Holiness: Thoughts for Parashat Vayikra

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayikra

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The book of Vayikra is known in the vernacular as Leviticus. This designation underscores that the book deals primarily with laws relating to the Levites…to the priesthood, Temple, sacrifices, purity laws. While this is a broad characterization, Vayikra covers many other topics relating to business, sexual morality, ethical principles etc.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has suggested that the general theme of Leviticus is holiness. “Holiness is not only what one does or does not do in the Temple, but something that applies even in places that have nothing at all to do with the ritual holiness of the Sanctuary of the Temple. It is a spiritual quality in its own right.” Rabbi Steinsaltz understands holiness “to be a type of refinement, perfection, and exaltation, not necessarily limited to one particular point or area” (*Talks on the Parasha*, p. 193).

The essence of holiness is to place our lives in context with God. Whatever we do and wherever we are, holiness is a challenge for us to live up to our best selves. We are not only answerable to God; we are answerable to ourselves. Have we done our best? Have we lived up to our potential? Are we still aspiring to grow spiritually?

Holiness is a lifelong process that requires humility, persistence, and realism. We aren’t expected to be perfect, only to be as great as we possibly can be. This week’s parasha lists the various offerings that are to be brought for sins. The Torah acknowledges that we will sometimes fall short and it offers a way forward through repentance. Keep striving, keep growing, keep reaching beyond.

We sometimes hear educators and politicians telling young people: “You can be anything you want. You have unlimited potential.” Although well intentioned, these statements are false. No matter how much one wants to be President of the United States or member of the Supreme Court, or a superstar

athlete, or a gifted artist, or a mega-billionaire…very few will actually achieve these things no matter how hard they try. To tell students they can achieve anything they want is basically to set them up for failure.

A better message is: strive to live up to your own potential. Draw on your abilities to be the best person you can be. Or, to put the message in Torah terms: be holy! Strive to live in context with the Divine. Live up to the talents that God has given you. Don't squander your lives chasing false gods and false goals.

We live in a world where holiness seems to be out of fashion. Some live as though there is no God; others live believing in a god that condones hatred, violence, and falsehoods.

The Torah reminds us and challenges us to be the best person we can be. Although it is difficult to block out all the negative static in our world, the quest for holiness keeps us human, humane and Godly.