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Today we start the annual reading of Leviticus, a moment eagerly anticipated by...perhaps no one. Leviticus is the shortest book of the Bible, but does not feel that way. For a number of years, Fabbrangon discussed alternative English readings during the weeks when Leviticus was leyned. Maybe we'll do that again some year.

But as with the rest of the Torah, the more you engage with Leviticus, the more you discover matters of interest and import. I'd never done a d'rash on this parsha before, so I hadn't realized how much it can offer beyond anthropological evidence.

Leviticus raises questions that will likely always be with us – about the need for ritual, and how to structure it and imbue it with meaning; about what causes feelings of guilt (and what should cause such feelings), and about when and how to expiate that sense of guilt; about how to deal with errors that are inadvertent yet nonetheless damaging to the community.

Through its approach to life and community, Leviticus also makes clear what's needed to create a functioning society. First, there has to be an overall “theory of the case,” an organizing principle, a bedrock set of values and goals. In Leviticus, those values are a striving for holiness and an allegiance to G_d; in our country, they may be a commitment to democracy and some vision of equality. Next, there have to be rules and procedures to inculcate those values, and to operationalize them – to bring them into everyday life and maintain them and pass them on to later generations. And last, there needs to be enforcement – punishment and rituals to deal with the unavoidable violation of what has been put in place.

But what can be done when this system is under threat or stress? That's what I want to focus on today. Robert Alter, in his introduction to his translation of Leviticus, notes that the Torah likely came together in something like its current form after the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians. Therefore, he suggests, the specificity of the rituals laid out in Leviticus may be an effort to preserve the rituals – and the values they represented – at a time when the actions of a hostile regime made it impossible to carry them out in reality. In that sense, the Book of Leviticus is an act of imagination, of memory, of tenacity...and of resistance. And in preserving the rituals, Leviticus is not just codifying arcane, antique rituals, it's passing on all the values and attitudes that lay behind them.

I usually refrain from explicit talk about current politics in my d'rashes, but this notion of Leviticus as resistance really struck me now. It seemed of a piece with all the current efforts to preserve our traditional laws, attitudes, principles, customs and taboos at a time when our leadership seems dedicated to destroying them. How do we conserve the past in a way that lets us reform and rebuild? I'll actually be at a meeting in California this week that is discussing such questions as they pertain to science policy.

This interpretation of Leviticus also resonated with me because of a line in the parsha itself (4:13): “And if all the community of Israel should err, and the thing be hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they do one of all the Lord’s commands that should not be done, and they bear guilt, and the offense that they committed becomes known,” here’s what they should sacrifice. In other words, there’s a ritual if the entire community violates one of the Lord’s commandments inadvertently. Alter notes that this could occur, “if, for example, the high priest [i.e., their leader] misguided them.”

In traditional Jewish instruction, Leviticus was the first book of the Bible to which children were introduced – odd or misguided as that may seem to us. But maybe that actually makes sense if Leviticus is an effort to ensure that the law and traditional rituals – and all that lies behind and under them – is not lost. That’s a desire that many of us can relate to now, when we may feel like exiles in our own land, the Capitol desecrated.

So I’ll open it up to discussion about how you make sense of Leviticus, and how it may offer guidance in our current predicament.