

CONNECTING THROUGH THE LAWS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parsha marks another new beginning in our public reading and personal understanding of the Torah. Whereas the first two books of the Torah are mainly narrative in nature and content, the book of Vayikra is mainly a book of laws and commandments and of the nature of purity and impurity, sacrificial offerings and priestly obligations.

Vayikra not only offers us a change of content, it offers a change of tone. It is less personal than were Bereshith and Shemot and it concentrates on the halachic and detailed aspects of Judaism rather than on the broad scope of Jewish national experience. In this way the Torah teaches us that Judaism is an all-encompassing faith, both public and private in nature and observance, general and particular all at one and the same time.

This becomes a large order for the Jewish people to handle and balance properly. We see throughout the works of the prophets of Israel that the people and the priests themselves unduly emphasized the public nature of the commandments. They also emphasized the sacrificial nature of the service of the Temple at the expense of the private and social commandments of the Torah.

We see the strong condemnation in the prophetic words of Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu, of reliance on the Temple public worship, of the sacrifices and altar-offerings of Israel and the priests, as an assurance of Godly favor and national salvation. The absence of the private nature of Torah service, without the observance of the detailed personal commandments and the emotional connection to God and sensitivity to others that only the private side of Judaism can convey, led to the destruction of the Temples - no matter how grand and generous the public offerings of the Temples were.

When the Jewish people were forced into their long exile, when public Temple services were no longer possible, much of the contents of the book of Vayikra apparently were no longer particularly relevant to daily Jewish life. Our faith and our national preservation then lay almost exclusively in observance of the private commandments of the Torah and in the study of Torah itself.

Without a land of our own and with no central temporal power base, Jews turned inward to connect with their past and their Creator. The entire nature of defining purity and impurity atrophied in Jewish life and education, and the Temples and their glory became a distant point in a clouded memory of Jewish nationhood.

The public nature of the Book of Vayikra faded into being only historical recall. This was due to the length and bitterness of the millennia-long exile. But the Jewish people in our time has miraculously

rebuilt itself and regained a national power and its ancient homeland. The debate over the relevance of the book of Vayikra has returned to the fore.

The Temple has become a living force once more in Jewish life and scholarship - especially in certain yeshivot devoted to the study of its laws and commandments. This is happening even though practically there is, as of yet, no physical Temple existing on Mount Moriah. Nevertheless, the book of Vayikra now speaks to us in a way that it has not done for many centuries. Let us concentrate on understanding its contents and absorbing its tone into our inner selves.

Shabat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com