

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayikrah/Shabbat Zachor
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Vayikrah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1480/jewish/Vayikra-in-a-Nutshell.htm

G-d calls to Moses from the Tent of Meeting, and communicates to him the laws of the korbanot, the animal and meal offerings brought in the Sanctuary. These include:

- The “ascending offering” (olah) that is wholly raised to G-d by the fire atop the altar;
- Five varieties of “meal offering” (minchah) prepared with fine flour, olive oil and frankincense;
- The “peace offering” (shelamim), whose meat was eaten by the one bringing the offering, after parts are burned on the altar and parts are given to the kohanim (priests);
- The different types of “sin offering” (chatat) brought to atone for transgressions committed erroneously by the high priest, the entire community, the king or the ordinary Jew;
- The “guilt offering” (asham) brought by one who has misappropriated property of the Sanctuary, who is in doubt as to whether he transgressed a divine prohibition, or who has committed a “betrayal against G-d” by swearing falsely to defraud a fellow man.

Zachor in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/73232/jewish/Zachor-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This being the **Shabbat** before **Purim**, on which we celebrate the foiling of Haman the **Amalekite**’s plot to destroy **the Jewish people**, the weekly Parshah is supplemented with the “Zachor” reading (Deuteronomy 25:17–19) in which we are commanded to **remember** the evil of Amalek and to eradicate it from the face of the earth.

Remember what Amalek did to you on the road, on your way out of Egypt. That he encountered you on the way and cut off those lagging to your rear, when you were tired and exhausted; he did not fear G-d. And it shall come to pass, when the L-rd your G-d has given you rest from all your enemies round about, in the land which the L-rd your G-d is giving you for an inheritance to possess it, that you shall obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Do not forget.

Food For Thought

Why Do We Sacrifice? By The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayikra/why-do-we-sacrifice/>

The laws of sacrifices that dominate the early chapters of the Book of Leviticus are among the hardest in the Torah to relate to in the present. It has been almost two thousand years since the Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system came to an end. But Jewish thinkers, especially the more mystical among them, strove to understand the inner significance of the sacrifices and the statement they made about the relationship between humanity and God. They were thus able to rescue their spirit even if their physical enactment was no longer possible. Among the simplest yet most profound was the comment made by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Rebbe of Lubavitch. He noticed a grammatical oddity about the second line of this parsha:

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: “When one of you offers a sacrifice to the Lord, the sacrifice must be taken from the cattle, sheep, or goats.”

Lev. 1:2

Or so the verse would read if it were constructed according to the normal rules of grammar. However, the word order of the sentence in Hebrew is strange and unexpected. We would expect to read: *adam mikem ki yakriv*, “when one of you offers a sacrifice.” Instead, what it says is *adam ki yakriv mikem*, “when one offers a sacrifice of you.”

The essence of sacrifice, said Rabbi Shneur Zalman, is that we offer ourselves. We bring to God our faculties, our energies, our thoughts and emotions. The physical form of sacrifice – an animal offered on the altar – is only an external manifestation of an inner act. The real sacrifice is *mikem*, “of you.” We give God something of ourselves.[1]

What exactly is it that we give God when we offer a sacrifice? The Jewish mystics, among them Rabbi Shneur Zalman, spoke about two souls that each of us has within us – the animal soul (*nefesh habeheimit*) and the Godly soul. On the one hand we are physical beings. We are part of nature. We have physical needs: food, drink, shelter. We are born, we live, we die. As Ecclesiastes puts it:

Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: as one dies, so dies the other. Both have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is a mere fleeting breath.

Ecccl. 3:19

Yet we are not simply animals. We have within us immortal longings. We can think, speak, and communicate. We can, by acts of speaking and listening, reach out to

others. We are the one life-form known to us in the universe that can ask the question “why?” We can formulate ideas and be moved by high ideals. We are not governed by biological drives alone. [Psalm 8](#) is a hymn of wonder on this theme:

When I consider Your heavens,
the work of Your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which You have set in place,
what is man that You are mindful of him,
the son of man that You care for him?
Yet You made him a little lower than the angels
and crowned him with glory and honour.
You made him ruler over the works of Your hands;
You put everything under his feet.
Ps. 8:4–7

Physically, we are almost nothing; spiritually, we are brushed by the wings of eternity. We have a Godly soul. The nature of sacrifice, understood psychologically, is thus clear. What we offer God is (not just an animal but) the nefesh habeheimit, the animal soul within us.

