

Vayikra 5767
Leviticus on the Prairie

Shabbat Shalom.

Over the past couple of months, I have been delving into two different texts. These texts are not similar, but in my mind, they shed light on each other.

You are probably not be surprised to hear that one is the Torah. On a regular basis, I expend considerable energy engaged in the Torah.

Although the Torah is a unique and sacred text, it includes many passages that challenge us. This morning we began the third book of the Torah, *Vayikra*; its main theme is the ancient system of animal sacrifices. These rites and rituals are difficult to appreciate today. When I study the sacrificial texts with our students in our religious school, or in the 25/52 group for sixth and seventh graders on Shabbat, they are often uncomfortable with it. Our students, some of whom are vegetarians, ask thoughtful and insightful questions:

Why take an animal and kill it as an offering to God? How does this bring us closer to God? What is the meaning of these rites? Are they ethical? And what do they teach us today?

It is interesting to note that, not only do our young people today ask these types of questions, but our tradition itself has also been asking them for centuries. Rambam, Maimonides, living nine hundred years ago, described the sacrifices as an evolutionary step in our relationship with God. The Torah continues the ancient sacrifices as a means of coming close to God, but believes that God never intended to keep them forever, that as we grew and developed less physical and more spiritual means of connecting with the Almighty, we would relinquish this system. But the question remains: how can we better understand these ancient rites?

The second text I wish to share with you this morning is a bit more unexpected. It is the great series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, "Little House on the Prairie." Before you start questioning my reading habits, let me tell you that I am not revisiting my childhood bookshelf; I never read these books. As a little boy, I was more preoccupied with baseball, basketball, soccer, and riding my bicycle than reading books about girls.

When I took my five and a half year-old daughter, Talya, with me on the Temple Emunah Israel Adventure, "Little House" came along. As Talya went to bed, I read her a chapter or two before we said the *Sh'ma*. Not only was she engaged by this story, but so was I, and when we came back to Lexington, I asked my wife Sharon if I could be the designated Little House reader. Sharon said that she wanted to read them, and we had to negotiate. She had always

imagined reading this beautiful series to her daughter as she read it as a child. In the end, Sharon's generosity has allowed me to read an occasional chapter, and now I have to confess that I have gone back to read the first volume after we read the second.

What is the connection between "Little House on the Prairie" and the book of Leviticus? Well – on a certain level, there really isn't that much of a connection. One describes the day-to-day life of 19th century pioneering Americans, which is fairly different from the world of thousands of years ago in which the ancient Israelites tried to create a moral and ethical society and rituals that brought them closer to God.

So what do we learn about the sacrificial system from the Little House series? In the book we realize how connected the family was to the natural world and the environment around them. When they were hungry, Pa would go out and hunt for some meat. These animals were not only eaten, but yielded other benefits as well. The skins provided warmth, and almost every part of the animal was utilized. Sometimes the animals weren't hunted, but were raised and fattened to be eaten on a special occasion. When we think about the Ingalls' relationship with the animals and with nature around them, we can perhaps much better appreciate the sacrificial system, and we can remove some of the focus on what the Torah states about them.

The families that brought sacrifices in ancient times were mostly not wealthy. Perhaps they had an animal or two. Many did not have any. When they could save up to buy an animal, it was truly a sacrifice for them to bring it to the Temple.

With our students, I often use a car analogy; many families in our community have two cars. To bring one of those cars and to offer it as a gift to someone would be a huge donation and sacrifice. The families that brought the ancient sacrifices did not eat meat all the time; they were not hunters. If they brought that animal as a sacrifice, it was a considerable loss.

There were different types of sacrifices that served different purposes, but coming closer to God undergirds the whole system. On a spiritual level, it brought the people closer to God. The Hebrew word for sacrifice is *korban*, which is connected to the word *karov*, meaning close. This animal that they had nurtured and were now going to consume was given a larger purpose. Through these ancient rites, its death was given greater meaning. Perhaps it also instilled within the people a spirit of generosity and gift giving that are at the core of a compassionate civilization.

Some sacrifices were consumed by the *kohanim*, the priests; these functioned as part of a system of taxation. Since the *kohanim* did not have any land, they did not raise their own crops. They were sustained by these meat

sacrifices, as well as the vegetarian offerings of grain, wine and fruits. Together, they formed part of an ancient form of taxation that sustained their society.

