



Vayikra as a Model for Transparent Communal Governance

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This is a sample sermon, originally delivered in 2018. Readers are invited to take and use as much or as little of this sermon as they want—in the context of a Shabbat morning sermon/d'var torah, or in any other context—up to and including delivering the entire sermon as written. The authors offer this as a resource to stimulate organizational and institutional conversations around power, policies, and transparency.

WHERE DOES THE TORAH BEGIN?

The answer, of course, is in *Bereishit*, in Genesis – literally, in the beginning: with exciting narratives about the creation of the world, self-discovery, wars with foreign kings, and complicated family dynamics; with the stories of our forebears figuring out what it means to be ethical people and beginning a family that becomes a nation.

But that's not the only answer to where the Torah begins.

According to a very powerful tradition, the Torah—or at least, the study of the Torah—actually begins in *Vayikra*, in *Leviticus*, smack in the middle of the *chamisha chumshei torah*, the Five Books of Moses.

Tradition tells us that for centuries young children began their Torah education at the beginning of *Vayikra*, with its obscure, practically irrelevant priestly laws. The beginning of a child's exposure to our sacred Torah focuses on sacrifices and purity.

Why would children begin learning the Torah here? This seems like such a strange, unrelatable place to begin. Even many adults struggle to relate to *Vayikra*. If you find yourself eagerly following the happenings and narratives of *Bereishit* and *Shemot*, of Genesis and Exodus, but seem to keep losing your place during *Vayikra*, you're not alone.

In his chapter on *Leviticus: The Democratization of Holiness*, the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes that *Vayikra* is “perhaps the key text for Judaism...setting out an entire infrastructure for justice and equity in political and economic life.” Why is that? Well, scholars believe that originally *Vayikra* was meant as a set of instructions for the *kohanim*, the priests alone, detailing how to perform their duties properly. As such, one could argue it didn't belong in the Torah; only the *kohanim* needed it. But *Vayikra* was ultimately canonized, becoming the central book in the Five Books of Torah, as a part of a process that democratized the Jewish faith.

The inclusion of *Vayikra* in the chumash became the model of the idea that, in Judaism, texts and rituals are accessible and taught to all, not just to the scholars, leaders or clergy. There is no secret lore, reserved for an elite few, whom we must trust by virtue of their position. *Vayikra* lays out—transparently, for all to see—exactly what occurs in our holiest communal institutions. We the people know precisely where our donations go, which *korban* or sacrifice is brought when, and what procedures the *kohen* must follow. This transparency ensures that we may:

- know what to expect from our leaders and functionaries,
- recognize deviance from the commandments if and when it emerges, and
- demand accountability.

Consequently, *Vayikra*—what children study first—highlights the foundational value of opening up to all even the Torah's most esoteric practices and central institutions.

This is the Torah's vision of holiness, as applicable today as it was thousands of years ago.

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Vayikra's inclusion in the Torah doesn't just outline a model of transparency and accessibility; as we will see, it directly confronts the risks of and opportunities for abuse in positions of power, and demands accountability. We will unpack here two lessons from the details of the sacrificial service in *Vayikra* that are critical to developing a culture of transparency and accountability.

The first lesson is about the inherent dangers of power. The fourth chapter of *Vayikra* discusses the various people who might sin and thus become obligated to bring a *korban chatat*, a purification offering. In referring to these people, the Torah describes the likelihood of their sinning by using words that imply varying degrees of certainty. Interestingly, in referring to the nasi, the ruler, the Torah uses language of certainty: אשר “when,” not if—as in “אשר נשיא יטא” “when a ruler sins”—as if a ruler's sinning is a forgone conclusion.

The *Kli Yakar*, a 16th-century Polish commentary, notes that a ruler's sin is often a function of how the ruler holds themselves in their position of power: רום מתוך רום ונוהג נשיאתו ברמה מתוך רום "אבל הנשיא המתנשא לכל ראש ונוהג נשיאתו ברמה מתוך רום" – "But the ruler who rules over all people, if the ruler conducts their leadership haughtily from a haughty heart, they will definitely come to sin."

Rather than a G-d-like reverence for leaders, an assumption of infallibility, the Torah here teaches us— "אשר נשיא יחטא" – "when a ruler sins." The Torah is teaching us something about power and those who hold it: they—we—will inevitably err.

And we all hold some power over others in our lives, whether as a parent over a child, teacher over student, doctor over patient. Power creates disparities among people that can potentially be exploited, and thus those in power must be especially cautious and self-aware. The Torah shows that, regardless of who we are or what position we hold, in Jewish law, no one is above reproach; we all risk sinning (not only but especially when in positions of power), and we are all accountable.

SUPPORT FROM THE SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE

Scientific research supports the Torah's apparent assessment. In 2013, researchers Pitesa and Thau published an article in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* detailing three experiments on power and accountability. They found, like many researchers before them, that power can promote self-serving decisions, particularly in situations of moral hazard. Interestingly, though, when people in power were held accountable procedurally, negative consequences were lessened.

In one experiment, participants were randomly assigned to act either as "bosses" or as "team players." The bosses were given special privileges and badges identifying them as superiors while the team players were told they all had equal decision-making power. Next, participants invested the payments they had received for participation, pooling their money and investing as much or as little as they wanted, with a 50% chance of doubling their money and a 50% chance of losing it. However, the bosses would not be investing their own money but instead would earn 20% of any financial gain made by investing other participants' money, incentivizing the bosses to invest as much as possible of others' funds (while being insulated from loss themselves).

The groups were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions: *outcome* accountability—in which the bosses were evaluated on the outcome of their investments, and procedural accountability—in which the bosses were evaluated based on *how* they made their decisions.