How does this work out in detail? A hint is given by the three types of animal mentioned in the verse in the second line of parshat Vayikra (see [Lev. 1:2](#)): beheimah (animal), bakar (cattle), and tzon (flock). Each represents a separate animal-like feature of the human personality.

Beheimah represents the animal instinct itself. The word refers to domesticated animals. It does not imply the savage instincts of the predator. What it means is something more tame. Animals spend their time searching for food. Their lives are bounded by the struggle to survive. To sacrifice the animal within us is to be moved by something more than mere survival.

Wittgenstein, when asked what was the task of philosophy, answered, “To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.”^[2] The fly, trapped in the bottle, bangs its head against the glass, trying to find a way out. The one thing it fails to do is to look up. The Godly soul within us is the force that makes us look up, beyond the physical world, beyond mere survival, in search of meaning, purpose, goal.

The Hebrew word bakar, cattle, reminds us of the word boker, dawn, literally to “break through,” as the first rays of sunlight break through the darkness of night. Cattle, stampeding, break through barriers. Unless constrained by fences, cattle are no respecters of boundaries. To sacrifice the bakar is to learn to recognise and respect boundaries – between holy and profane, pure and impure, permitted and forbidden. Barriers of the mind can sometimes be stronger than walls.

Finally, the word tzon, flocks, represents the herd instinct – the powerful drive to move in a given direction because others are doing likewise.^[3] The great figures

of Judaism – Abraham, Moses, the Prophets – were distinguished precisely by their ability to stand apart from the herd; to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, to refuse to capitulate to the intellectual fashions of the moment. That, ultimately, is the meaning of holiness in Judaism. Kadosh, the holy, is something set apart, different, separate, distinctive. Jews were the only minority in history consistently to refuse to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith.

The noun korban, “sacrifice,” and the verb lehakriv, “to offer something as a sacrifice,” actually mean “that which is brought close” and “the act of bringing close.” The key element is not so much giving something up (the usual meaning of sacrifice), but rather bringing something close to God. Lehakriv is to bring the animal element within us to be transformed through the Divine fire that once burned on the altar, and still burns at the heart of prayer if we truly seek closeness to God.

By one of the ironies of history, this ancient idea has become suddenly contemporary. Darwinism, the decoding of the human genome, and scientific materialism (the idea that the material is all there is) have led to the widespread conclusion that we are all animals, nothing more, nothing less. We share 98 per cent of our genes with the primates. We are, as Desmond Morris used to put it, “the naked ape.”^[4] On this view, Homo sapiens exists by mere accident. We are the result of a random series of genetic mutations and just happened to be more adapted to survival than other species. The nefesh habeheimah, the animal soul, is all there is.

The refutation of this idea – and it is surely among the most reductive ever to be held by intelligent minds – lies in the very act of sacrifice itself as the mystics understood it. We can redirect our animal instincts. We can rise above mere survival. We are capable of honouring boundaries. We can step outside our environment. As Harvard neuroscientist Steven Pinker put it: *“Nature does not dictate what we should accept or how we should live,”* adding, *“and if my genes don’t like it they can go jump in the lake.”*^[5] Or, as Katharine Hepburn majestically said to Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*, *“Nature, Mr Allnut, is what we were put on earth to rise above.”*

We can transcend the beheimah, the bakar, and the tzon. No animal is capable of self-transformation, but we are. Poetry, music, love, wonder – the things that have no survival value but which speak to our deepest sense of being – all tell us that we are not mere animals, assemblages of selfish genes. *By bringing that which is animal within us close to God, we allow the material to be suffused with the spiritual and we become something else: no longer slaves of nature but servants of the living God.* [1] Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutei Torah* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1984), *Vayikra 2aff.* [2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 309. [3] The classic works on crowd behaviour and the herd instinct are

Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (London: Richard Bentley, 1841); Gustave le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1897); Wilfred Trotter, *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1916); and Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Viking Press, 1962). [4] Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1984). [5] Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 54.

