

Shabbat shalom. First I want to say thank you to Rebecca for inviting me to give this dvar. I have never been part of a community before where I've been able to openly share my academic work, and certainly never as a dvar torah! I appreciate the chance to do that with you today. As I think most of you know, I am a PhD student in Hebrew Bible at the University of Chicago. The focus of my research is on priestly ritual and its relationship to the larger priestly narrative. The chapters we have been reading over the last two months form nearly half of a document I call "the priestly history." Some of you may know it as P. It's the fourth member of the J, E, D, P documentary hypothesis quartet.

The priestly history is essentially trying to answer one question: how does god live in the world? What I want to do today is give you a very broad overview of the whole story P constructs and focus a bit more on the place of *vayikra* in that story. According to P, at the time of creation god didn't live in the world. God lived above the world, on the heavenly side of the *raqia* and apart from human beings. This arrangement didn't take long to go awry and God needed a new plan. After decimating most of the world, he established an agreement, a *berit*, with Noah. In doing so, God began to blur the sharp line dividing deity and humanity. As the story develops, God builds relationships with various characters -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron. All along he is becoming more and more involved in human life, all the while still inhabiting this fuzzy space -- not quite in the heavens but not yet living on the earth.

God knows that if he is going to live on the earth, he is going to need two things: a physical place to live, and people to tend to his needs. By the time the Israelites leave Egypt, the second of these has been fulfilled. God has plenty of servants.

It's not long before the Israelites end up at Sinai where God appears to the people as a consuming fire on top of the mountain. He then gives Moses a blueprint for the *mishkan*. Moses relays these plans to the Israelites and they set to work carrying them out. A year to the day after the Israelites left Egypt, God tells Moses that it is time to set up the *mishkan*. And he does. Eight days of initiation and inauguration of the *mishkan* follow.

When the eight days are over, the Israelites leave Sinai and start their journey to Canaan. They make a few missteps along the way, including that major faux pas of doubting god's ability to give them the land after they've gone to check it out. This misstep means that the generation of Israelites who left Egypt are not allowed to enter Canaan. Almost all of them will die in the wilderness, but their children will enter the land. This is exactly what happens. As promised the Israelites make quick work of possessing the entirety of the land and once Canaan is in their control they set up the *mishkan*, god's place to live, in Shiloh.

You may have noticed that in telling this story I mostly skipped over *vayikra*. If P answers the question "how does god live in the world" in general terms, *vayikra* answers it with great detail. In this detail, P reveals all sorts of information about god, about humanity, about the relationship between two, and about the nature of the created world as a whole.

*Vayikra* is, in its entirety, part of the eight days of initiation and inauguration for the *mishkan*, or as my advisor calls them, the eight days of hanukkah. These eight days begin in Exodus 40 and chronologically end in today's *parasha* with Leviticus 26.

Day one begins with Moses putting together all of the pieces of the *mishkan* and moving its furniture in. In the process of doing this, he lights the menorah, burns some incense and offers a sacrifice on the altar. But why? The answer is deceptively simple. God is still living in this fuzzy in-between space. Moses needs to lure god down to earth by providing the comforts of home: light, food, and a pleasant smell. It works. God comes down in a cloud and settles into the holy of holies.

God has moved in, but we're told that Moses can no longer get inside the *mishkan*. But why would Moses need to get inside the *mishkan*? As it turns out, God is a bit of a high-maintenance house-guest. At the beginning of *vayikra* God summons Moses into the *mishkan*, much like he summoned Moses up Sinai. Once inside the *mishkan*, Moses is given a long list of instructions detailing how god wants this *mishkan* to be maintained. He wants semi-regular gifts -- the *olah*, *shelamim* and *minhah* sacrifices. And then he explains the basics about keeping the *mishkan* clean and inhabitable— the *hattat* and *asham* sacrifices.

At the end of this speech God tells Moses to ordain Aaron and his sons. The ordination takes seven days. These days are about separating the holy from the ordinary. In the case of the priests and the *mishkan* turning the ordinary into the holy. Holiness in P is a technical term. It means to be set-apart. *le-qadesh* is equivalent to *le-havdil*. There's nothing wrong with being ordinary in P. But to get close to god, you have to be holy. And the only people who are holy in P

are the priests. The priests will always have to serve as intermediaries between god and the people.

