

Traditional Torah Readings Reconsidered Session 3: Creative Reclamation of Leviticus 16

Creative Reclamation of Leviticus 16: Introduction

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I suggested this topic, both because of my own work on how liberal Jews can make sense out of text related to sacrifice in Temple, and also out of my own experience of reintroducing Leviticus 16 in my congregation for the morning reading of Yom Kippur. The replacement of another Torah reading for traditional reading of Leviticus 16 reflects, of course, a larger ambivalence of how we should relate to text about sacrifice. And while it may be obvious that prayers for restoring the sacrificial system would be problematic in a Reform context, it does not necessarily follow that references to the Temple and to the sacrificial system as history and memory have no place in the Reform synagogue. And so as we look at Leviticus 16 this afternoon, lurking in the background of our discussions are questions about other references to sacrifice. The big questions for which Leviticus 16 is one site are things like: Might

How do you relate to text about sacrifice?

there be ways of referencing the sacrificial system that could be useful for us in terms of providing a historical context and in presenting the origins for the religious life we now practice? And I use the term “ambivalence” to describe our relationship with the sacrificial system quite deliberately, rather than use the word “opposition” or “rejection.” There are inescapable allusions to sacrifice in our daily religious life and numerous practices that only make sense in light of their sacrificial origins, one example being the very notion of morning and afternoon prayer. Might we need to creatively retrieve text about sacrifice in order to more fully develop a narrative in which prayer is understood as a substitute for and an evolution from sacrifices, in which our study is seen as a worthy substitute for sacrifice, in which *tzedakah* is seen as a form of sacrifice, etc. So, it would seem to me that with Yom Kippur as the sacrificial ritual par excellence, described in Leviticus 16, we have an opportunity to connect our contemporary observance of Yom Kippur with its historical origins. And it seems to me that much of this language of Yom Kippur, in terms of reference, concepts, and vocabulary, that could lend itself so easily to metaphor and poetry has been lost in our Reform communities by separating ourselves so decisively from the story of the *Kohein Gadol* and the *se’ir laAzazel*, as described in Leviticus 16. The questions that I’ve been thinking about are: How might Leviticus 16 facilitate a reinsertion of ourselves into the mythical historical narrative of the Jewish people? How might the national and communal *kaparah* experience as described in Leviticus 16 serve as a counterweight to the more personalized and individualistic work of *t’shuva*? And in thinking about Jacob Milgrom’s work on the Book of Leviticus, we might ask ourselves:

Jacob Milgrom,
*Leviticus: A Book
of Ritual and Ethics*
(Minneapolis:
Fortress Press, 2004).

How would Leviticus 16 present us with new ways of speaking or old/new ways of speaking about how our actions have the power of either allowing God to continue to dwell among us or the power to drive God away? The questions that anchor our conversation today are: What might be gained by reclaiming Leviticus 16 in the Reform synagogue? And how might we go about reclaiming it?

How would you respond to the questions posed by the presenter before reading ahead? Then compare your answers with those suggested by the following presenters.