

Vayikra **And (Adonai) called**
Torah: Leviticus 1:1-5:26 (6:7)
Haftarah: Isaiah 43:21-44:23
Brit Chadashah: Hebrews 10:1-18

I list this Torah portion as technical. In fact, only four of the portions in Leviticus are not technical. It is part of a series of instructions given to the priests about the ritual procedures of the sacrifices which Jews were commanded to offer. In subsequent portions of Leviticus, morality is dealt with, along with the three prohibitions to protect kosher sex. It can only occur in a marriage which does not violate kinship, gender and species.

There is also the sad story of the strange fire offered by Abihu and Nadab, followed by the laws of biblical kosher. Purification rituals are discussed along with the High Priest's annual trip behind the veil (Avodah). The interdiction of consuming the blood of living animals is also dealt with. The festivals of the L-rd are outlined along with the regulations for both the sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee. Lastly, conditions for blessing are given along with the rules covering tithes and oaths. It is a fascinating book, and is somewhat complicated.

Our portion this week begins with a discussion of the three kinds of burnt offerings which the people were to offer on the copper altar – large livestock, small livestock and kosher birds. As I was reading, I had at least two questions which I wanted research for this meditation, and, as usual, the first source which I consulted was the Stone Edition Chumash, which is a kind of Rabbinic commentary on the Torah portions of the annual reading cycle.

As is common, I was both amused and disturbed by the fanciful conjectures and flights of fantasy made by so many of the Talmudic authorities. It is said that when the voice of G-d called Moses into the tent of meeting, even though YHVH's voice could be heard around the world and could split trees, only Moses heard the voice because the people were not worthy to hear the holy voice. I think they forgot about Joshua. It is unwise to add to the Scriptures.

Also, they claim that every future Jewish soul was present when the Ten Commandments were given at Sinai. I did not find anything useful from this source to help me with my questions, but I was confident that adequate answers can usually be found by examining the context of the passage. First, the passage appears to be saying that the men offering the sacrifices, slaughtered the animals themselves, while the priests only dealt with the sprinkling of blood, the cutting up of the meat and the washing of the legs and guts, which were also burned. I feel that this is just a manner of speaking when it says that the worshippers did the actual slaughtering, when this task is elsewhere said to be the sole responsibility and privilege of the priests. Worshippers brought the sacrificial animals to the priests, who sacrificed them.

Also, when the three categories of animals to be offered are mentioned (cattle, sheep/goats and two birds), even though all three were offered as an agreeable odour to YHVH, atonement is only mentioned in the case of the large livestock. We know that elsewhere burnt offerings of all sizes are considered atonement offerings. So, by studying other passages, we learn that the sheep/goats or birds which were offered, also provided atonement. The blood of the birds is only applied to the sides of the copper altar, likely because there was so little of it.

Neither the birds crop, nor its feathers were offered as part of the burnt offering. This is likely because the crop could contain grain and maybe insects and meat and grain offerings were not offered together as part of the same sacrifice. The feathers were not offered because they contained no meat and both of these were dumped in the place where the ashes were put. They would have been disposed of, once the ashes were taken out of the camp..

In the study of Jewish sacrificial rituals, even though lots of blood was involved, these ceremonies are never grotesque or savage. The animals were slain humanely (causing no pain), and even though some of the blood was sprinkled on the altar, none of it was eaten or smeared all over. It was sometimes used in anointing rituals, but it was never smeared like in the violent pagan rituals involving blood.

The remaining chapters of the portion deal with sacrifices which were eaten, sometimes wholly, other times only partially. Sometimes only the priest ate portions of them, at other times, the worshipper was also fed, at other times both of them were fed.

In chapter two, a portion of the grain offering was mixed with oil and incense and burnt on the copper altar. Only incense was burned on the incense altar which always stood in front of the veil which lead to the Holy of Holies. Neither honey nor leavening were ever offered on any altar. Only a portion of the first fruits grain offering was mixed with oil and incense and burnt on the copper altar. The rest was considered food, and thus, by association, could be mixed with leavening and honey. We are not told where it was cooked, but the copper altar was not used. Some portions of a meat offering which was to be eaten, was cooked on the copper altar, but never any grain which contained either honey or leavening.