While all of the bosses took more risks with their teammates' money than the non-bosses, those judged on the *procedures* they used to make their decisions risked three times less money than those judged on the *outcome* of their decisions. The researchers concluded that to inhibit abuses of power, recklessness, and self-serving leadership, we must establish standards and procedures and be accountable to them.

BOUNDARIES IN RELATIONSHIPS

This lesson is the essence of *Vayikra*.

In fact, from the very first words of *Vayikra*, we also learn a second key lesson: the importance of applying standards to all relationships. The *parsha* begins: "ויקרא אל משה וידבר ה' אליו"—"And God called to Moshe, and God spoke to him." On this line, the Talmud in Tractate Yoma (4b) asks: "למה הקדים קריאה לדבור?"—"Why did G-d call out to Moshe before beginning to speak to him?" The Gemara answers, "למדה תורה דרך ארץ"—"the Torah is teaching us *derech erez*, proper etiquette, that one should not begin speaking to a friend without calling to that friend first."

On this point, the *Torah Temimah*, a 20th-century Lithuanian commentary, exclaims: We are learning this lesson of *derech erez* from God calling Moshe by name. Moshe!—with whom God had such an intimate relationship. Moshe!—about whom God says: "בכל ביתי נאמן הוא אל פה אדבר בו ומראה ולא בחידות ותמנת: ה' יביט (במדבר יב:ח) —"In my entire house, he is the trusted one. Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a clear vision, and not in riddles; at the image of God does he gaze." But why does God need to practice this etiquette with Moshe?

The Torah is teaching us here that even in the context of such close intimate relationships, we have boundaries. We don't just barge in; we invite, we call by name. Surely God, we might imagine, had the right to talk to Moshe whenever and however, but instead God models a valuable lesson about the application of boundaries to all relationships, no matter how intimate, no matter how powerful. **These boundaries protect relationships—especially relationships of familiarity and intimacy.**

It is intimacy that the people of Israel seek when they bring *korbanot*. Though we translate the word "*korbanot*" as "sacrifices," the Hebrew root of the word is "*karov*"—"close." We yearn for closeness to God. By bringing an offering, something of value to ourselves, we are investing in the relationship with God and bringing ourselves closer to God. It is a closeness many of us instinctively seek, and it is because of this yearning for closeness that *Vayikra* contains such detailed instructions and regulations. Powerful inclinations for connection can sometimes turn from healthy to harmful. Guidelines and safeguards exist to protect us as well as others, and to allow us to flourish and grow in healthy ways within these frameworks.

And so we begin educating children with these laws, teaching them from an early age that all the good in the world, all of the most beautiful relationships, all of our greatest leaders – all of these must operate within a set of structures. No one is above the law. The Torah models a communal religious way of life that centers on transparency and accountability

CONTEMPORARY VAYIKRAS

Our contemporary *Vayikras* are sets of guidelines and protocols for the protection of the welfare of every member of the community. We can't imagine and build healthy communities without having conversations about—and constructing guidelines that create—cultures of transparency, clarity, safety, boundaries, and accountability.

Too often, institutions in the Jewish community have found themselves on the wrong side when issues of abuse of power arise: covering up abuse, protecting those who abuse, and ostracizing those who have been harmed. Too often, when individuals who were harmed turned to religious leaders in our institutions, there was no clear system to address complaints, no direct communication about the actions that would be taken, no cooperation with or reports made to police. Too often, nothing at all was done. Even when the initial abuse is not entirely preventable, continued and prolonged cover-ups and the maltreatment of victims and whistleblowers always are. Jewish communities must follow the Torah's model of religious transparency laid out in *Vayikra*; regardless of position, authority, or relationship, all parties must be held accountable to (and protected by) agreed-upon, transparent standards.

Vayikra calls upon every communal institution to meticulously apply best practices of abuse prevention in the context of its organizational culture, to consider these at the core of its mission, and to develop protocols to protect the sanctity of the institution. These priorities guide our institutions and help each of us to model safe behavior and foster nurturing, healthy interactions. Though we don't typically think of policies as fostering relationships, the *Vayikra* model teaches that only when we begin with clear, well-communicated, accessible policies can healthy intimacy and relationships flourish.

Consider a rabbi in a congregation who finds themselves uncomfortable in the presence of a 9-year old child who routinely hugs the rabbi tightly for a full minute every time they meet. The rabbi might feel warmly towards the child, and also worry about whether this hug is appropriate. Is it modeling safe behavior? Dialogue and guidelines about interacting with children, including how and when to provide nurturing, healthy touch can help clarify things for the rabbi, and lead to greater support and warmth for the child.

Beyond articulating communal norms and serving as guides for modeling individual behavior, policies also function as the perimeter of our institutions, identifying immediately when a line has been crossed. Though they cannot prevent all harm, policies allow us to act proactively at an early stage, before we are confronted with a full-blown crisis. They ensure that we can intervene responsibly and sensitively in complex situations, in a manner that is communicated, understood, and expected by the entire organization.

RETURNING TO THE QUESTION WITH WHICH WE STARTED:

WHERE DOES THE TORAH BEGIN?

The Torah of vibrant, healthy, safe 21st-century Jewish communities begins with Parshat *Vayikra*, and with the wider biblical book of *Vayikra* that models communal values in its minutia, its etiquette, and its very inclusion in the Torah. This is why *Vayikra* is arguably the most important book of the Torah, the introduction for centuries of school children to the treasures of Torah education.

May we merit the building of communities that embody the ideals of *Vayikra*, and may the policy work undertaken by our institutions guide us as we continue our quest at the heart of the *korbanot*—to be *karov*, close, to God, to Torah, and to each other.

This piece is part of the Respect & Responsibility: A Jewish Ethics Study Guide that is a joint project of Sacred Spaces and the Center for Jewish Ethics. Learn more at www.jewishsacredspaces.org.