

Drash Notes – Mark Perlis
March 28 - Tzav
[Leviticus 6:1-8:36](#)

1. A note in Etz Chayim states that the burden of the Book of Leviticus was how the people Israel were to live as a holy nation. One strand is the primacy of justice and compassion for each other and another strand is demonstrating loyalty to the Lord. I would like to approach the parsha this morning through the lens of loyalty. If Israel was to become a holy nation, it meant that individuals had to demonstrate through their own behavior and their expectations of each other loyalty to the governing ideals. And the institutions and leaders of the formative nation had to reciprocate by rewarding loyalty and punishing disloyalty to the central ideals of holiness.
2. A nation might begin to emerge from individuals who shared a common history – the Exodus from Egypt – but for a nation to cohere and to last required adherence to a shared set of ideals. Those ideals in the Tanach comprise both laws for individual behavior and of holiness. The belief in the divine and the people’s adherence to God’s holiness in all its manifestations was an essential element of achieving that cohesion necessary to establish a long lasting nation.
3. The concept of divinity or holiness might begin with the First Commandment: You shall have no other Gods but me. And the Second Commandment: you shall make no graven images to which you would bow down. Absolute loyalty was expected and demanded to these principles, as a precursor and prerequisite for establishing the laws of individual behavior which followed.
4. At the same time, nascent national institutions begin to be formed beginning with respect for the Third Commandment: Do not take the Lord your God’s Name in vain. What does this mean if not that reverence and loyalty is owed. And in Leviticus that reverence is imparted to the people Israel through the establishment of the rituals that pervaded the people’s communications with the divine, in the Tabernacle, the place of holiness.
5. Central among the rituals of reverence and holiness were the sacrifices made in the Temple to the Lord. Yes, to a modern mind these sacrifices seem an anachronistic if not barbaric means of demonstrating reverence to the holiness of the divine and to establishing loyalty to the creed of the merging nation. But I suggest that the sacrifices were the means available at hand for the people and their leaders (Moses, Aaron and the high priests) to acknowledge and communicate to the people that the nation Israel would be founded on loyalty to the principles of God’s holiness.
6. In ancient societies, sacrifices may have served as a metaphor for providing food, sustenance and strength to their gods who would protect the people. But our Torah, while retaining idioms of sacrifice common to pagan societies, God saw our sacrifices not as a means of sustenance but a means of attracting and, indeed, commanding the devotion and loyalty of a people to a shared set of ideals that would become the eternal glue of the Israelite nation.
7. Passages in last week’s and today’s parsha reinforce this notion of reverence and loyalty to the divine and the reciprocity that was being promised for building a durable nation. The offerings were to be without blemish and only choice grains; the sacrificial burning was to be of a pleasing odor to the Lord; the grain offerings set aside for Aaron and the high priests were to be “a holy portion from the Lord’s gifts.” A perpetual fire was to be kept kindled for the Lord. And

on and on, what appear to us today as archaic rites, with formalistic rules, conferred a path for showing reverence to the holiness of the Lord. Communicating and demonstrating that relationship for all to see and doing so within institutionalized structures, like the sacrificial system overseen by a caste of high priests, provided a glue for the emerging nation.

8. I believe the centrality of loyalty and reverence for holiness holds lessons for us today, on this day of No Kings. Our nation, founded as a democratic republic – of the people by the people and for the people – has persevered for 250 years because of a similar type of cohesiveness of loyalty to shared ideals and reverence for holiness, in a secular sense. That reverence is directed to the rule of law and the supremacy of the Constitution to which all of our officeholders pledge fealty. Our cohesiveness does not inhere in a shared history of where we were born, but in a commitment to our democratic ideals by newcomers and citizens of many generations standing.

9. What pains us all today is that the cohesiveness of our democratic creed has fractured and we feel that our leaders and many of our fellow citizens have abandoned and repudiated reverence to our ideals and our cherished institutions. They act above the law, or like a King that makes his own law. We must somehow as a nation restore reverence for what has made our democratic nation holy, in a secular sense. Reverence for the intricate checks and balances of our governmental institutions and for our fundamental ideals of liberty and justice for all.

10. The floor is open for discussion.