Note: Please bring a complete Tanakh to every class, including the first. You should also have a Torat Hayyim edition of Shemot and Vayikra, and Jewish Study Bible (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Oxford University Press, 2004)

Our goal is to understand why Vayikra is at the center of the Torah, how it serves as the Torah’s core. We will explore basic themes from a conceptual perspective, including

- the interconnected dimensions of sacred time, space and person;
- the meaning of sacrifice and atonement;
- the relationship between ritual and ethical action;
- the role of Sanctuary in maintaining Divine presence
- the concept of embodied spirituality, and the importance of touching in cultivating relationship, including intimacy with the divine
- Exploring the nexus of the three “bees”—blessing, brothers, blood
- Mediating tension between individual and community, as well as between individuated identity and socially defined roles

➔ We will endeavor to think canonically as well as locally. That is, while learning to hear the Torah’s Priestly voice with clarity and comprehension, we will consider how this voice relates to other important voices in Tanakh, especially the prophetic, sapiential (wisdom), and narrative.

➔ Finally, we will invite exploration of contemporary implications, reading Vayikra as a fresh and engaging guide to the challenges and possibilities of spiritual leadership in our time.

Class requirements:

- Be prepared to discuss the class assignment: biblical text, assigned classical commentaries, secondary readings.
- A class presentation, summarizing an assigned secondary reading and opening class discussion
- Write a final paper at the semester’s end, exploring how our study of Vayikra may inform and be placed in dialogue with other biblical, rabbinic and later perspectives, and showing how Vayikra can be relevant to contemporary Jewish theology and practice.


[Please note—Twenty-nine topics are listed here; it is unlikely that we will be able to cover them all. The list is intended to give students a sense of the sweeping range of inquiry prompted by this central book, and to provide an aspirational horizon for your ongoing study.]
Topic #1. Introduction. The structure of Torah: Priestly and Deuteronomic perspectives.

Leviticus as instruction [Torah]; as narrative; as theology; as ritual; as system theory.
The meaning of sacrifice. Major themes: blessing, attracting the Divine Presence,
mediation; sacred space and time; meaning of the gift—to God. Ethics and ritual; purity
and holiness; sincerity and presence.

Priestly themes in Genesis. Gen. 1. Creation, order and boundaries. Blessing and
[intercession]—restoration—renewed covenant; spilling blood as (ultimate) capital crime. Sign of the

Is the Akedah (Binding of Isaac) a precursor to the sacrificial system?

in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Cf. Ex. 20:8-11 with Deut. 5:12-15 (Shabbat). Sacrifices and the Book of
4:1-8 with Ex. 19:4-6, and with Ex. 29:45-46; compare Deut. 26:16-27:8 (treasured people/covenant on
stones/altar and sacrifices) with Ex. 19:1-6, Ex. 24:1-18, and Ex. 32:18.

Topic #2. Constructing and partitioning sacred space (compare with sacred place in
Genesis). The sequence of nested rectangles; Tabernacle as a microcosm of creation.
Tabernacle as projection and domestication of Sinai. Significance of the Tamid: at its core, the
system is simple (one lamb in the morning, one lamb in late afternoon), and continual (starting from Sinai,
extending in an unbroken chain through all time) Ex. 29:38-46; cf. Numbers 28:1-8. Tangible signs—the
“envelope” circumscribing the divine Presence: the Glory/Kavod, the divine autograph, Moses’s karnei
hod, the cherubim, the altar.

Why is command of the incense altar situated at Ex. 30:1-10, rather than at Ex. 25:40 (or even Ex. 26:35)?
Note how this textual dis-placement mirrors the description of the placement of the incense altar in contrast
to the Menorah and Table; cf. Ex. 40:3-5; 40:22-27.

Comparing Ex. 29 and Lev. 8. [Theocentric view: priests as “sacred vessels.” Moving to the
anthropocentric view: priests as representatives of the people and as individuals in their own right—
individuals who will need to go deeper to seek their own atonement….]

Establishment of a horizontal vector of approach to by-pass/over-come the paradox of self-referentiality.
This is hinted in the enigmatic verse at Ex. 30:10—“Once a year Aaron shall perform kipper rites upon its
horns, with the blood of the hattat of applications….” This of course alludes to Yom Kippur and Lev. 16,
but what still obscure reality is alluded to here?