Some sacrifices were at least partially consumed by those who brought them. In essence, Jerusalem was transformed into a great big barbecue or, while not to belittle it, into a tailgate party at a big football game. People went to the festivals, brought their sacrifices, and barbecued together with friends and extended families in what was a great celebration and time of thanksgiving.

The truth is that the relationship of Laura, Mary, Baby Carrie, and their parents, Ma and Pa, to the natural world and the animals around them was much closer to what the ancient Israelites experienced. They all had to consume meat in order to survive. While the ancient Israelites probably ate meat less often than the Ingalls family, it was certainly part of their diet.

Beyond the sacrifices, “Little House on the Prairie” is pervaded by a simple spirituality. Everyday acts and chores are elevated and, in Laura’s descriptions, become almost holy. Similarly, our tradition tries to elevate the mundane, to take the ordinary and infuse it with a sense of *kedushah*, of sanctity.

While on a simple level, the sacrificial system helped our people perform atonement or prepare food for festivals and special occasions, it also transformed those acts and gave them a certain majesty.

In the same sense, Pa, Ma, Laura and Mary infuse a kind of spirituality into their day-to-day chores and tasks. As I read the Little House books, I long to bring that awareness into my own life and my children’s lives. There is a deep and profound intentionality to the way the Ingalls family approached their daily lives that feels like the book of Leviticus.

I hate to frighten everyone, but in nine days, *Pesah* will begin. This is a time when many of us put great energy into preparing for this most complex festival. We clean out our homes of *hametz*, of leaven. We replace our dishes with *Pesah* dishes, and we prepare special foods for the holiday and for the *seder*. It is an extraordinary amount of work.

But even as I dread it, I also find it that the work is somehow uplifting, even as it is challenging. It reminds me of the rabbinic teaching: “*l’fum tza’ara agra* – according to the pain, so is the reward.” The more that we clean our homes, the more time we spend focusing on the *mitzvot* of *Pesah*, the more it rewards us.

There is a scene in Little House that I think is particularly apt. The butter that they churned was not uniform in color, but varied based on the time of year and the temperature. In the winter, it was often pale. Ma goes to great lengths to color the butter, “to make it pretty.” To do this, she grated a carrot, placing it

and hot milk in a cloth bag. “Then she squeezed the bright yellow milk into the churn, where it colored the cream. Now the butter would be yellow.”

It’s an extraordinary amount of work simply to give the butter an aesthetic appeal. But when you finish reading that chapter, you appreciate how much she enjoys the colored butter and how much it added to the family’s experience.

So it was with the ancient Israelites. The *korbanot*, the system of sacrifices, added much to their lives, and I would argue that our preparations for *Pesah* do the same thing. The work that we put into *Pesah* rewards us many times over. It is not simply a spring cleaning to prepare for the festival, it is about purging our homes of the *hametz*, which is a metaphor for all that we want to purge from our own souls and from our lives and how we improve ourselves each year and how we become better people.

When we enter into *Pesah*, we are ready to recreate and retell the narrative of our ancient ancestors. We cherish the work and time that we spend. The preparations for *Pesah* and its seder nights, like the ancient sacrifices, are in-depth processes that on many levels are complicated and extraordinarily labor intensive. But I think we should look past the drudgery to elevate these actions. Just as Pa and Ma and Mary and Laura could infuse their day-to-day lives and all of their chores with a deeper sense of awareness, we should approach the next week with that same attitude, and when we sit down at our seder table, we will be ready to appreciate the meaning of this beautiful holiday.

The rabbis have a great teaching that brings this all together. They explain that the preparation for a mitzvah is as important as, or perhaps even more significant than, the actual mitzvah itself. We are supposed to prepare for *Pesah* for weeks before, but it is that preparation that is as great a mitzvah as the rituals of the seder, if not greater. As we spend our time cleaning our houses, buying kosher *L’Pesah* food, cooking meals, and setting the *seder* table, let us remember that these acts are just as great as the actual mitzvah of the seder. They inculcate within us and our children and our community a profound sense and appreciation of what *Pesah* is all about. For if we simply walk into the *Pesah* seder, we do not experience any of the work or effort.

When the Ingalls family in Little House sits down to their festive meals, they have worked tremendously hard to prepare for those meals, and I think on some level they enjoyed those meals even more.

May we all enjoy the work and then enjoy the meal that is *Pesah*, infusing our lives with a simple spirituality that elevates the day-to-day and the year-to-year with deep meaning.

Shabbat Shalom.