

Vayikra: New Beginnings  
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Think about where you were 10 years ago. How about 5? What about a week ago? Now think about a week from now. 5 years from now. 10 years from now? No two moments in our lives are exactly the same. Just as our lives continue to change over time, when we return to each Torah portion year after year, we are able to learn something new from the text.

Throughout the service this evening, we have been talking about New Beginnings. We chose this theme because this week we are beginning the book of Leviticus, the third book of the Torah. It may not make sense to talk about new beginnings considering that it is already March 16. You may not consider this the beginning of the month, or even the year. Resolutions made in January have long since been forgotten and people have settled back into their normal routines.

But what made these routines normal? In this week's torah portion, we are given in great detail the proper ways to sacrifice an animal as a form of worship. Personally, I was appalled as I read this. As a vegetarian, I had never given much thought to the different ways to remove vital organs from a dead animal. But the thing that most struck me about the passage was how normal it seemed. Animal sacrifice was expected, if not demanded, by Jews of the past. In fact, the way we pray today would not be recognized as true prayer by the early Jews.

Before the second temple was destroyed, animal sacrifice was the most common form of prayer. Jews would gather as a community to witness the ritualistic slaughter and to reap the benefits thought to be brought on by the practice. This was especially sacred to early Jews because proper sacrifice was only allowed to be done in the temple. Because it was prohibited to commit sacrifices alone, the idea of communal prayer was established.

If you look at the title of this week's torah portion, "vayikra", it translates directly to "and G-d called". G-d called out to his people and gave them a reason to gather as a community. Also, the word used for sacrifice in this portion, "korban", means literally "draw near". This language displays the true purpose of this ritual of animal sacrifice, to bring the Jewish community together for a higher purpose.

Now, some of you may be thinking "If animal sacrifice helped bring the Jewish community closer, why did they stop?" Although it was not yet popular, organized prayer had already emerged in many Jewish communities. Sacrifice was required to be performed in the temple, so when the Second Temple was destroyed, Jews had no choice but to abandon the practice altogether. They quickly adopted prayer as their new community ritual and its popularity grew rapidly.

Like sacrifice, there were many strict rules involved in organized prayer. This gave the Jews some sense of order, without which they would have been lost. Also, the rigid structure forced each participant to create meaning for themselves as they prayed in order to have a fulfilling relationship with G-d. This practice continues today, to varying degrees, all over the world.

For example, there are currently three main denominations of Judaism; Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Four if you want to count Secular. Many of us here tonight fall into the reform category. We are here because we feel a strong connection to the Jewish values and traditions, but are not particularly concerned with the outdated rituals of the Torah. This community has evolved and changed over time, usually in response to the changes in the rest of the world. Although many Jews are concerned with basic morality and the essence of Judaism

has not changed, certain details have become less mainstream over time. This structure allows each individual to have a relationship with G-d that is meaningful to them, and to have a prayer experience that matches their level of connectedness.

This is why my friends and I are up here tonight. Even though we are young, we have a voice in this community and are able to make changes to better serve people of our generation as well as Judaism as a whole. Right now in our country, teens of all faiths are coming together to cause change where they see fit. My favorite feature of modern Judaism is its ability to adapt. When you all came to services tonight, there was a certain level of expectancy. You anticipated the prayers we read and the order in which we read them. But there should also have been a level of uncertainty. Every week, we are different than we were the week before. Every week, we learn something new about ourselves and our community. Beliefs we once held may cease to be important, worldviews shift over time. We grow and change, constantly evolving to match our surroundings. Every time we come here together, as a community, it is a new opportunity for learning. It is a new opportunity for friendship. It is a new opportunity to grow. Everyday is a new beginning.