Moses’s intercessory role in Exodus. Ex. 32. Changing God’s mind. Moses and Noah. (cf. Gen. 8:22 with
Gen. 6:5; cf. Ex. 32:9 with 34:9; note the term va-yinahem.

• Encounter between God and Moshe at 32:17-23. God wants intimacy. Interplay between Moshe’s personal
quest and heightened empowerment for leadership. The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

• Moses returns with God’s instructions, erects the mishkan and begins the service. The first day of the first
month. The end of Shemot, with bi-directional valence.

Observe the seven-fold pattern in Ex. 39; Ex. 40; and Lev. 8. Note the similarities—and the differences.

Topic #3. Understanding Leviticus’s sacrificial system. Individual and community. Lev.
1:1—“a person ---who shall offer--- from among you--- an offering--- unto God…”
Priesthood: petitioner, officiant, sacrifice; Three primary dimensions: space, time and
personnel. Holiness—consecration—is expressed by restriction. Greater degrees of
holiness are associated with greater restriction along all three dimensions in a coordinated
fashion.
• Leviticus 1 (olah); The meaning of semikhah. The meaning of nirtzah, kipper (cf. kapporet, kippurim.)

Topic #4. Minhah. See Lev. 5:13; Num. 4:16, 18:9 (minnah before hattat); Joel 1:9, 1:13, 2:14 (note connection to berakhah). Nehemia 10:34 (list of Temple sacrifices). The azkarah: Lev. 24: 5-9; the meaning and significance of noteret.

Key terms: hiktir, saraf, akhal. In what context is each term used, and what is the difference between them?

Topic #5. Shelamim. The significance of separation and offering of the suet (בלוט).


Topic #7. Korban Asham. (Lev. 5) How does Asham differ from Hattat? (See Nahmanides on the meaning of ‘asham’). Asham as uncertain, unacknowledged guilt; the role of vidui (confession)—see Lev. 5:5. Cf. Gen 26:10—Abimelech and Isaac; Gen 42:21—Aval ashemim anahnu…; Lev. 16:21 (vidui of the High Priest on Yom Kippur); Lev 26:40.; Num. 6:12—asham of the Nazirite who comes into contact with unexpected, sudden death.

See Lev 5:2—ve-ne’elam mimenu, ve-hu tame’ ve-ashem
5:3, 5:4——-ve-ne’elam mimenu ve-hu yada’ ve-ashem
Note that in verse 2, ve-hu tame’ can mean, he had already been tame’. Similarly, ve-hu yada’ ve-ashem means he had already known—but had then forgotten—thus his guilt is that he did not take his situation seriously enough to keep it in mind, he allowed it to slip from memory. yada’ is a pluperfect. Cf. Rashi on Gen 4:1 Ve-ha-adam yada’—“the man had known…” See note of Rosebaum-Silbermann, p. 17, n. 1—
“Rashi bases [his] statement on the syntactical rule that when, in a narrative, a series of imperfects with Vau Conversive is followed by a perfect, it has a pluperfect sense, the action it describes having taken place previous to the event mentioned immediately before it.” Cf. Rashi on Gen 19: 22—himtir…and R-S note, p. 266; Rashi on Gen 21:1 and note 3, p. 267.

This explains ve-hitvadah in Lev 5:5—as the person struggles to acknowledge guilt, he must articulate it. [Note that Hazal categorize the “sliding-scale” offering as a hattat, but consider that the terminology of asham pervades this section; see Targum Onkelos and Targum Jonathan.] Cf Num 5:7 (a passage that augments Lev 520-26), which specifies vidui for this type of asham. (Maimonides uses Num 5:7 to derive the requirement of confession in his exposition of Teshuvah)

Assignment: Rashi on Lev 5:17—the meaning of asham talu’i, the reward for observance of commandments; note the incremental structure of this Rashi. Rashi on Lev 5:21.

Topic #8. [Parashat Tzav] Disposition of Sacrifice; Priestly Perquisites. Disposition of Olah: . 6:1-6. the deshen (residue) [Sefat Emet on terumat ha-deshen.]


