

**Drash for May 4, 2024 by Steve Zolno**  
**Achrei Mot, Leviticus 16.1 – 18.30**

Today's Torah section contains detailed descriptions of what the Israelites should and shouldn't do that was given months after they began their sojourn in the desert. But it might be helpful to consider all this lawmaking in a larger context. The progression from oral to written law is similar to what occurred in many early societies.

Going back to Exodus, the Israelites were given freedom as an expression of God's love, which at first was enough. But eventually they craved a clear image of the God they were to worship and with whom they could experience a deep personal relationship, as was the case with the societies around them. A God with no image is hard for most people to fathom.

We can look at those Israelites and say they were a bad bunch and it's a good thing we're so exemplary today. I haven't seen one golden calf on my way in here this morning. So congratulations to us. But we also might wonder at times if following all the commandments and doing all the rituals necessarily bring us an experience of closeness to the divine. I once heard a rabbi discuss how when young he went to orthodox High Holiday services. The congregation had heard it all repeatedly over the years, so they spent most of their time in the lobby or outside socializing. That was about as deep as it got.

As the Israelites crossed the desert we must assume there were no classes in conflict resolution because Moses often needed to mediate. This was before the laws were given to govern people's behavior. He was overwhelmed by this responsibility, so his father-in-law Jethro advised him to assign judges to handle all but the most significant disputes.

But even guidance from judges, no matter how wise, still wasn't enough for the Israelites, because like those in many societies, they still sought a god-like image to guide them.

When Moses understood they wanted a divine authority to tell them what to do, he sought guidance on Mount Sinai. He came back to remind them of the ancient covenant that they would be loved and protected as long as they worshipped only the one God, to which they agreed. But before long that still wasn't enough for them. Again he ascended the mountain, and as he came back with the Ten Commandments after forty days he found the people already worshipping an image they had created for themselves.

But even after the dust had settled, those commandments still were not enough. Just like in every society, laws must continually be revised to meet new needs. The Torah eventually enumerated 613 commandments. But again a question we might ask is are *they* even enough? Does following every commandment and performing every ritual necessarily bring us the sense of closeness to God we seek?

So the Israelites went from having a grateful and loving relationship with the God who freed them to needing 613 commandments to keep them in line. But the prayer we most often recite, the Shema, takes us back to the essence of that relationship. It tells us: "God is One. Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength," and only *then* adds the part about following specific commandments.

But is it possible to follow the commandments, talk about God's love, and never actually experience it? We can choose to keep it in the realm of a concept and then go home and

remember what a nice talk we had. But how do we actually bring ourselves to experience that essence – a sense of connection with that oneness?

For me, talking about God's love – and leading as just a life as I know how – doesn't necessarily bring it into the realm of my experience. Sometimes prayers bring me closer, but at times I find I go through the motions and not much happens inside.

We may recall having that feeling of God's love at times in the past, or we may hope to have it in the future. But we can't really do anything in the past or future; we only can allow that experience into our minds and hearts in the present. So in this moment we might ask ourselves: "What does it feel like to experience God's love?" "What does it feel like to experience God's forgiveness?" As we let that feeling in it transforms us because we no longer seek it. Then it becomes reflected in our actions, perhaps even lessening the need for all those commandments. We no longer want to commit aggression or be judgmental toward others because we already have what we most want.

Then we don't mind repeating our rituals or saying the same prayer a zillionth time because we already bring that feeling into what we do.

It's hard to know whether the accounts of God's commands to destroy pagan civilizations are actual or metaphorical. I don't know much, but one thing I'm fairly certain of, having taught and written about it for years, is that when we hate others it hurts us by bringing us an experience of hate. When we express appreciation and love to God – or even toward other mortals – we experience it ourselves. Then we can bring that understanding into our everyday interactions, even as we defend ourselves as needed.

Shabbat Shalom