

I'm working on a book based on the material from the clobber texts class I've done for many of the mama & papa bears. I don't need to rehearse that material here because this is not a contested issue in our church, thank G-d! But my research for the book has led to a deep dive into the third book in the Bible, Leviticus, which is probably the most inaccessible book of the Bible to modern people; it opens with detailed instructions (for 7 chapters) on the ritual sacrifices used in the temple. So I'm writing out the book of Leviticus by hand, reading the best Jewish commentaries, and immersing myself in the strange logic of ritual.

The ancients used ritual to deal with the deep psychological, physical, and spiritual needs, and to enact a community's sacred values. So what values do the rituals of Leviticus convey? That humans, not demons, are the cause of harm—often unintentionally. That God wants to be our neighbor who lives nearby, and we make a home for God by making a home for each together. That we have the power to drive God out of the temple—by the way we treat each other. That the highest ethic is love your neighbor as yourself and love the stranger, the foreigner in your midst as yourself (that's from Leviticus, chapter 19).

But many rituals are a like a foreign language to us. It can take painstaking work to learn the language—and only then does the internal logic {a symbolic-mystical logic} and the psychological genius, and the beauty of the ritual present itself.

Small example, the ancient Israelites offered animal sacrifices, called burnt offerings. Leviticus chapter one gives instructions for the burnt offering. The head of a household would bring a bull, a sheep, or a goat, to temple courts, dispatch it, drain the blood which the priest would gather and throw against the altar, while the Israelite would cut up the parts and the portions not suitable for food would be burned on the altar by the priests. It all seems very gross to modern people who only get their meat from Kroger's or Costco, where the brutal agribusiness practices are hidden from view.

But this ancient ritual conveyed the sacred value of living creatures. It was a way of placing significant limits on meat eating. One could only eat meat that had been

sacrificed in this ritual way, so people weren't having meat 5 nights a week, weren't storing it in their freezer or refrigerator, weren't picking up a burger in a drive through. It was always a very special occasion, a sacred act. The only quadrupeds allowed for food were cattle, sheep, goats. All other 4-legged creatures were off limits. The animal had to be dispatched painlessly—much more humanely than in our modern slaughterhouses. Modern treatment of animals used for meat—force feeding grain, miserable living conditions—are grotesque and brutal and would be condemned by the writers of Leviticus. The blood had to be treated as sacred in the ritual, because the life was in the blood. This conveyed the sacredness of the creature's life. So which represents a more evolved approach? Animal sacrifice or our modern approach? The rituals of Leviticus, hands down, convey a vastly more humane, more compassionate, more evolved approach.

And that is just one aspect of the ritual of the burnt offering, which most of us, at first glance, find so offensive.

I bring this up—the value of ritual—because as we transitioned from in-person worship to virtual worship back in March 2020, our usual ways of worshiping were disrupted. Singing together doesn't work on Zoom, and we were in a crisis mode with Covid, so we found ourselves leaning into rituals: the lighting of the candles to pray for various groups of people, the naming of some of the lives lost to white supremacy, the naming of loved ones, followed by the time of communion. Emily will update on the question of returning to in-person worship while continuing our virtual worship, but for now I want to say what our Sunday rituals have meant for me. A more personal reflection, how our Sunday rituals affect me.

Lighting of candles in worship goes way back. G-d revealed himself to Moses in a burning bush—and fire has always been associated with the divine. The holy place in the temple had a menorah, seven candles on a candlestick, kept lit at all times. Candle lighting is very important in many churches and it's a major feature in Jewish practice. The flame of the candle is ritual expression of the divine in our midst. The menorah, the candlestick in the holy place is really important. It's mentioned many places in Scripture—Hebrew Bible and the New Testament writings. Featured prominently in the most mystical book of the Bible—the Apocalypse or Revelation. A candle.