“Calling In”: Relationship When We Don't Expect It by Rabbi Aviva Richman

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-collection/aviva-richmans-divrei-torah>

The first verse in Vayikra seems mundane and predictable; God speaks to Moshe in the mishkan (tabernacle), as God does throughout much of the Torah. Yet, as we saw in Parashat Pekudei, Moshe did not expect this call.¹ The call of Vayikra is an unexpected gesture of intimacy. Through this lens, the whole book of Vayikra represents an invitation into relationship across apparent obstacles and boundaries. Vayikra asks of us: what are the ways in which we feel distant from God or others? What does it mean to hear a call beckoning us close in those very moments of distance?

In Parashat Pekudei, we explored a parable where Moshe was like a servant who built a palace at the king's request, and expected to remain outside. We probed how it could possibly be that Moshe didn't expect to go inside the mishkan. In Vayikra, we will linger on the moment of the “call” and the significance of this unexpected invitation inside.

Vayikra Rabbah 1:7

So too, at the time the Holy Blessed One said to Moshe, “Make Me a dwelling-place,”

on everything that he made he would write, “Just as God commanded Moshe.”

The Holy Blessed One said, “All of this honor Moshe has made for me and I am inside and he is outside?!”

He called him that he should enter inside.

Therefore it says, “and [God] called to Moshe.”

The “call” to Moshe allows him to cross a boundary, just as the servant crosses a boundary into the palace he had no rights to be in. Like the servant, Moshe leaves behind an aspect of hierarchical distance in his relationship with God, forging a closer connection as an insider in God's home. God's call was an invitation into a new and unimagined stage in the intimacy of their relationship.

The formative nature of this call becomes all the more powerful when we see in another midrash that Moshe would relive this moment of beckoning again and again.² Through careful midrashic derivation, the Sifra concludes that God called

“Moshe, Moshe” not just here but before each and every time God spoke to him.³

One might think that this proliferation of “calling” cheapens its impact. The first call was unexpected, but after the third, or tenth or fiftieth time wouldn't it become trivial? We can understand the significance of these many calls when we have our parable in mind. Perhaps between God's speech acts Moshe's anxiety or self-doubt resurfaced; he might have continually wondered whether he belonged in this relationship with God.⁴ Every time Moshe heard God calling his name, he relives the experience of that first unexpected call into the mishkan. Vayikra is a persistent invitation that reminds Moshe again and again that God wants to be close with him.

Indeed, the midrash goes on to define God's call of “**Moshe, Moshe**” as an expression of love. The proliferation of God's loving calls to Moshe becomes a literary parallel to the servant-architect who inscribed the king's name everywhere, and the Torah's refrain, “**Just like God commanded Moshe,**” for each part of the mishkan. We might have understood this as a demonstration of obedience, but now it carries the valence of love—or even infatuation. Moshe invoked God's name repeatedly in setting up the mishkan as he longed to be back in relationship. God calls Moshe's name again and again, as a repeated expression of a desire to be close.

This reading of Vayikra evokes the way a parent recites their child's name obsessively, or the thrill of speaking your lover's name, or hearing a lover speak your name. Vayikra holds the sense of intimacy that comes with knowing that another person consistently wants to be close to you, to grow with you. The continued “naming” by the other bears witness to an evolving self; each time the name is articulated, it is with new knowledge of who this person is and what it means to love them.

Another part of the Sifra passage relates to this kind of evolving identity:

Sifra Dibbura de-Nedavah chapter 1, paragraph 12

Another explanation, “Moshe, Moshe”—he was Moshe before God spoke with him, and he was Moshe after God spoke with him.

