

Parshat HaShavua for Vayikra Rabbi Dan Liben

When my son Micah was about a year and a half old, I came home one day to find that he had written with crayon on the living room wall. He wasn't speaking in sentences yet, but I could tell that he was really upset. He dragged me over to the scene of the crime and pointed to it urgently, again and again, fearful that the deed could not be undone, or perhaps, and more ominously, that his newly-discovered feeling of shame might be permanent. As much as we hugged, him, smiled at him, and assured him that it was really ok, and that we understood that he wouldn't write on the walls again, he continued to point towards his illicit artwork, feeling the need to confess his crime.

I've never seen a collection of Bible stories for children make reference to any material in the book of Vayikra (Leviticus). Yet, I think I understand why the Rabbis teach that this is the first book with which parents and teachers should introduce the Torah to small children. At first glance, it's counter intuitive. Why not start at the beginning, with Bereshit? That's where we find the creation of the world, the moral-filled tales of Eden, Babel and the flood, and the drama of the patriarchal narratives. In short, Bible stories. But the rabbis overlook all that, and Exodus's drama of slavery and covenant as well, and turn instead to Vayikra : "Children are pure; let them study laws of purity (Midrash Vayikra Rabbah.)"

As we grow out of childhood, we learn to bury our sense of shame. We no longer want to point out to others that we have drawn with crayon on the wall. We learn to justify, to rationalize, to ignore. Sometimes we clean up our mess and make amends, sometimes not; but we move on. It is an important survival strategy.

Vayikra reminds us, however, that missteps, both intentional and unintentional are inevitable, and that the need to set things right- in our hearts, between us and those whom we have hurt, and with God- never really goes away. Nor should it.

There is almost no narrative in this book. It begins with a detailed list of animal sacrifices and grain offerings that our ancestors would bring to the Temple in a variety of circumstance: to acknowledge our sense of well-being and thanksgiving, to express our desire to feel close to our Creator, and to ask forgiveness for the mistakes we made unintentionally, and the sins we committed intentionally. In the latter case, sacrifices were brought only after some practical act of restitution had been carried out.

Vayikra often reads like a hand-book for priests, detailing rituals of sacrifice and purity that have nothing to do with the Judaism that we practice. Yet, underneath it all, lies the knowledge that living is messy and fraught with opportunities to make mistakes; that human beings will always struggle with sin and the need to set things right; and that we can be forgiven and loved, with all our imperfections. May we merit to read Vayikra with the purity of heart that we possessed as children.