In chapter three, when a thanksgiving meat offering was made, the entrails and the fat which surrounded them were offered as a burnt offering and not eaten. The rest was considered food and we are not told how it was cooked, but the copper altar could have been used for this purpose. Instructions on how to offer large and small livestock as thanksgiving offering are given and their entrails and the fat were always offered as a burnt offering. The offering of birds as thanksgiving offerings is not mentioned in this portion.

Our people were not allowed to eat any of the fat or the blood of any sacrificial animal. However kidney and liver are popular foods, even among the orthodox Jews, but these never come from sacrificial animals and they are prepared so that the blood they contain is carefully extracted. Not eating blood refers to not eating animals while they are still alive. The blood used as part of the sacrificial procedures, always came from the sacrificial animals. It is physically impossible to extract all of the blood, even from meat which is considered kosher, but once the animals are slaughtered, in the Bible, this restriction no longer applies.

A clear distinction needs to be drawn between the blood and the guts of animals used for sacrifices and that which is consumed as food. Chapter 11 deals with which kinds of animals we are forbidden to eat and which animals are considered clean and can be eaten. The question whether an observant Jew can eat sushi from a kosher fish, is not dealt with in the Bible. Orthodox Jews do not make gravy.

The two remaining chapters of the portion deal with various kinds of atonement offerings. The usual sacrificial rules applied, with some special considerations given about which part of the offerings could be eaten by the priests and by the worshippers and which parts were burnt.

When it comes to dealing with things which were found or stolen, a fifth of the value of the thing stolen was added when that which was stolen was returned to the original owner. An additional guilt offering was then made so that atonement could be made for the penitent one.

Sacrifices were done decently and in order, with dignity and even splendour. There was nothing ugly about how they were performed and they were always prepared according to the instructions which were given. Biblical symbolism is always exalted.

Sermon: Living and Being Renewed

As we move through another year in the L-rd, we want to always maintain our focus on the Messiah through His Word. He does not want us to be disabled by our weaknesses or overpowered by the trials and the attacks we experience on our journey to our Father's Home in Glory. But in order to understand what this means, we have to distinguish between our inner life which needs to be peaceful and full of trust and faith, and our outer life, where we walk through the valley of the shadow death, repeatedly.

Psalms 23 is a peaceful psalm written by a man who encountered more trials than what the average believer experiences, and yet who was a peaceful man who kept his eyes focused on the protection and provision of G-d. He had some deep flaws and once his running days were over and he was crowned the King of Israel, his failure to surrender them to G-d and to take the way of escapes, which YHVH always provides for us, meant that his final years were not as peaceful and as happy as they could have been.

Let us look at our verse for today and then discuss how flawed, imperfect believers can set straight paths for their feet and not spend a lot of time falling down and rolling around in the dust.

Passage: *You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in you.* (Isaiah 26:3)

What is your life focused on? How is your peace doing? Are you actually learning to trust in Him? When I spoke about the essential discipline of tithing ten percent of our increase last week, I did not want to make anyone feel uncomfortable and I was picking on no one in particular. I have always kept the finances of the shul at arm's length and only spoke because I felt guided to do so. An out of town friend was splitting his tithe between us and his church and has just told me that he felt he had to give it all to his church. It was a decision I agreed with, even if it meant a few thousand less dollars coming in to our community.

I want to keep on reminding people about the things which are important and the priorities which the Bible wants us to maintain. If you are not tithing, you are placing that part of your life outside of the protection and provision of G-d and I would never want the lack of this vital discipline to become a fatal flaw, which impoverishes you or opens the door to all kind of unnecessary spiritual attacks. It is a challenge, but if we want our whole life to revolve around the Messiah and His Word, it is essential that we tithe ten percent of our increase regularly.

As a community and as individual believers, we will come under spiritual attacks on a regular basis, but if we let a part of our life be built on the sand, then we live in constant danger of seeing the house of our faith come crumbling down. This is not what I want for any of you.

Our community wants to grow. Our community wants to undertake all kinds of projects and to support several ministries, in Canada and in Israel, but we cannot plan to do this until all our bills, including salaries, are paid in full. I want us to be among those believers who are kept in perfect peace because we trust in the Messiah. I am greatly troubled by the horrible things happening during the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. I mean, who hits a maternity hospital?