This cryptic interpretation speaks to both the deepening and stability of Moshe's identity as God spoke with him regularly. Being open to deep relationship, with God or with another person, can be a daunting proposition. The kind of vulnerability it requires—and possibility for self-reflection and change—demands a degree of courage, risk, and stamina to face what could be a disorienting experience. This midrash reassures us that Moshe's intimate encounters with God did not overwhelm his sense of self. Moshe evolves more into becoming Moshe by virtue of this relationship.

The experience of this kind of loving intensity in relationship with God doesn't end with Moshe. Rashi draws on these midrash traditions when introducing Sefer Vayikra so that the sense of God's love frames our own encounter with this new book of the Torah. In fact, Rashi generally highlights God's love in his comments at

the beginning of each book of the Torah, recreating for us the midrashic reality Moshe experienced.⁵ Each time we open up the Torah to read God's words—at the beginning of every “divine utterance”—the words themselves must be embedded in this loving relational stance. We can only encounter words of Torah if we can hear God calling our own names first. And, we will hopefully come to know the potential of our names and selves more deeply by virtue of this call into Torah. The book of Vayikra beckons us into the deepest of relationships. Its many details, when framed within the valence of love, offer pathways to navigate the complexities of intimacy, whether on a divine or interpersonal level. What we learn from the parable of the servant-architect who never expected to be invited inside is that the possibility for intimacy can traverse what we perceive as impenetrable boundaries and obstacles. A relationship of kedushah (sanctity) integrates those parts of life that might feel most overwhelming or isolating; our experiences of gratitude, guilt, sexuality, birth, death, illness all become catalysts to step deeper into relationship with God and others, and to strengthen our ever evolving sense of self.

Shabbat Shalom.

¹ See my essay on Parashat Pekudei, “Shifting Expectations,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/shifting-expectations>. ² I realize that this reading anachronistically reads the message of Vayikra Rabbah (compiled in the late 4th-early 5th centuries CE) onto the much earlier Sifra (compiled in the 3rd century CE). This is meant as an exercise in our own creative interpretation, and not meant as a reading of the plain sense of this Sifra passage. ³ Sifra Dibbura de-Nedavah chapter 1, paragraphs 6-7: “... ומנין לכל הדברות שבתורה ת”ל מאהל מועד כל שהוא מאהל מועד נקדים בו קריאה לדיבור. (ז) יכול לא היתה הקריאה אלא... / ...לדברות בלבד ומנין אף לאמירות ולצויו, אמר רבי שמעון תלמוד לומר דבר וידבר לרבות אף לאמירות ולצוין... How do we know there was a summons for every speech in the Torah? The verse teaches, “From the tent of meeting”—in all cases from the tent of meeting, a summons preceded the speech act... How do we know it was also for statements and commands? Rabbi Shimon said: The verse teaches “Speak, And He spoke”—to include statements and commands... ⁴ This is certainly how he felt at the beginning of his journey, at the burning bush (see Exodus 3-4). ⁵ This is most prominent in Shemot (תָּזַר), Vayikra (see above), and Bemidbar (מִתּוֹךְ חֲבֵתֶן לְפָנָיו מוֹנֶה אוֹתָם כָּל), (וּמִנְאֵם בְּמִיתָתָם, לְהוֹדִיעַ חֲבֵתָם שָׁעָה). In Devarim, Rashi doesn't invoke the word “love” specifically in the very beginning, but emphasizes God's respect for Israel even in the context of rebuke (לְפִי שֶׁהוּא דֹבֵר יְתֵר וּמְנִיחַ כָּאֵן), (כָּל הַמְּקוֹמוֹת שֶׁהִכְעִיסוּ לְפָנָיו הַמְּקוֹם בְּהוֹן, לְפִיכָּה סָתַם אֶת הַדְּבָרִים וְהִזְכִּירָם בְּרִמְזָא מִפְּנֵי כְבוֹדוֹ שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל). Note also that Rashi's comment on זהב ודי refers to a passage of Talmud that stresses Israel's innocence and blames God for their sin (Berakhot 32a). Additionally, Rashi refers to חבה in Devarim 1:15. In Bereishit 1:1, Rashi refers to Israel as being God's “first” or “choice” people (ראשית)

