

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Vayikra

Leviticus 1:1-5:26

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Parashat Vayikra Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Coming Near to God through Sacrifices

Theme 2: Restoring God's Harmonious World through Sacrifice

Introduction



Parashat Vayikra, the first parashah in the book of Leviticus, establishes the groundwork for how the Israelites will approach God through sacrificial offerings. Although Israelite religion did not officially sanction the idea prevalent in other ancient religious traditions that God needs sustenance as humans do, it retained the practice of offering sacrifices as a way to serve God. For the ancient Israelites, sacrifices were a way of coming closer to God and restoring the balance of God's created order when it was defiled through human transgression. The procedures for sacrificial offerings outlined in this parashah were for the instruction of *all* Israelites, not only the priests who guarded such sacred knowledge in other ancient cultures. Sacrificial offerings included animals as well as grain. Animal sacrifices strengthened community ties by offering a shared meal of meat—a scarce and costly commodity in the ancient world. Provisions were made for those of lower socioeconomic status to offer less costly sacrifices, indicating the importance of these rituals for the entire community. The parashah ends with a list of ethical offenses that require sacrificial offerings, reflecting a deep concern with social and economic justice.

Before Getting Started



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 569–70 and/or survey the outline on page 570. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

Theme 1: Coming Near to God through Sacrifices



Shaping the Israelites into a holy people and safeguarding the purity regarded as essential for contact with the holy are the central goals of the book of Leviticus. The procedures for sacrifices outlined in this parashah facilitate these goals by helping the Israelites draw near to God.

The widespread responsibility for the sacrificial rules indicates the vital role of every Israelite in keeping God's presence with the people.

1. Read Leviticus 1:1–2, which contains God's instructions to Moses regarding the burnt offering (*olah*) as well as the various sources for this kind of sacrifice. This is the first of five types of sacrificial offerings discussed in this parashah.
 - a. From where does God speak to Moses (v. 1)? In what way does this passage connect to the closing lines of Exodus 40:34–38, the verses in the Torah that immediately precede this opening verse of Leviticus?
 - b. In verse 1, God calls (*vakiyra*) to Moses. God “calls” to Moses in only one other place in the Torah (Exodus 24:16). How does the use of this word here in Leviticus compare with its use in the Exodus verse? In your view, why does God both “call to” and “speak to” Moses in the Leviticus verse?
 - c. According to verse 2, who should receive God's instructions for sacrificial offerings? What does this suggest about the responsibility for seeing that the offerings are carried out according to God's instructions?
 - d. The phrase translated as “when any of you” (v. 2) uses the Hebrew word *adam* (“When an *adam* from among you”) to describe who brings a sacrificial offering. Since the word *adam* refers generically to a human being, what does this verse imply about the audience of this instruction: does it apply only to men or to both women and men? How does the inclusive nature of this verse compare with your prior assumptions about who brought sacrifices in ancient Israel?
 - e. The Hebrew words translated as “presents” and “offering” (*yakriv* and *korban*) in verse 2 come from the same root, *k-r-b*, meaning “to come near.” How does this root help you to understand the purpose and meaning of sacrificial offerings?
2. Read Leviticus 1:3–17, which describes details of the burnt offering (*olah*).
 - a. According to verse 3, what characteristics must the animals designated for sacrifice share? What further light does the Central Commentary on this verse shed on the significance of these characteristics?
 - b. Who should slaughter the animal, according to verse 5? What do we know from ancient Near Eastern sources about the role of women in sacrificial slaughter?
 - c. What are Aaron and his sons to do with the blood of the slaughtered animal (v. 5)? What is the significance of blood in the Torah (see Leviticus 17:11 and the Central Commentary to that verse)? According to Tamara Cohn Eskenazi's comment on verse 5, what is the relationship between the blood of the slaughtered animals and the altar?
 - d. How does turning “the whole into smoke” (v. 9) facilitate the worshipper's communication with God?