• In what case is the hide not given as a perquisite (“perk”) to the priest? What does this mean?

• What is the significance of 6:23 “But no hattat may be eaten from which any blood is brought into the Tent of Meeting …”? 

Topic #10. Consecration of Aaron and sons: Ex. 29:1-37; Lev. 8:1-36. Seven-fold pattern in Lev. 8. The manufacture of anointing oil, associated particularly with Moses (Ex. 30:22-33). The paradox of self-referentiality, and the paradox of initiation. Comparing Ex. 29 and Lev. 8. [Moving from the theocentric view—priests as “sacred vessels” to the anthropocentric view: priests as representatives of the people and as individuals in their own right—individuals who will need to go deeper to seek their own atonement…. Recall Lev 1—the emergence of individuated agents out of communal space. Recall also the introduction of the incense altar following the section on the ordination of the priests in Exodus, suggesting that only after the corporate nature of the Tabernacle is established do we now begin the development of priests as individuals]

Topic #11. The eighth day of consecration. What surprises us about Lev. 9?


Topic #13. Consecration of Aaron and sons: compare Ex. 29:1-37 with Lev. 8:1-36. Seven-fold pattern in Lev. 8. The manufacture of anointing oil, associated particularly with Moses (Ex. 30:22-33). The paradox of self-referentiality, and the paradox of initiation. [Moving from the theocentric view—priests as “sacred vessels” to the anthropocentric view: priests as representatives of the people and as individuals in their own right—individuals who will need to go deeper to seek their own atonement…. Recall Lev 1—the emergence of individuated agents out of communal space. Recall also the introduction of the incense altar following the section on the ordination of the priests in Exodus, suggesting that only after the corporate nature of the Tabernacle is established do we now begin the development of priests as individuals]


Topic #15. Animals and humans; domestication. Kashrut. [Jared Diamond Guns, Germs & Steel; Michael Pollan, Omnivore’s Dilemma; Jonathan Safran Foer, Eating Animals]


Topic #17. Tzara’at and boundaries: somatic, sartorial, social Reading: Sefat Emet on Lev. 13:2. No’am Elimelekh on Adam ki yihiyeh be-or besoro se’et o sapahat o baheret…—positive traits inhibited by stereotyped patterns ingrained in childhood; on zot tihiyeh torat ha-metzora— the baal teshuvah uplifts the prayers of the zaddik

Topic #18. The meaning of Yom Kippur. Lev. 16. The hidden and manifest Glory. Penetrating the inner sanctum, the ultimate repository and reservoir of Divine Purity. Tume’ah as “implication/entanglement” Rabbi David Pardo, Maskil le-David on Lev. 16:16; God wants to be implicated in Israel, just as Israel wants to rise to purity and holiness. The pattern of dovetailing—notice how 16:6 prepares for 16:11, while 16:9 prepares for 16:15. Meanwhile, 16:7,8&10 prepare for 16:20b, 21 & 22. What does this dovetailing accomplish? [contrast the lack of dovetailing—that is, the discrete completion of each stage—in the inauguration rites at Lev 9]
Sa’ir la-Azazel—Ramban on Lev 16:8, 16:21—s.v. ve-natan otam al rosh ha-sa’ir.
Note how 16:7 & 16:10 support Ramban’s view that even the sa’ir la-azazel is an offering (not a sacrifice) to God—yo’omad chai lifnei Hashem le-khaper alav…; God is present (even) in the sending-out-of-the-camp…

Reading: Bonna Devorah Haberman, “The Yom Kippur Avodah within the Female Enclosure.”

• the meaning of Lev. 19: 26--“Do not eat upon the blood, you shall not indulge in sorcery or divination”—compare 1Samuel 14:32—33. A divinatory practice?
• Compare II Samuel 23:14-17 and I Chronicles 11: 15-19. Why does David not wish to drink the water? What does he do instead? What does this suggest about blood symbolism?