⁶ He might even think that Aharon is taking his place in the mishkan. As noted by e.g. Yalkut Shimoni #515, Moshe acted as Kohen Gadol throughout the initiation ceremony (milu'im). At the end of this period, he consecrated his brother as the new Kohen Gadol, and he hesitated, which is signified by the long shalsholet note that shows up in this exact moment (Leviticus

8:23). After that hesitation, Moshe seems to have finally relinquished any lingering expectation that he might continue in some kind of priestly role after installing his brother and his nephews. When it comes to the mishkan, then, Moshe may assume that this is supposed to be completely Aharon's domain, despite the Torah's inclusion of him.

[When the Entire Community is Guilty by Rabbi Seth Goldstein](https://truah.org/resources/parshat-vayikra-seth-goldstein-moraltorah/)

<https://truah.org/resources/parshat-vayikra-seth-goldstein-moraltorah/>

Is it possible for an entire community — an entire nation — to sin?

In this week's Torah portion of Vayikra, we begin the book of Leviticus, which in its opening chapters describes the procedures for making sacrifices and offerings in the ancient Tabernacle. These can be understood as the ancient means of prayer, the means of communicating with the divine. For various reasons, both positive and negative, one may bring an offering of animals, birds, or grain to a priest, who will bring it to the altar.

One such reason for an offering is atonement for sin, and the Torah describes a number of instances in which such an offering is required. And while most offerings are done on behalf of individuals, there are times when an entire community is guilty:

If the entire community errs and the matter escapes the notice of the congregation, so that they do any of the things which by God's commandments ought not to be done, and they realize guilt— when the sin through which they incurred guilt becomes known, the congregation shall offer a bull of the herd as a sin offering, and bring it before the Tabernacle. The elders of the community shall lay their hands upon the head of the bull before God, and the bull shall be slaughtered before God. ([Leviticus 4:13-15](#))

For us, living in a country that prefers to point blame at the other side, or misguided leaders, or individual actors, the Torah brings a powerful corrective. No, the text says, *everyone* is to blame for society's ills. And while it is hard to imagine how an entire populace can engage in sinful acts, it is perhaps the "sins of omission" of which we are more often guilty. Turning away, neglecting our history, willfully not knowing what is happening — these can be considered sinful as well. Recently, the United States passed a painful anniversary. On February 17, 1942 — 80 years ago last month — President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which led to the forcible removal and internment of close to 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry in 10 different camps scattered around the inland western United States.

A few years ago, my family and I visited Minidoka, one of the camps located in Idaho, in a rural area about two hours east of Boise near the borders of Nevada and Utah. Many residents from the Pacific Northwest, where I now live, were

removed to Minidoka. It is now a national park and museum, and there we learned about the history of the internment, the difficult conditions of life at the camp, and the specific legacies of racism and xenophobia that led to the Executive Order and still persist today. And I am embarrassed to say I was learning most of this for the first time.

While exploring this site as a Jewish family, it was hard not to think about the connection to the Jewish experience and the attitude of fear and exclusion directed at Jews at the same period in history. The same government that ordered the internment of Japanese residents also turned away boats of Jewish refugees fleeing Europe. Indeed, the same act of legislation in 1924 that severely limited Jewish immigration also completely eliminated immigration from Asia.

It is the history of Jewish refugees that must inspire us as Jews to be aware of and advocate for issues affecting refugees to our country and around the world today. This past Shabbat was the HIAS-sponsored Refugee Shabbat, in which the Jewish community dedicated our sacred day of rest to learning about these issues. And part of that learning must be about our country's sins when it comes to engaging with refugees and immigrants, sins that include closed doors and compulsory relocation. It is my fervent belief that everyone should visit a Japanese internment camp.