The candle is almost always a form of remembrance. To remember someone or something by lighting a candle is to honor them. So when it's my late wife's birthday or death I light a candle that burns all day. I do the same for my parents. It's my way of saying to my late wife, and parents, "I haven't forgotten you." It's a way of reminding myself that my deceased loved ones live on in G-d. I go about my other tasks, and the candle does the remembering, the praying.

You know how in the Buddhist tradition there are prayer wheels? Some you turn by hand, some turn in the wind, like pinwheels. Candles function like that in our tradition. They don't just signify prayer. A lit candle is a form of prayer. I think of the flame as the divine spirit, the wick as the person praying, and rising of the heat or the smoke as the ascent of our prayers to the realm of the divine.

See that's the benefit of rituals. Our modern world puts so much emphasis on words and on thinking: words in our mouths, words in our minds, words on a page. A ritual may include words, but it always involves physical actions or objects. Our need for prayer goes way beyond words.

So most Sundays I like to light my own candle here while Emily or today Caroline lights our 5 candles. As the year has progressed, and I just stare it and let my thoughts slow down—I let the candle do the praying for me in a way.

First candle for those who are sick or have died of Covid, now we know the official figures represent maybe held the actual deaths. The reality of these deaths over the past year has certainly weighed on our minds. Isn't that a telling phrase, "weighs on our minds" – we use that when some painful reality just sits there, parks in our minds. Weighs on us. Realities like this need some form of expression, so they don't just weigh on our minds. Like lighting a candle in remembrance.

We have the candle for the first responders, the essential workers, and others who have been bearing the brunt of this crisis. Every week, by lighting the candle, we've called them to mind, we've remembered them, we've held them for a moment in our hearts. We've honored them.

Past month has been my emergence—seeing vaccinated people in person without masks, usually outside. Easy does it. Julia’s 60th. Grace visiting last week. We go to a Deli eat outside, no masks. Living large! Later Grace says, “Hey Dad let’s go get a beer” I’m like, “Where we would do that?” I haven’t gone out for a beer since March 2020. We start walking, I’m like let’s go to York (a coffee shop that sells sandwiches, and you can get a beer or glass of wine). I was walking there (masked), I see the owner, Tommy York. Apologize for not coming all year. [details]

My heart is bursting with love for the people serving me, taking my credit card. I’m tipping like a crazy person. Small businesses staying open through a pandemic, surviving ... adapting.

I realize I haven’t forgotten these people, I’ve been remembering them every Sunday in our candle lighting ritual. I do not every want to take them for granted.

Our fifth candle remembers those who have been killed by the reality of systemic racism. Split second decisions are made before someone pulls a trigger. And the conscious and unconscious bias promoted by racism operates in those split seconds. And it kills innocent people. This only keeps going on year after because of the indifference of people who are not personally affected by it. It’s about time we light a candle and say the names. I don’t ever want to go to church where we can’t say the names. God hears the cry of the afflicted, why shouldn’t we say the names in the presence of God? Until this scourge is past, and reparations are made. Reparations another theme in Leviticus conveyed through a ritual. The ritual doesn’t solve the problem—but it prevents us from forgetting or ignoring the problem, so that we lend our hand to solving it.

Then we remember the names of the loved ones that different ones of us are concerned for in the prayer for loved ones. A lot of our worry is about loved ones, right? And we can often feel alone with that worry. But this ritual, naming the loved ones, is a reminder that all of us have loved ones that we are concerned for. It’s a way we can carry that burden for each other, and a shared burden is a lighter one.

I counted up and we mention the names of over a hundred people every Sunday. That’s a love your neighbor as yourself ritual. And love your neighbor as yourself (and the stranger in the land as yourself) is the central ethic of Leviticus

And this is followed by communion—the ultimate love your neighbor as yourself ritual. There's a ritual connection between the people we remember with the lighting of the five candles, the names that we remember of our loved own loved ones, and the name of this beloved loved one, who reminds us that we worship the G-d who hears the cry of the afflicted. Through the rituals, we enact the reality that that a God who hears our cry is the same God who opens our ears and our hearts to our neighbors.