

Brotherhood Shabbat, Parsha Vayikra, March 19, 2016

By David Epstein

Good morning. It's always an honor to have the privilege of speaking from here as a member of the Emanuel Synagogue Brotherhood. What a warm and selfless group of guys.

This week's parsha, Vayikra, is about sacrificing animals to the Lord. It is concerned with the actual practices of ritual slaughter. This is done for any number of reasons, mostly to correct one's relationship with God after having erred. Vayikra tells what to do if, in the language of the Everett Fox translation, "a person breaks faith with any of God's commandments that should not be done." The commandments have not changed. The erring has not changed. Why has the expiation changed? What is the expiation, the atonement, the reparation? The corrective is a sacrifice. Vayikra gives highly specific instructions on how the priest is to kill the sacrificial animal, or what to do with a grain or fruit offering. The pattern is consistent: basically, the sacrifice is burned, so that the corporeal is turned into the ethereal, into smoke. And this is done for God's "Soothing Savor." And speaking of soothing savor, I'd like to remind everyone that the Brotherhood has prepared a marvelous Kiddish.

Who's erred lately? Who's sinned? Our behavior—and misbehavior—has not really changed in Lo these many years. We still goof, mess up, commit wrongs. Most of the time, most of us "break faith" without really intending to. We are disrespectful in the heat of an argument. We covet in the context of a materialistic media-blasted society that tries constantly to sell us things that maybe we shouldn't ought to buy. So, we fail, we are imperfect. How do we repair our standing with a family member or neighbor? We apologize. And then we go out to the altar, we place a hand on the head of our best ram, and slit the animal's throat. And then the priest drains the blood in this way and that, and...no, we don't do that anymore. Has anyone here killed anything lately? Unless it's an accidental interaction between one's car and a small animal, most of us don't kill anything anymore. In fact, the thing most of us kill most often... is... time. This is not to be flippant. As Henry David Thoreau said, with

considerable derision on just this matter: "...as if one could kill time without injuring eternity."

What do we do when we recognize that we've made a mistake? There is a fairly universal gesture. When someone else wrongs one, there's a fairly universal gesture too, but we're in polite company here. Vayikra instructs the Jewish people on ritual to repair a relationship with God. At the same time, it's the repair of the relationship with oneself, and the signal of the admission of guilt before the wronged person, and before the community. In a sense, this is the moral dirty work of being a Jewish person. No one wants to admit they're in the wrong. People go to tremendous lengths to excuse or deny or even justify culpability, before they'll admit to it Lance Armstrong. So, Historically, Jews have rituals, have in place a system of corrective action. Is it punitive? I can imagine so, as it involves the loss of the best and most pure of something that you depend upon to survive. Most of us cannot relate to this. How could we? What is there in our lives of parallel stature? Perhaps our cars. Imagine: "Place your hand upon the hood of your Honda. The coolant is to be scattered in the direction of..." I'm making light of this, but the point is that people have not changed, yet our rituals have.

The most common ritual response to error is to apologize. To apologize means "to speak in defense of." That is not the kind of response we're talking about in Vayikra. Here we are acknowledging having unintentionally acted in error. Here we do not defend our actions. We present ourselves as both fallible and culpable, and we present ourselves as doing what is necessary to reinstate ourselves to moral and spiritual good standing.

My father, who is of blessed memory, lived a complicated life, Jewishly. Raised Orthodox in a de facto shtetl of around 300 Jewish families in Portland, Maine during the Great Depression, he went away to college terrified. He was terrified of what would happen if he broke kashrut. He got over that. Then, after the war, he was conflicted: he found it impossible to pray to a god who would let something like the holocaust happen. As a result, he didn't send any of his children to Hebrew school.

We received Jewish values, but in secular form. It's only as an adult that I've discovered that many of my father's lessons were in fact mitzvot.

But a markedly Jewish question my father sometimes asked was what thing or things one had done that day that marked one out as a Jew? Now, this is the man who sometimes wrote to his state representatives in defense of Blue Laws, you know, mandated store closings on Sundays. He liked to point out that if one did the same things every day, if one worked, if one did not keep a Sabbath, one was no different from animals who simply don't know from Shabbat. There are rituals we keep because they benefit us: putting our keys down in the same place so we can find them again. And there are rituals like those in Vayikra, that are kept because they benefit God, and our relationship with God.

I think our rabbis would quickly point out that rituals indulged in without belief, without faith, are hollow. There are rituals we keep because they are the law: Stopping at traffic signals, paying our income taxes, for instance. In terms of the Torah, the Jewish Law, these are hardly different. But there is a difference. Do we pay our taxes because we believe in Democracy? In a sense yes, in a sense no. We pay our taxes because it is the law of the land. Do we perform Jewish rituals because we believe in God? In a sense yes, in a sense, no. Levels of belief vary. Certainly we perform our Jewish rituals at least out of personal identification as Jews. It seems possible to have a Jewish identity that wavers on the point of belief in God. But it does not seem possible to have Jewish faith that then performs rituals without personal identification as a Jew.

This brings us to the question of when is a Jew a Jew, and when is a Jew not a Jew? Depends who you ask. There are certain sects of Judaism that would consider my identity as a Jew utterly heretical, if not laughable, because I don't keep certain rituals. There are thousands of non-Jews who would not hesitate to torture and kill me because I am, to them, undoubtedly a Jew, whether or not I keep Jewish rituals. So who is it important to ask? That's easy: yourself. Most of us in this place of worship can answer that question. So you're sitting there, you're asking yourself: am I Jewish? And you're answering yourself in the thunderous affirmative.