And as we learn from Leviticus, for communal sin there *can* be expiation. The process begins not with bringing a bull to the sanctuary, but with a commitment to learn history, and a commitment to ensure that history is learned by others. It is in this way we can begin our atonement and can proclaim *nidoto nai yoni* — “let it never happen again.” (*Rabbi Seth Goldstein is a 2003 graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and rabbi of Temple Beth Hatfiloh in Olympia, WA.*)

[Shabbat Zachor: Where Do We Find Amalek Today? By Rabbi Prof David Frankel](https://schechter.edu/shabbat-zachor-where-do-we-find-amalek-today/)
<https://schechter.edu/shabbat-zachor-where-do-we-find-amalek-today/>

This year Parashat Vayikra comes out on Shabbat Zakhor. On Shabbat Zakhor we remember “et asher-asah lecha amalek” (Deuteronomy 25:17). We remember “that which Amalek did” as the Israelites came out of Egypt, how they attacked from behind those who were straggling, and those who were weak. They showed no fear of god.

The question I'd like to ask is why has this parsha, become such a central part of the Jewish tradition? It is a special mitzvah to always remember “that which happened to Amalek”. I would like to suggest that Amalek here is not just a one-time event. Amalek represents that which is evil, destructive, and reflects a lack of morality and a basic sense of decency. The fear and the danger that the Torah wants to warn against is that we may forget that this is humanity. That this is part of

humanity. We may think that we are somehow in a new era, that mankind has advanced, civilization has advanced, and so we can plan our world for a brighter future without worry. The Torah teaches us “zachor”, always remember because what happened with Amalek is paradigmatic of the human character and nature. The evil which is within humanity does not go away, we have to fight it in each generation, and therefore the Torah also says “Milchamah ladonai ba’amalek middor dor.” (Exodus 17:16) The fight against Amalek is a fight that is continuous. It never disappears. There are ups, there are downs, but we have to remember and strengthen our resolve against the evil in the world because the fight for a better society is a never-ending fight. And we must always build up that conviction and resolve remembering what humanity can do.

Shavua Tov from Schechter. (*David Frankel has served as a senior Bible lecturer at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies since 1992. He earned his PhD at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under the direction of Prof. Moshe Weinfeld.*)

[“Tis the Gift to Be Simple” by Gordon Tucker](http://www.jtsa.edu/torah/tis-the-gift-to-be-simple/)
<http://www.jtsa.edu/torah/tis-the-gift-to-be-simple/>

Parashat Vayikra inaugurates the book of Leviticus, the center(piece) of the Torah. Following immediately on the completion of the meticulously constructed Tabernacle (Mishkan) and its sumptuous appurtenances, it launches a set of instructions for how that sacred space was to function, and under whose authority. No wonder it was called in Rabbinic times “Torat Kohanim”—“the priests’ manual.” This week thus presents an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between that Mishkan—and all its successor institutions in Jewish life—and spiritual quests. One of the first things to note is that the lavish nature of the Mishkan is not the only image the Torah knows of Israelite worship sites. The Mishkan’s Ark of the Covenant was richly overlaid with gold, with a solid gold covering that featured golden cherubim. Yet Deuteronomy, in its account of Moses replacing the shattered first Tablets, has God say simply and tersely, “make an ark of wood.” Though Deuteronomy does refer repeatedly to an exclusive place of worship that God will choose, no richly finished and furnished Temple is described. Moreover, the account of the Mishkan at the end of Exodus made much of the fact that it would be sanctified by the “Kavod”—God’s palpable Presence. But Deuteronomy pointedly calls the chosen site of worship “the place where God’s Name will dwell.” The late biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky dubbed this the “relay station”; i.e., God’s Name is invoked there, and the offerings and prayers are conveyed from there to the God of Heaven.

We previously encountered this preference for the simple in the earlier chapters of Exodus. Consider what was said there about a proper altar:

Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your

sacrifices of wellbeing. . . . And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones, for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them.

Exod. 20:21–22

In this alternate vision, the altar is not to be created by skilled artisans and overlaid with polished bronze. Rather, it is to be simple earth. And if you are in a rocky place? Well then, a stone altar is OK, provided it is not worked with a tool. Otherwise, the tool will render it profane. Note well: the finishing tool is a desacralizer.