Assignment: Ramban on Lev 17:11-12, s.v. “Ki nefesh ha-basar….” Note Nahmanides’ view of intimate proximity of animal and human life. Cf. Anne Fadiman, Spirit Catches You, p. 107: “The souls of sacrificed animals are precious and vitally connected to human souls. Animals are not considered to be as far removed from the human species as they are in our world view.” (quoting Dwight Conquergood)
Ramban on Lev. 18:4, s.v. et mishpotai ta’asu—the mitzvot give life—in accord with your understanding of ‘life’.

Assignment: Ramban on Lev 19:2, s.v. Kedoshim tiheyu.

Topic # 21. The sacred calendar of Lev. 23; comparison to other calendars, e.g. Num. 28 and Deut. 16. The role of Shabbat in the festival cycle. Why the double beginning (23:2, 4) and the double ending (23:37, 44)?
"קדושי יהיו " What is the meaning of “Holy convocation”?
(1) Ramban on Leviticus 23:2—Torat Hayyim page 224
Note—You may omit the first part of Ramban’s comment and begin with the words האיש מקרא וקרז—this is four lines up from the bottom of page 224; the comment continues on pages 225 and 226.
(2) Seforno on Leviticus 23:2—In the Torat Hayyim edition, the comment begins at the bottom of page 223 and continues on 224.
(3) Seforno on Numbers 28:11, s.v. לברון העמים—the inner significance of Rosh Hodesh: comparison between the moon and Israel
The meaning of אזכרה ויוד לב

Topic # 22. Lev. 24:13-23—the Nokev Shem. Why placed at this point? Compare to Ex. 2:11—Va-yigdal Moshe va-yetze el ehav….; Ex. 18:7—Va-yetze Moshe likrat hotno….; Va-yomer Yitro 'Barukh ha-Shem…' Ex. 21:22-27 (ayin tahat ayin)—what similarities and differences do you see? Note that ‘mum’ ‘blemish’ is a disqualification for sacred service—compare to Lev. 21:21—kol ish asher bo mum…lo yigash le-hakriv …et lehem Elo-hav… Name theology in Vayikra: The meaning of Kiddush ha-Shem and Hillul ha-Shem. Swearing falsely with God’s Name as Hillul ha-Shem—Lev 19:12; Priestly holiness as safeguarding the sanctity of the Name: Lev 21:6. A priest bearing tume‘ah approaching the sancta desecrates the Name: Lev 22:2. Uttering (nokev) the Name: Lev 24:11, 16
Compare Ex 33:17 va-aida-akha be-Shem; Lev 20: ki mi-zar’o natan la-molekh, le-ma’an tame’ et nikkadshi, u-le-hallel et Shem kodshi [note ‘Panai’]
Lev 22:32 Ve-lo tehalleu et Shem kodshi/ve-nikdashti be-tokh Bnei Yisrael
Compare Malachi 1: 6-7 ...ha-konim bozei Shem, ...Magishim al mizbehi lehem me-go’al...

“ve-natai Panai ...” is applied only in three circumstances: Lev 17:10—one who eats blood (attemping to internalize life-spirit as practice of power); Lev 20:3, 5—one who “gives of his seed” to Molech—commiting idolatry, murder, destroying seed; Lev 20:6—Turning to Ovot, Yidonim—internalization of the ghost for visitation with the dead, divination. cf. Lev 26:17—misuse of land and its sacred personhood ….

Lev 24: 16, 22—One law for the ger and the ezrah. The return to ritual details of Pesah after narrative—Exodus 12:43-51. Circumcision; note that the ה is exactly as the ה (vv. 48-49)—why is this mentioned at this point?

Reading: Ellen F. Davis, Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible.


Christian views of sacrifice. Epistle to the Hebrews: critique of the Aaronide priesthood as itself in need of atonement, and of Jewish sacrifice as perennial process vs. once-and-for-all redemptive event (ch. 7).