Once the seven days are complete, the *mishkan* is almost up and running. Before it is, though, Aaron and his sons perform a series of sacrifices designed to purge the *mishkan* of any impurities that may have accrued inside of it over the last week. Think about when someone builds a new house. There's dust everywhere from the construction. Before you move in completely and start living there, you need to clean up all that dust. This is what's going on the morning of the eighth day. Once this cleaning up is complete, Aaron and his sons offer the first series of sacrifices. The same consuming fire (*eish okhelet*) from Sinai reappears and devours the meat on the altar. The people recognize the fire as God. What follows is a celebration among all the people.

Well, most of the people. Caught up in the excitement of these events, two of Aaron's sons take their incense pans and approach god with their own incense offerings. I think we all know what happens next. The *eish okhelet* bursts forth from the holy of holies once more and kills them both. There's a lesson here, one that Moses somewhat insensitively conveys to Aaron. In a nutshell, the purpose of god's dwelling on earth is for the benefit of the people, not the priests. The *mishkan* and its sacrificial practices are fundamentally for the people and not a private priestly party. It's a tough way to learn that lesson.

As if this eighth day hasn't been busy enough already, God calls out to Moses and Aaron and gives yet another set of instructions. This time the issue is purity and impurity. We know at this point that it is the job of the priests to separate (*lehavdil*) between holy and ordinary. Now

they are being told in more detail how to do that. As Ben Sommer explained, people generate impurity. It's a fact of life. God can't live with all of that impurity. It eventually builds up and becomes too much. The people have to bring sacrifices for certain kinds of impurity and the purpose of these sacrifices is to clean up the mess their impurity has made. And in case some people neglect to do this, god orders an annual spring cleaning -- a giant purging of all impurities and sins that have accrued in the *mishkan*.

Having nearly finished with his instructions for the maintenance of the *mishkan*, god moves on to a list of rules and regulations for the Israelites themselves. The priests are innately holy after their ordination. The people are not, but provided they follow these *mitzvot* laid out by god, they might eventually get there.

In a brief break from the long lawgiving speech, the narrator of this story tells us that a fight breaks out between a half-Israelite man and another Israelite. The half-Israelite man curses the name of god. The people don't know what to do with him so they ask Moses. Moses asks god and god commands that the man be brought outside of the camp and stoned by the entire community. They do it.

The eighth day concludes in today's parasha. Let's review very briefly what's happened on this very busy day: there has been a spring cleaning of the *mishkan*, and then the initial sacrifices to get it going. God has appeared to the people again, and a great celebration begins after the inauguration of the *mishkan* is complete. Almost immediately Nadav and Avihu overstep the carefully constructed boundaries, and shortly thereafter the half-Israelite man does

as well. All three are killed. Things are not off to the best start. It's time for God to step in and remind the people what's at stake.

In today's parasha God spells it out for the people: you must keep my commandments; you must do them. If you do, you will be abundantly blessed. If you don't, there will be widespread and devastating destruction. What God seems to be threatening at the end of this series of inducements to obedience parallels the very beginning of P's whole story. When things started to go awry last time, God took care of it with the flood. What this part of the story is saying is that if things with Israel go awry, there's nothing stopping God from wiping the slate clean a second time and starting over. He seems more than willing to do so. In P, God only promised not to wipe out humanity with another flood. The list of threats here is in so many ways the inverse of the flood. It includes everything *except* a flood. Instead of an abundance of waters, the sky will become like iron and the earth like bronze. In other words, the sources of water from above and below will be cut off. Plants won't grow, famine ensues, animals will eat people, people will eat people, and so on. Rather than sustaining life, the land will claim it. It would be a return to the pre-flood state of chaos.

Living in the world is God's answer to humanity's unruliness before the flood. He is able to do this through the *mishkan* and the rules he's carefully outlined for its maintenance. God is able to live in the world because of a carefully regulated separation between that which is holy and that which is ordinary. The stakes are high for maintaining this separation. If the Israelites don't do it, God will clean the slate and try again. What is so astonishing about P is that despite this threat, there remains a fundamental optimism in the story. The author of the story has every

expectation that Israel will obey. So much so that he meticulously demonstrates that obedience in the structure of the story. Without fail, every single positive command given to the Israelites to perform in the wilderness is fulfilled -- nearly 200 of them. Individuals may cause problems here and there, but this author makes it clear that collectively Israel is able to create and maintain a place for god to live in the world.