as well as the health of the Earth and its surrounding atmosphere.

This week we begin, in Ohio, a period of redefining what it means to live in community with very strict rules about our behavior. By State mandate, we are staying in our homes to avoid the spread of COVID-19. We are restricting our physical exposure to a very small number of people – our “tribe” – with whom we share food, shelter, and germs. We are following communal rules that tell us where we can go, what businesses will remain open, how we will care for the sick, and how we will bury the dead. We are cancelling in-person social gatherings from seders to weddings. We are figuring out what it means to create the safest and most sacred spaces to live wisely.

This week, too, we begin Sefer Vayikra ~ the Book of Leviticus in our annual cycle of Torah. Vayikra is a difficult book for any 21st century reader. I studied for an entire semester in rabbinical school, with Rabbi Laura Duhan Kaplan and a small virtual community of colleagues (on Zoom, by the way), the book of Vayikra in a class Reb Laura called, “Learning to Love Leviticus.” Yet, I still wrestle with the chapters upon chapters of animal sacrifice and the level of detail offered on blood, entrails, and salt. I am pained and outraged by the ways in which passages from Leviticus are used, still today, by some to shame and restrict the loving acts of others. I struggle with the depiction of a God that is soothed by the pleasing scent (רֵיחַ יְיָ / rei’ach ni’choach) of burning animal parts.

And ... despite the discomfort and in the midst of all of these very alien concepts, Vayikra depicts for us the beginnings of the carefully constructed and clearly instructed parts of Torah which will create communal order and societal structure for those depicted in our most formative biblical stories – b’nei Yisrael (the children of Israel/Jacob) and the mixed multitudes that journey out of Mitzrayim (biblical Egypt) with them. This level of order is no small feat for a group of people whom Moshe would surely describe, if he spoke to us in modern parlance, as “herding cats.” They have just escaped from slavery pursued by Pharaoh’s army, crossed a miraculously parted sea, traveled through the desert whining about their discomfort, received Torah at Har Sinai, and have the post-traumatic stress and excitement from their close encounters of the Sacred kind.

For all of the strangeness of our current circumstances, perhaps one of its many blessings is the opportunity to view, through the new lens it is providing, Vayikra’s somewhat off-putting and odd-sounding text depicting the norms, rules, and rituals of bringing offerings. Perhaps there isn’t as great a difference as we may imagine. For aren’t we, too, finding ways to make voluntary offerings of gratitude, thanksgiving, peace, and communal appreciation? Aren’t we, too, continually defining ways to lift up shared values and request forgiveness?

While we are navigating our own journey through the the proverbial desert of Coronavirus, and as we begin to imagine our 5780/2020 experience of Passover through the mitzrayim (narrowness) of social distancing and travel restrictions, we bring to this year’s reading of Vayikra a very different perspective than ever before.

May we find hope and comfort in new places and may we find insight and light in old passages.

Shavua tov,
Rabbi Jessica

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UPCOMING EVENTS

JUN 5 Fri
7:00 pm Shabbat Service with Mike Solms @ Virtual Via Zoom

7:30 pm Kehilah Tefilah ~ Kabbalat Shabb...

JUN 13 Sat
8:00 pm Havdalah ~ with Rabbi Jessica @ Virtual Via Zoom

JUN 20 Sat
11:00 am Shabbat Morning “Ahhhh” with Rab... @ Virtual Via Zoom

JUN 28 Sun
10:00 am Kehilat Sukkat Shalom Community ... @ Virtual Via Zoom

JUL 3 Fri
7:30 pm Kehilah Tefilah ~ Kabbalat Shabb...

AUG 7 Fri
7:30 pm Kehilah Tefilah ~ Kabbalat Shabb...

SEP 4 Fri
7:30 pm Kehilah Tefilah ~ Kabbalat Shabb...

OCT 2 Fri
7:30 pm Kehilah Tefilah ~ Kabbalat Shabb...

NOV 6 Fri
7:30 pm Kehilah Tefilah ~ Kabbalat Shabb...

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