But I want to ask you two more questions: First, what does it mean, ritually, TO YOU, to be a Jew, and second, my father's question, what have you done today to evince yourself a Jew. What Jewish thing have you done today?

One of the privileges of public speaking is setting up one's audience. To the second question, you get a pass: you are in shul today, that's a Jewish thing, check the box, you did a Jewish thing already. The first question, what does it mean, ritually, TO YOU, to be a Jew, that was a set-up. You might have been answering in your mind, "well, I keep kosher," or "I went to morning minyan," or "I say a prayer of thanks when I greet the day," or "I visited a sick friend." Really, any of the 613 mitzvot will fill that blank. But that's not what I'd like you to think about.

Let's divide the question into two halves: First, what rituals have you performed that have been, to you, Jewish rituals? And second, is it possible to identify yourself as a Jewish individual? I'll get back to that complex question shortly.

What are our Jewish rituals? Anyone slaughtered a ram lately? Anyone here taken a pair of your best chickens and scattered their blood in the prescribed directions about the altar? Who's been to the mikvah lately? Are we found wanting? Of course, if only because there's always a gap between the ideal and the attained. We call that gap human nature.

So, what are our rituals? It's easy to identify some: candles on Shabbat, a pebble placed atop a gravestone. But really, the rituals of Vayikra are gone. They are not replaced. Is it possible for us to be Jewish in the Vayikra sense? No. It's not possible. But, then, we don't have the same needs in terms of Jewish identity and cultic behaviors. We are not in a culturally transitory state between being a population of former slaves and becoming a conquering monotheistic warrior nation. We do not have the need to ingrain in ourselves Jewish law and our relationship with God. Well, actually, yes we do. So where are our rituals? Some of us know enough to perform genuine acts of contrition or Teshuvah when we have wronged someone else. Some of us don't bother, go on with our lives, and still consider ourselves Jews. Some of us accept our failures with an ease

far past forgiveness. This is wrong. But before whipping up the hellfire and brimstone, let's reopen the question: whether our rituals? What Jewish thing will you do tomorrow? Moreover, why? Let's say tomorrow comes and you find yourself, for whatever reason, feeling covetous. Or let's say you owed someone something and didn't make good on it right away. You'll rationalize, "Well, I'm only human," or "They can go without it another day." But that's not what we as a people are about. Vayikra is about the pathways of ritual, about pointing out that there are ways to reset a righteously lived life gone astray. The point is that there will always be that gap, and while we are tempted to just say, "That's human nature," okay. But that's not Jewish nature. Jewish nature is to strive, is to find inspiration in that gap between what we aspire to and what we accomplish.

Since we're pointing at Jewish nature, we need to revisit that set-up of a question: is it possible to identify yourself as a Jewish individual? I would contend that it is not. If you are a Jew your covenant is with God. In that way, one is not an individual. One is identified with God. And further, OUR covenant is made manifest in how we agree to treat one another. And should we depart from that agreement, we are, again, breaking faith. We pray in a minyan. Our relationship with God is not as a single person standing before God: it is as a member of a group all of whom hold in common a codified set of laws prescribing our behavior. But we're human, too, and we mess up.

Am I suggesting that we open a new era of ritual slaughtering? No. Again, we are not in the desert learning the originary Torah. We are several *thousand* years past that... and still imperfect. But what did it mean to take one's best most perfect sheep and offer it to God? It meant that the sacrifice had to have significance to you. One had to sacrifice something of value To YOU. God becomes meaningful to us when we perform acts in God's name that require meaningful sacrifice from ourselves. And what is our most common excuse? It's not "I don't have the money." It's "Who has the time?"

What is it that I hope we can learn from Vayikra? To take something meaningful to us, our time, and sacrifice it. We don't have to burn time so

as to send it up for God's "soothing savor." We live in a society and in an era when much of our lives are not scrabbling after survival in a desert. Our lives are already ethereal. What we *have*, to sacrifice, time, is tremendously meaningful. As you go forth tomorrow, be on the lookout for a Jewish thing to do. When you're being watchful for some way in which to make faith instead of break faith, look for a way to give your time. These are our Jewish rituals. We don't even need a priest to scatter our moments and minutes just so. Be we do have to ritually and mindfully take that time from our metaphorical herd of hours, and give it. And not even for the next mistake you make. For that last one. And the one before that, and for the imperfection that courses like the blood in our veins.

Another of my father's stalwart phrasings was "Be a doer. Do things." I have noticed that, during my lifetime, many of the social niceties are fading. People don't talk to their neighbors. Kids post more images and words than they speak to one another. Phone calls are not returned. And who's written an honest-to-goodness letter in the past five years? What do these things have in common? They all take time. And that's what I'm getting from Vayikra: we don't need ritual sacrifice. We need to notice that modernity is quashing social ties, rending our relationships, keeping us from being with and among one another. In this way, our very covenant, our very Jewishness, is imperiled. And here there is a wealth of Jewish things we can do in response: connect with a relative. Make time to spend with a friend. Broaden our sense of community by interacting genuinely. Don't send that text: make a call. Stop by. Bring someone something just because you can. No, we don't need ritual sacrifice of animals. But we do need to commit **our** most valued and treasured commodity: our time. By the way, hurry: there isn't that much left. Gut Shabbes, everyone.