Solomon's opulent Temple in a later time stands quite clearly in contrast to such ideal visions. But even that Temple, with its finished magnificence and rich trappings, still paid homage to the ancient concern about the intrusion of technology by insisting that if the stones were to be dressed, that had to be done out of sight and out of earshot of the place of worship itself: when the House was built, only finished stones cut at the quarry were used, so that no hammer or ax or any iron tool was heard in the House while it was being built (1 Kings 6:7).

Thus there is an old tradition of simplicity that opposes the grandiosity of the Mishkan, but what was the idea behind it? Consider a terse comment by Abraham ibn Ezra: there should be only complete stones, just as they were created (Short Commentary on Exodus 20:22). That phrase—"just as they were created"—is an essential gloss. It is as if attempting to worship God by means of something created by our wisdom is somehow to miss the entire point. The more ancient commentary on Exodus known as the Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai nicely captures what this is all about:

"Do not build it of hewn stones." . . . from where are they to be brought? From virginal land: one digs until a place is reached in which it is clear that there has been neither work nor building there, and the stones in that place are then removed.

In 2003, I met a fascinating archaeologist named Uzi Avner, who had studied desert culture extensively. One of the things he repeatedly encountered was that ancient worship sites in the wilderness almost always featured uncut, rough, natural matzevot (pillars) to represent the divine:

Crude stone, shaped by nature, or God, not by man, is sacred and appropriate for cult purposes. . . . [this opposition to human technology in worship] was shared by the prehistoric desert religions, by the Israelites, the Nabataeans, and Islam, all with desert roots.

"Sacred Stones in the Desert," Biblical Archeology Review, 2001

The view that the elaborate Mishkan was not the ideal had additional roots in rabbinic literature. Abraham Joshua Heschel noted Rabbi Yishmael's disagreement with the view that the Mishkan was part of God's plan from the start: *Rabbi Ishmael . . . understood that the command to build the Tabernacle . . . was not given until after the Israelites created the golden calf. What forced Rabbi*

Ishmael to postdate the building of the Tabernacle? It must be a reflection of the conviction that this command did not enter the divine mind until Israel sinned . . . when it was clear that they were prone to idolatry, the command was given to build a Tabernacle and to bring sacrificial animals to the officiating priests.

(Heavenly Torah, 76)

In this view, the Mishkan, and a fortiori the more fixed and formalized Temple, is not about bringing us close but, on the contrary, is institutionalized distance. Keeping the people, who were prone to idolatrous attachment to their own artifices, safely away from the seat of worship, lest they mistake what they have erected and created for the essence of religion.

Remarkably, Leonard Cohen seemed to have intuited this very idea in his song “Lover Come Back To Me.” Here are the relevant stanzas:

I asked my father, I said, “Father change my name.”

*The one I’m using now it’s covered up
with fear and filth and cowardice and shame.*

*“Let me start again,” I cried, “please let me start again,
I want a face that’s fair this time,
I want a spirit that is calm.”*

“I never never turned aside,” He said, “I never walked away.

*It was **you** who built the temple,
it was **you** who covered up My face.”*

Building Temples runs the risk of obscuring God’s face. We may of necessity build institutions that are essential to provide a locus for our religious needs. But we should never lose sight of the fact that they will always have the potential of distancing us, rather than drawing us close, if we cannot retain the simplicity that undergirds the life of the spirit.

This is not an argument against technology and human artifice per se. But when you think about it, religious reforms usually bring with them returns to greater simplicity. It is not only true of the Shakers, who sang of the “gift to be simple, the gift to be free.” We ourselves have a clear strain within our tradition of a preference for the simple as a precondition for true worship. Or at least we can say this: we have long recognized that an imbalance toward what human technology creates, even when yielding blessing—and certainly an idolization of what human ingenuity has produced—will ultimately distance us from God.

There may not only be environmental wisdom in greater simplicity. There may also be great spiritual depth, and opportunity for encountering God, in some human and

humane simplicity as well. (*Gordon Tucker is Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement at JTS*)

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### Yahrtzeits

Karen Brandis remembers her father Stanley Grossel on Thurs Mar. 17(Adar II 14)