- e. According to the Central Commentary on verse 17, what is the meaning of the phrase “pleasing odor to Adonai,” a refrain that concludes the description of the *olah* and other offerings?
3. Read the Another View section, by Carol Meyers, on page 587.
 - a. What evidence exists, according to Meyers, that religious activities carried out only by women were part of Israelite household life? What does this suggest about the desire of women to draw closer to God through non-sacrificial rituals?
 - b. What concerns specific to women were the focus of such gender-specific religious behaviors? What is the relationship, in your view, of these concerns to the idea that life and fertility are gifts from the gods (see the introduction to *Vayikra*, p. 569)?
 - c. In what kind of protective ritual practices did women engage in ancient Israel, and why?
 - d. Can you think of a ritual developed and carried out by women in modern times? If you have participated in such a ritual, what was this experience like for you? How did it differ from non-gender-specific rituals in which you have participated? In what ways did this ritual help you feel closer to God?
 4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations, by Dvora E. Weisberg, pages 587–89.
 - a. How do commentators interpret the small letter *alef* that ends “*Vayikra*,” the first word in this parashah, as it is written in a Torah scroll? How do commentators view the order of the verbs “to call” and “to speak” in the first verse of the parashah? How does this interpretation affect your understanding of the text?
 - b. According to Weisberg, how do commentators interpret the fact that God speaks to Moses “from the Tent of Meeting” (Leviticus 1:1)? What is your reaction to the idea that once the Tent of Meeting was erected, God chose concealment over openness?
 - c. What other nonmaterial forms of sacrifice are suggested by the interpretations of some of the commentators? How might this shape your view of the meaning of ritual sacrifice?
 - d. According to the Rabbis, what was the role of women in laying hands upon the burnt offering? In your opinion, how might this view of women’s role in the sacrificial ritual support women’s expanded roles in ritual today?
 - e. How did the Rabbis use the wording of Leviticus 1:5 to validate who could perform ritual animal slaughter? According to Weisberg, what do we know about the role of women as ritual slaughterers?
 5. Read “Psalm 50” by Debbie Perlman in Voices on page 591.
 - a. Read Psalm 50 in the Bible, verses 8–15 and 23, in addition to the poem of the same name.
 - b. What is the relationship between these verses of Psalm 50 and our parashah? Note, in Psalm 50:15, the word *uk’ra-eini* (“call upon Me”). This word has the same root (*k-r-a*) as the word *vakiyra* (“[God] called”). What does this suggest about the relationship between God and Israel and how Israel is to draw near to God? What is the relationship between these verses from Psalm 50 and Perlman’s poem?
 - c. What views of God does the poet express in the first and second stanzas of the poem?

- How does God, in the poet's view, help her to come closer to God's presence?
- d. The poem's third, fourth, and fifth stanzas describe what the poet experiences "in the house of the Eternal." In your view, what is the relationship between what the poet experiences in these verses and stepping beyond her "self-made boundaries" (second stanza)?
 - e. What role does God play in the poem's fourth stanza? What is the relationship between this role and the poet's actions in the last stanza?
 - f. In your view, what are the differences and similarities between how the poet draws closer to God in this poem and how the Israelites drew closer to God through sacrifice?
 - g. Can you think of a time when pushing beyond your own "self-made boundaries" helped you to feel closer to God?

Theme 2: Restoring God's Harmonious World through Sacrifice



The Book of Leviticus aspires to a perfectly balanced, harmonious world created by God. Leviticus accepts that human beings will act in ways, both knowingly and accidentally, that will jeopardize this harmony. Transgressions of an ethical nature, although known only to the transgressor, endanger this balance as well. Through a system of purgation and reparation offerings, this parashah outlines procedures for restoring God's balanced world.

1. Read Leviticus 4:1–12, which describes the purgation (*chatat*) offering and how it applies to the priest who incurs guilt by accident.
 - a. The name of this sacrifice, *chatat*, comes from the same root as the word *chet* (sin). The meaning of *chatat* is "that which cancels out sin." How does this help you to understand the function of this offering? According to the Central Commentary (p. 579), how does the relationship between the Tabernacle and the larger world help us to understand the importance of this offering? Why is it significant, in your view, that this offering must be made following any accidental, not deliberate, sin?
 - b. The term "purgation offering" used to be translated as "sin offering," based on the translation of the Hebrew word *chet* (sin). According to the Central Commentary (p. 579), how does the current terminology ("purgation") better describe the purpose of this offering?
 - c. What were the dangers to the Tent of Meeting from moral and spiritual transgressions? How did the purgation offering address these dangers?
 - d. According to 4:2, to whom do the instructions regarding the purgation offering apply? What do we learn from the word *nefesh* ("person") in this verse compared to the word *adam* ("human being") in 1:2 about who could offer sacrifices in ancient Israel?
 - e. The instructions in 4:3–12 apply to an anointed priest who incurs guilt. What are the special concerns regarding a priest who incurs guilt, according to the Central Commentary on these verses? In your view, why are the concerns related to a priest who incurs guilt different from those for the community leadership (4:13), a chieftain (4:22), and a person "from among the populace" (4:27) who incur guilt?

