

Temple Israel
Cantor John M. Kaplan
March 19, 2010 - 4 b’Nissan, 5670
Shabbat Vayikra

This week, we begin a new Book of the Torah called *Vayikra*, or Leviticus. Actually, the name “Leviticus” is a Latin derivative from the name given in the Greek translation, called the *Septuagint*, made in the Jewish community around the 3rd and 2nd Centuries BCE in Alexandria, Egypt. The traditional Hebrew name, *Vayikra*, comes from the opening word of the Book itself and means “and He called.” The Book, *Vayikra*, deals with the specific laws and obligations of the Levites, thus “Leviticus,” which includes most of the laws for the sacrificial cult. As a matter of fact, this portion opens with instructions for sacrifices. It states:

1. And the Lord called to Moses, and spoke to him out of the Tent of Meeting, saying,
2. Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them:

When any of you presents an offering of cattle to the Eternal: you shall choose from the herd...[the implication being the selection is made from the best].”

This “offering” is called in Hebrew, *Korban*, and it means “to be drawn near.” That was the purpose of these various sacrifices – they were intended to help the person making the offering and God to move closer together. Today, when we hear the word “sacrifice,” we think of a bloody act of animal slaughter or the noble and unselfish acts of one individual on behalf of someone else. I would offer a different perspective – one that was taught to me this past week.

Last Wednesday evening, I had the honor of being invited to participate in the monthly meeting of the “Cancer and Healing Support Group” which meets here at Temple Israel. I say it was an “honor” because of the incredible insights I learned regarding the courage, determination, and unflinching hope these individuals have in the face of such devastating illness. I was invited to bring into the discussion a Jewish perspective on the theme of one of the most pressing and seldom-talked-about concern anyone has about such an illness – the very real and nagging worry of “What happens if my cancer returns?” Although I have not experienced cancer, thank God, nor have anyone in my immediate family, I understand that this question haunts those who have survived cancer. Every new pain, every return of a remembered pain sets off alarm bells. Questions such as: “Has my cancer returned?” “What will I do if it has?” – just to name a few, immediately fill their minds where, prior to the cancer, they would have discounted the pains as nothing unusual.

As we talked about this week’s Torah portion, we began to explore the possible instructions the words of *Vayikra* might be teaching us. During the meeting, we talked about Biblical sacrifices. The parallels to the specific Biblical sacrificial rites became quite apparent. Each one couldn’t help but say they were dealing with their own personal sacrifices. Not just the sacrifices their loved ones have made, and continue to make on their behalf; but, the personal sacrifice each of them has made trying to shield their loved ones from the pain and fear that grips them, and the ever real possibility that they may become a sacrifice to their disease. And yet, it was not from a sense of giving up something of value, such as personal health, or even life itself, that defined these individuals. They viewed their survival from cancer and the life they now have as a rich treasure to be respected and guarded, yes, but even more – to be enjoyed and celebrated. They saw life after cancer, not just as a heavy burden, but also as an opportunity to draw closer to their family and to be drawn closer to themselves. They also reflected that the experience of surviving cancer had taught them the ability to remain silent when, initially, all they wanted to do was cry out in anger over the injustice of it all.

Not to cry in silence, although they have had many of those moments. But to live in silence – not to burden family and friends with their doubts, their fears, their pain. “No one wants to be around someone who’s sick – especially if it’s cancer,” one person said. Another said, “If I told them every time I felt pain, every time I felt like crying, my friends wouldn’t be able to be around me – it would hurt them too much.”

How often have we found ourselves avoiding someone because we felt helpless in the face of their illness? We rationalize it by saying, “Oh, they have plenty of family support.” Or, we may say to ourselves, “I don’t want to intrude.” Perhaps we say, “I’ve got my hands full with my own health problems.” Or, “I’m taking care of an aging parent – I just can’t do any more.” Whatever the excuse, quite often, and I think unwittingly, we abandon those whose lives are in crisis. Please understand, I’m not trying to chastise anyone. Nor am I trying to determine what other people should or should not be doing. I am convinced, however, that there are times when we avoid rather than embrace. In Jewish tradition, one of the highest, and at the same time one of the most difficult of the *mitzvot* that we can perform is one which simply states: “visit the sick.”

Returning for a moment to this week’s portion, the opening Hebrew word, *vayikra*, is written with an unusual anomaly. The final letter of the word, “aleph” is written smaller than the other letters of the Torah. And, as many of you know, this letter has no sound – it is silent. It is dependant upon a vowel and another letter to have a sound. Many suggestions have been made over the centuries for this difference in appearance, but one that resonates with me is one that comes from the writings of a contemporary teacher. Rabbi Marshal Klaven writes: This small and ever-so silent *aleph*...draws our attention ironically to a resounding lesson on learning. Namely, informed speech – which calls the world to change – cannot be achieved without a preparatory moment of silence. Or, to put it another way, holy speech is contingent upon first achieving a moment that is wholly silent [http://www.isjl.org/rabbinic/taste_of_torah.htm].

What is this “informed speech” that Rabbi Klaven refers talks about? He writes: In other words, within ... silence we not only are given a chance to perceive the beauty of the world, we are also presented with an opportunity to receive the knowledge it projects, understanding more completely what really makes us rich.

The lesson I learned this week was one of “silence.” To remain attentive to the words, the thoughts, the feelings being shared with me by those who no longer wish to burden their family with their experience. The “silence” which comes about when I don’t project onto them the feelings that I think they are experiencing because somehow I think I understand what they are going through. A “silence” that speaks from the heart – not the mind. The “silence” that includes holding their hand. A “silence” that echoes from this week’s portion – not from the sense of “sacrifice” but of “drawing near” – “drawing near” to one another and thereby “being draw near” to God.

That is what today’s “sacrifices” are all about. Not giving up, giving in, or drawing away; but rather, drawing near. May this *Shabbat* be an opportunity for us to draw near to God. And, may we then take every opportunity to draw near one another, not just those whose lives are whole, but those whose lives are broken.

Shabbat Shalom! – Good *Shabbos!*