As our society becomes more secular we will also experience horrible things as our society comes gunning for our faith, but it does not matter whatever trials and tribulations parade through our lives as long as we walk with the Messiah in every area of our lives. I do not want any of us to be spiritually shortchanged in any area of our lives. We need to study His Word diligently and regularly. We need to pray fervently and frequently. We need to attend services and fellowship as the main form of socializing that we do. We need to share our faith whenever an opportunity presents itself and praise needs to be a major part of our lives.

We may still encounter questions and things which we do not fully understand, but if we walk with the Messiah, these will never become issues which will damage our lives and sink the ship of our faith. I have been studying the Bible for 50 years and it often feels like I am just scratching the surface. There are the secret things which belong to G-d that none of us will really understand in this life, but as long as we know what it means to walk closely with our King, this intimacy will keep us focused and steadied through all kinds of spiritual weather.

Purim is just around the corner and it will be time to read the story of Esther once again. She was not only beautiful and humble, but she was courageous over the year when her enemies were making plans to annihilate her people. There was a modern day Haman who wanted to annihilate European Judaism and he came close to succeeding. Hitler would have let many Jews leave German territory, if other countries would give them refuge. There were really none that would and over six million Jews perished when they could have been saved.

There is a day of judgment coming when all the enemies of Israel will be judged and severely punished for their crimes. This assurance keeps me from despair as I see antisemitism on the rise again. Being anti-zionist is a blatant form of antisemitic racism. All that millions of Jews want is to live peacefully in their homeland and be on good terms with their neighbours. Palestinian terror groups are not freedom fighters trying to liberate their land and their people. They are thugs and criminals who refuse to try and make peace with Israel, even though they keep on being asked.

Did you know that Anwar Sadat came to Israel the forty second time that he was invited? Most Palestinians are the children and grandchildren of Arabs who moved to Palestine from all over the Middle East, to either work for Jews or take advantage of the increased prosperity of a formerly impoverished land. There is more fake news circulating about Israel and the treatment of the Palestinians than there is about any other news item in the world.

Did you know that the Gaza Strip has a surplus of water and is potentially one of the most fertile regions in the Middle East? But Hamas and the PLO (and Hezbollah) continue to spend their aid money on weapons rather than on food and medicine and education for their people. Various Palestinian terror groups kill many times more of their people than those who die in confrontations with Israel. Did you know that Israel is the number one employer of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza?

Attacks on the most peaceful country in the region are inspired by the enemy of our souls and even people in Canada are falling for his lies. The Bible clearly teaches that the Jews are a great nation and that they will be a great blessing to all nations. Please do not let lies and fake news pull you away from the teachings of the Scriptures. We need to speak out on behalf of Israel and support it as the nation of G-d's people who are returning home.

Perfect peace means that we trust in the L-rd and spend our energy studying His Word and praying for each of us and for the world around us. I wish you all lots of money, nice houses, nice clothes and good health. But you can have all of this and still be spiritually poor and blind. Are you learning to trust G-d in every area of your life? Do you realize that tithing ten percent of your increase is a biblical requirement for all believers and an essential spiritual discipline, both when times are hard and when times are good?

Sometimes in the 18 year life of our shul, our finances have suffered as people came and people left, but there have been numerous times when we have received substantial gifts when it looked like we were sinking. I get the sense that it is time for all of us to take up the challenge of tithing ten percent of our increase, because when we do, our finances will not be up and down and all over the place. We are not poor and if it takes financial miracles to keep us afloat, something is seriously wrong with how we are handling our money. People make the most amazing excuses about not being able to tithe. I have known people on welfare or disability who have joyfully learned to tithe and it is amazing how their needs are met.

I want us to regularly experience the perfect peace that comes upon those whose minds are focused on YHVH and His Word. We need to be focusing on the festival cycle more than we are on the fickle events happening throughout our world. After Purim, Passover is just around the corner. For the first time, our Seder meal will be not be catered and our ladies are coming up with lists of what to bring and are making plans to buy all the items we need for the ritual part of the Seder. We are only charging \$5 per adult this year and this should cover most of our expenses.