- f. In 4:12 we learn that the priest must carry the parts of the bull that have not been consumed on the altar to “a pure place outside the camp,” where they are to be burned. The same rule also applies to the sacrifice for the community leadership. This means that neither the priest nor the community leadership may benefit from this offering. Why do you think this is the case? This rule does not apply to a chieftain or to an average person. How might you account for this difference?
2. Read Leviticus 5:1–13, which describes specific situations that require purgation offerings.
- How would you describe the nature of the violations listed in these verses? What do they have in common? What are the implications of such acts both on a societal and on an individual level?
 - The word *yada* (“have known” or “have learned of”) appears in connection with each of the violations (vv. 1, 3, 4). The verb *hitvadah* (v. 5, from the root y-d-h) means “to confess.” How does the use of these two words help you to understand the significance of these violations?
 - According to verse 6, what is the offering mandated for one who commits these offenses? How does this differ from the offerings outlined in verses 7–10 and 11–13? In your view, what do these differences tell us about who had access to the rites connected with purgation offerings? What does this say about the responsibility for restoring the damage done by these offenses?
 - Performing an “after-the-fact” ritual, as outlined in these verses, does not change the damage that has occurred. What is the purpose, in your view, of requiring such rituals in these situations?
 - What are the differences between the offerings in verse 6 and those in verses 7–11? What can we learn from these differences about the significance of these offerings? How does making these offerings accessible to all contribute to restoring God’s harmony to the world?
3. Read Leviticus 5:14–26, which describes the reparation (*asham*) offering.
- What is the purpose of the reparation offering, according to these verses? How does this differ from the other types of offerings in this parashah?
 - The name for this offering, *asham*, is often translated as “guilt,” from which the term “guilt offering” was derived. “Reparation” more fully reflects the purpose of this offering. In your opinion, what is the difference between these two terms? How do they affect your understanding of this type of offering?
 - According to verses 20–26, against whom does a person transgress when committing the violations in these verses? How does this affect the restitution the violator must make?
 - The word *maal* in verse 21 (translated here as “trespass”) can also be translated as “sacrilege.” What does the use of this word convey about the transgressions listed in these verses?
 - Why, in your view, must the transgressor repay the value of what he has taken (plus twenty percent) before he is permitted to bring an offering to God?
4. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Janet Marder on pages 589–90.
- What are your reactions to Marder’s view that this parashah is “hard to digest”?
 - What relationship does Marder identify between Exodus 19:6 and the instructions given to the priests in this parashah?

- c. What is your reaction to Marder's view about the relationship between human nature and the stern, disciplinary regulations of the priesthood?
 - d. How does ritual slaughter help to neutralize and sublimate human aggression? Can you think of other rituals that may help to neutralize or sublimate human aggression?
 - e. What is the process through which a *korban* (ritual offering to God) transforms an act of violence into something holy?
 - f. How does the ritual of animal sacrifice provide a way for flawed human beings to become more humane?
 - g. How, according to Marder, do the instructions for animal sacrifice help us to sanctify "even the darkest forces" within us?
 - h. How do acts of purgation and reparation, both in this parashah and in our own time, help to restore and repair the world?
5. Read "How divine is forgiving?" by Marge Piercy in *Voices* on page 592.
- a. What does the poem's first line tell us about the poet's attitude toward forgiveness?
 - b. The refrain "We forgive" repeats six times in this poem. What six reasons does this poem give to explain why we forgive others? Would you add any other motivations to this list?
 - c. To what famous line does the title of the poem allude? How does this poem challenge Alexander Pope's well-known line that "To err is human, to forgive divine"? Whose opinion on forgiveness fits better with your own views, Piercy's or Pope's?
 - d. What is the relationship between the attitudes toward forgiveness in this poem and the procedures for purgation and reparation offerings in this parashah?
 - e. Can you think of a situation in your own life when you forgave someone for some of these same reasons? What did you learn from that experience?

Overarching Questions

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. In your view, what is the role of Jewish rituals in connecting us to God? Can you think of a time when participating in a Jewish ritual helped you feel closer to God?
2. What is your reaction to Leviticus 5:4, which commands us to treat the promises we make to ourselves (when expressed as oaths) as seriously as the promises we make to another person?

Closing Questions

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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