

A Few Thoughts on Parashah Vayikra (Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26; Deuteronomy 25:17-19; Samuel I 15:1-34)

Shabbat Zachor – March 22, 2024 Hazzan Leah Frey-Rabine

Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Remembrance, which falls on the Shabbat immediately preceding Purim, coincides this year with the beginning of the Book of Leviticus. Shabbat Zachor is the first of the four special Shabbatot leading up to Pesach. In the additional reading from Deuteronomy Moses recounts Amalek's attack shortly after they had left Egypt and commands the people to remember Amalek. The end of this reading contains a curious instruction: "... you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. Do not forget!" (25:19) The only way we can perform this seemingly oxymoronic *mitzvah* is to view Amalek as a metaphor for the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination that in all of us vies for dominance with our *yetzer ha-tov*, our good inclination. Throughout human history, a tragic succession of Amaleks has filled the earth with unimaginable suffering. Of all the evildoers, Amalek is singled out because he attacked without cause and without provocation. He did not need slaves, the Israelites were not invading his territory, and he was not building an empire. Amalek attacked solely out of pure hatred, and in doing so, he paved the way for others to follow. Midrash Tanchuma 9 offers a pithy analogy: "This can be compared to a bathtub of boiling water into which no living creature could descend. Along came an irresponsible man and jumped headlong into it! Although he scalded himself, he [succeeded to] make others think it was cooler [than it really was]. And Midrash Sifrei 296 offers insight into "...he happened upon you on the way ..." (25:18): Amalek represents the belief in chance ... which opposes the Jewish belief in Divine providence." This is illustrated in Haman's establishing a lottery (*purim* means lotteries) to determine the day on which the Jews will be annihilated. This cold-blooded disregard for life itself, cynically playing dice with the lives of human beings, is the epitome of evil. Our *mitzvot* require us to care for the weak, the orphan, the widow, and the stranger. But Amalek "... cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and he did not fear God." (25:18) One of the most frequently repeated commands throughout our Torah is to remember that we ourselves were once slaves and strangers – to view these bitter experiences not as license to treat others as we were treated, but rather, as our sacred duty to make sure every human being is treated with fairness and respect. Whenever we engage in an act of *teshuvah* (repentance/atonement) personally or communally, we are channeling the memory of past misdeeds into positive action that helps create a better future for all. We dare not forget the past lest we be drawn to repeat it; instead, we must use its lessons to help root out evil and replace it with good. The Torah, which we received after we escaped the evilness of slavery teaches us that although we are free from slavery, we are not free from responsibility.

This week we begin reading the Book of Leviticus with its multiplicity of rules and regulations, a goodly number of which focus on sacrifice and ritual purity, seemingly irrelevant issues for us today. But it is precisely this book, placed in the middle of the Torah, that contains the essential lessons that not only connect us to the past, but also teach us how to live in the present and work toward creating a better future. As usual, the Hebrew name of this book is its opening word *vayikra* (and He [HaShem] called). Calling to Moses from the Tent of Meeting, HaShem gives him instructions for setting up the sacrificial system of the Temple, the means by which our ancestors established a link between themselves and HaShem. The intricate precepts of Leviticus, which cover all aspects of life, can be united under the heading of holiness, of striving to the best of our human ability to imitate HaShem in our actions. We are reminded countless times, and not only in Leviticus, that HaShem has singled us out to be a holy people, living in an eternal covenant that obligates us to act within its precepts. It is noteworthy that in the very first verse of Leviticus we read three different words for communicating: "And He called (*vayikra*) to Moses, and the Lord spoke (*vaydaber*) to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying (*lemor*)," Far more than a collection of rules and regulations, Leviticus is about communication. It is a call to action. For our ancestors, action centered on, and radiated from the *mishkan* and later the Temple. It is difficult for us to understand the fullness of what the word *korban*, usually translated as sacrifice or offering, meant in the ancient world. It derives from the root meaning to approach/to bring closer to and is related to words meaning interior/innards. Indeed, communication implies approaching, drawing close, but within the firm boundaries established by HaShem. Imitating HaShem does not imply the pagan notion of merging human and divine. Haman is one of many despots who reach beyond the natural limits of human empowerment. We are not gods; we are humans, fashioned in the image of HaShem. With its Hebrew name *Vayikra*, the Book of Leviticus calls us all to act as people holy to HaShem should act. Its ancient precepts and rituals contain a wealth of timeless teachings to guide our behavior today as we continue to help root out and combat evil with acts of courageous goodness. In the "war for the Lord against Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus 17:16) we are all called to do our part. Remember and act.

Shabbat shalom!