Please make firm plans to attend the Seder. We are not opening it up to the public as we have done in previous years, but those who do not regularly attend shul will be welcome if they pay \$5 and are willing to bring a good kosher dish. All kinds of food are eaten at this festival meal and you can ask us what to prepare or go on line and see the hundreds of Passover recipes there are out there – even lots of gluten free ones!

It is a family event that is celebrated between sunset and full dark and it is the only festival where home observance is more important than anything which occurs publicly. In the rabbinic community, two Seders occur – one of the evening of the fourteenth of Nisan and the other on the evening of the fifteenth of Nisan. This is done to replace the Festival of First Fruits which was the most important festival in temple times and began the fifty day countdown to Shavuot (Pentecost).

It is may be funny, but the three pilgrimage festivals (First Fruits, Pentecost and Sukkoth) were times when the people brought their agricultural tithes into the temple as they gathered to rejoice together over the goodness and the provision of G-d. In the days of the New Testament the population of Jerusalem was around 160,000, but three times a year, it swelled to well over a million. One of the main businesses during the festival times was the rental of rooms for Jews who came up to Jerusalem from all over the known world.

I think it would be good for our shul to develop a way to celebrate First Fruits, since it is a pilgrimage festival. On the Hebrew calendar, Passover always occurs on the evening of the 14th of Nisan. The week long Festival of Unleavened Bread starts on the fifteenth of Nisan and runs for seven days until the 21st of Nisan. Today, this seven day festival is often called the week of Passover. The Festival of First Fruits was to be celebrated on the sixteenth of Nisan, which begins at sundown on the evening of the fifteenth of Nisan and it was on the sixteenth of Nisan that the countdown (or counting of the Omer) to Pentecost begins. Shavuot always falls on the evening of the fifth of Sivan, which is the beginning of the 6th of Sivan.

The three days after resurrection of our Messiah happened at dawn on the 19th of Nisan and as we learn to let our lives revolve around the festivals of the L-rd, we can develop a stability and a depth that will enrich our lives. I want to live in perfect peace. I want my mind to be focused on the Word of our Messiah.

It was part of my objectives for today, to give you a little bit of a review, so that your heart and life can get into the habit of being ready for the festivals, which are part of the timing of G-d. Happily, winter is coming to a close for another year, even if we have below zero temperatures for a little while longer. We should keep our eyes on the weather so that we know what we need to wear and when the annual planting season begins, both for farmers and for those of us who have gardens.

My old father-in-law used to say that you should wait for the May long weekend to put your garden in because we cannot be sure of not getting any more frost until after this date. We need to keep our eyes both on the natural weather cycles in our world and on the spiritual weather cycles in the Messiah. It takes a couple of times through the festival cycle before it becomes second nature, but until the spiritual realities of G-d's Word become second nature to us and to our lives, we will never know any enduring perfect peace, because we need to be keeping our focus on YHVH through His Word.

In this world we shall face trials and temptations and sad situations like what is happening in the Ukraine will keep on happening. But this is not what our lives should all be about. David lived a very peaceful life. John the Baptist did as well, as did our Messiah when He lived among us for 33 years. We can never be fully in control of what is going to happen in our lives, but when our focus is on the Messiah and His Word, the rest will fall into place.

In 1959, my parents saw that war was coming in the country of my birth, so they changed where they lived so as not to be dragged into a conflict which they did not agree with. Some of you and some of your parents made similar moves and Canada is getting ready to welcome thousands of displaced Ukrainians who want to live outside the conflict zone. We should pray for peace in the Ukraine and peace in every other country in the world. We know that this may not always be what happens, but there is a peace which is more enduring and more powerful than the feeble happenstances of this life – the perfect peace of YHVH.

One day this sorry old world will pass away with great noise and great heat. We need to walk with the Messiah in every area of our lives as we wait for this joyous occasion. Is there anything in your life which you should be doing and which you are not doing? Is there anything in your life which you should not be doing and yet you are doing it? It is always possible to be in control of our inner, spiritual world and to never let the storms of life upset us or sink us. How is your perfect peace doing? How is your focus on the things of Messiah doing? Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov.