



## 5 table topics

Today's Torah discussion invites us to think deeply about the basic human instinct to develop religious rituals as part of our response to God. Using the questions below, share some of your thoughts and experiences of ritual, perhaps as a 'table topic' over a household meal (a ritual in itself). The questions are open-ended enough to allow a variety of responses from your table guests of differing ages, religious affiliation and levels of commitment.

- 1. Formative.** Describe one ritual established in your childhood that has had an enduring impact on your life.
- 2. Important.** Think of one ritual which you regard as especially important to pass on to your children.
- 3. Challenging.** Think of one ritual which you struggle to practice regularly despite your belief in its value. What is the source of this struggle?
- 4. Accessible.** Name one ritual which is readily understood by the general public. Name one ritual which appears 'crazy' to the uninitiated/outsider.
- 5. Developing.** Describe a ritual in your life which, while remaining basically constant in its inner meaning, has changed dramatically in its external details over time. What has it been like living through these changes?



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Leviticus 1:1—5:26

*Vayikra:*  
'he called'

## *Why reflect on Torah?*

Today we commence a new book of the Torah: Leviticus. Chapter after chapter of ancient cultic laws may appear daunting at first. Might it challenge us to know that traditionally Jewish children commence their Torah education with the book of Leviticus!

But perhaps Leviticus is not as alien as it first appears. This is a book about ritual. As much as contemporary culture appears to thrive on spontaneity, there is something deep in the human psyche that responds to ritual. Whether it be a wedding ceremony or cutting a birthday cake, the rhythm of such an event—with its established words, gestures, symbols—connects us with others, with our culture, our history. It tells us something important about who we are and to whom we belong.

As we approach Leviticus, then, we do so not just as a matter of historical interest but from a searching for what human hearts seek to express about their experience of divine mystery. Over the coming weeks, in conversation with the Jewish sages, let's listen to what Torah can teach us about our own response to divine mystery, to the presence of God.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Leviticus 1:1—5:26

Compared to the action-packed stories of Genesis and Exodus, we are struck by a lack of movement in Leviticus. The entire book is set in one place: at the foot of Mount Sinai. There, in the wilderness, God speaks, forming the people by unveiling a series of laws or instructions: how to worship, how to behave, how to deal with transgressions. Through a system of order and repetitive ritual, the identity of Israel, as God's holy, chosen people, is solidified.

## Tasting Torah

Five kinds of sacrifice are described in our Torah portion. Read one (or more) of these, pondering not only the ritual details but their underlying meaning/purpose. Note that the Hebrew name for one of the most common forms of sacrifice, *korban*, has been rendered 'near-bringing' by some translators. In bringing the gift to be offered near to the altar, the worshipper draws close to God. As strange as these ancient practices may appear, is there anything in them that speaks to your own desire to 'draw near' to God?

## Touching Torah

While Israel's Temple sacrifices ceased in 70CE with the destruction of the Temple, reflection on Leviticus continued (and continues) in creative, and at times controversial, forms as the Jewish sages have sought the deeper meaning of the Torah's sacrificial laws.

A famous controversy emerged between the views of two great medieval Torah scholars: Maimonides and Nahmanides.<sup>1</sup> Maimonides proposed the idea that the sacrifices were God's way of weaning the Israelites from pagan sacrifice. To have suddenly dismantled all that was familiar would have been too unsettling and discouraging, says Maimonides. Leviticus "*was prompted by Divine wisdom, according to which people are allowed to continue the kind of worship to which they have been accustomed, in order that they might acquire true faith*".

## Depthing Torah

Maimonides saw sacrifice as a preventative measure against idolatry. But Nahmanides was horrified by this emphasis. In his eyes it weakened the value of sacrifice *in itself*. As an alternative explanation, he held that the external ritual process gives rise to a process of internalization. The offerer gains insight into his own patterns of thought, speech, action and is moved to improve his behavior.

*"All this should make him realize that having sinned against God with his body and soul, he would deserve to have his blood spilled and his body burnt. However, God in His infinite mercy, accepts this substitute for an atonement, and its blood in lieu of his."*

The role of ritual as an authentic expression of faith is a theme that appears in the *Sefer haHinukh* (a famous medieval Jewish education text): "*The mind is influenced mainly by deeds. It is not enough for the sinner to cleanse his mind and commit himself to avoid further sinning with mere words. For this purpose a significant act [i.e., the complex sacrificial action] must be performed.*"

Maimonides himself would agree: whether in biblical times or today, no one can worship God "in thought only, without practice."

## Doing Torah

The Maimonides v Nahmanides controversy has stimulated Jewish thinking through the centuries. In what way does it stimulate yours as you reflect on today's Torah portion?



## Faith & life

At Mass one Sunday I saw a young mother enter with two small children in tow. As the mother made the customary bend on one knee (genuflection) the two youngsters copied her. I had to stifle a chuckle because the two little ones nearly fell over each other in the process. One had barely mastered the action of walking, so genuflection proved a sizeable challenge indeed! But deeper still, I was moved by the visible testimony of this family: the desire that worship of God be handed on from one generation to the next.

1. Maimonides: d.1204. Nahmanides: d.1270. Cited in Leibowitz, 3,8-9,10.

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (NY, 1993).