The notions of mattir; piggul. Mishnah Zevahim 4:6; lishmah, shelo-lishmah. (Cf. Rashi on Lev. 7:18 and 19:5-8.) Mishnah Zevahim 1:1-4; Mishnah Zevahim 2:2-5. The four critical parts of the blood rite. The correspondence to the four stages of the meal offering. Menahot Ch. 1; Ch. 13:11.
The linkage of mattir and piggul: Zevahim 4:1-4. Piggul is possible only when there is no other essential flaw in the sacrifice. It is the taking of sacred energy—that which could have, would have, should have been kodesh—and perverting it, reversing its direction but not its power. This is piggul. That which could not have been holy cannot be piggul. Zevahim 3:6—thoughts which do not cause piggul.
Topic # 26. The Book of Leviticus in Aggadic Thought. The primacy of ethics in Midrash. Selected texts from Vayikra Rabbah Recommended edition: Mordecai Margoliot (Jerusalem 5732 [1972]). Midrash Tanhuma. Substitutes for sacrifice in Rabbinic Judaism: Study, prayer and deeds of lovingkindness. Avot de-Rabbi Natan 4 (“We have an atonement like the Temple sacrifices…”); “Whoever engages in study of the laws of Olah… (Menahot 110a)” ; “daily prayers (Tefillot) were instituted in correspondence with the Tamid offerings” (Berakhot 26b) The development of the synagogue and bet midrash.

Topic #27.. Sacrifice and Sanctuary in Medieval Jewish Thought. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Bet ha-Behirah.
Ramban (Nahmanides), Torah Commentary Introduction to Exodus — the climax of the Redemption is the making of the Tabernacle and the dwelling of the Shekhina there—this is homecoming.
Commentary to Ex. 25:1 (pp. 434-437)—“the main purpose of the Tabernacle was to contain a place in which the the Divine Glory rests, this being the ark…”
Introduction to Leviticus (pp. 3-5); Introduction to Numbers (pp. 3-4)
R. Bahya ben Asher, Torah Commentary to Ex. 25:7 (ed. Chavel [Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1981], vol. 2: 266-7 —the significance of the fifteen items listed for contribution to the Mishkan;
Commentary on Lev. 1:9 (vol. 2 pp. 399-403) —the meaning of olah re’ah niho’ah.

Sacrifice and Sanctuary in Zohar.
Reading: Isaiah Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar I: 319-322 (“The Unification of the Sefirot through the Mystery of the Light of the Lamp”)

Ani & ayin: personal, collective, transpersonal identity.
Rosh Hashanah, s.v. “Inyan ha-prishah le-kohen ha-gadol” (I:367a-369a)
“One & one….One & seven”: meditative awareness of continual creation.
R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, Sefat Emet. Raising the ashes: the meaning of sacrifice.
III:21b-22a, s.v. Zot Torat ha-Olah, Parashat Tzav 5635 (1875). V: 1. Parashat Devarim, s.v. Yada Shor Konehu. It is our task to bring knowledge of God to all creation.
R. Jacob Leiner, Sefer Bet Ya’akov al Sefer Va-Yikra. (selections)

Topic # 29. Sacrifice and Sanctuary in contemporary Jewish Thought. Summary and review.
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### Biblical Cosmology/Jewish Biblical Theology


#### Priestly Worldview


Davis, Ellen F. *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, Foreword by Wendell Berry (Cambridge University Press, 2009)


#### Death of Nadav and Avihu—Torah’s Midpoint (“darosh darash”)—Moses and Aaron


### Hattat and other Sacrifices


**Blood, Circumcision, and Covenant**


**Tzipporah, Moses, and the “Bridegroom of Blood”**


**Sacred Space and Sanctuary**


Hundley, Michael B. “Before Y H W H at the Entrance to the Tent of Meeting: A Study of Spatial and Conceptual Geography in the Priestly Texts” [pdf]

Hundley, Michael B. “Sacred Spaces, Objects, Offerings and People in the Priestly Texts” [pdf]

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Map Is Not Territory.* [locative and utopian worldviews]
Land Alive: Leviticus and Ecological Consciousness

Second Temple, Rabbinic Judaism, Purity, and Sacrifice

The Significance of Ritual
Adam B Seligman, Robert P Weller, Michael J Puett and Bennett Simon, Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity
Adam B Seligman, Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity

Sacrifice: A Comparative Perspective

Vayikra and the Structure of Torah;
Vayikra in Canonical Perspective
[semihah as ‘pre-sanctification’ of the animal; press of the five-fingered Hand to transmit the Spirit]