



## 5 ways to view the mealtable

As rabbinic Judaism emerged from the ashes of the destruction of the Temple and its system of worship in 70 CE, the family meal table became (and is still today) a vital focal point in Jewish spirituality: a gathering place to be nourished by food—blessed and shared—and by the study of words of Torah.

### **Nourishment.**

The preparation and consumption of food is the obvious connecting element between Temple sacrifice and domestic meal table.

### **God's Word.**

Eating together should not be reduced to a physical activity devoid of spiritual values. In the Mishnah (*Avot* 3:4) the voice of Rabbi Shimon likens a meal without words of Torah to a sacrifice to a false god!

### **Reconciliation.**

*'In the days of the Temple, the altar served to atone for us; now it is our table that atones for us.'* (Rabbi

Yohanan, 3rd C.) The meal table is a place for reaching out to include others and to mend relationships.

### **Endurance.**

The contemporary Jewish custom of sprinkling salt when breaking bread is associated with the use of salt in Temple sacrifice (Lev. 2:13). The preservative quality of salt is a symbol of the endurance of the covenant (recall 'salt of the earth' in Mt 5:13).

**Holiness.** The Temple altar stands in a sanctuary. Likewise, the meal table requires a sanctuary setting, i.e., a home where love and religious values are taught and practised.



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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?*

Couched in the language of law and ritual, Leviticus is not always easy reading. Graphic accounts of animal sacrifice challenge the sensibilities of 21st century readers—Jewish and Christian alike. We need to be attentive to the text's ancient setting and its capacity to be interpreted.

Israel's ancient sacrificial system came to an end when, in 70 CE Jerusalem, a catastrophic event occurred that changed the face of Judaism forever: the Roman occupiers destroyed the Temple, the focal point of Jewish worship. We can only imagine the decimating effect on a religious people. Yet, as demonstrated time and again through history, the creative resilience of the Jewish people enabled them to reinterpret and live anew their traditions. Without a Temple, the rabbis proposed a different sacred focal point for Jewish consciousness: the altar of the Temple became the table of the family home, where meals were shared and Torah studied.

As we approach Leviticus, then, let's be sensitive to the ever-searching human heart desiring to express its encounter with divine mystery, in ancient times and still today.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Leviticus 1:1—5:26

In the wilderness, God calls and 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 repeated ritual, the identity of Israel, as God's holy, chosen people, is solidified.

Here we ponder the opening verse of Leviticus, including the traditional biblical device of repetition and the apparent redundancy of certain words.

## Tasting Torah

The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: *Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them...* (Lev. 1:1-2).

In just two verses there are five references to verbal activity: 'called,' 'spoke,' 'saying,' 'speak,' 'say'. The two verbs in v.1 were of particular interest to the rabbinic mind. Why does the text say that the Lord called and spoke to Moses? Are both verbs really necessary? What deeper meaning can we find here? From your own prayerful, imaginative insights, how would you and your havrutah partner answer this question?

## Touching Torah

By the tone with which somebody calls your name you can usually predict the sentiments of the message to follow! Likewise, the sages interpret 'call' as a relational indicator preceding the message itself. God addresses Moses as an intimate, *'like one whose hand is affectionately laid upon his son,'*<sup>1</sup> as one with whom there is an existing relationship forged through shared activity and purpose. The call comes not as a thunderous voice for all to hear, but from the Tent of Meeting (Tabernacle), i.e., from close by, from a site of great significance for both Moses and God.

Then again, for the sages the two verbs can suggest Moses' humility. Upon being called, he respectfully waits outside the Tent, ready for the next communication, while God surveys the completed Tabernacle with satisfaction.

## Depthing Torah

But how do these thoughts relate to the chapters of ritual and legal material that follow? Let the voices of the sages in the midrash guide us in the language of story...

The rabbis observe that the Torah contains three 'calls' to Moses: at the burning bush, at Mt Sinai, and now as he is about to be presented with Israel's ritual code. Say the rabbis, Moses repeatedly resisted God's call. At the burning bush he had to be convinced to go and confront Pharaoh. Having completed the task, he tried to step down from his public role, but God called him again, this time to lead the people out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, to be fed by manna, to receive the Law at Mt Sinai and build the Tabernacle. Moses did all this, but then felt he had done enough and again tried to retire from leadership. At this God said, I have one more great task for you: *teach my people to live as a holy nation, morally, spiritually.* Thus did God call Moses and present him with a code of holiness, the scriptures which we refer to as Leviticus, and which the Jewish people know by its Hebrew name *Vayikra*, 'he called'.

## Doing Torah

The sages show how, in a single verse, God's Word opens up an array of insights when we bring our minds and imaginations into prayerful play, and by association with other parts of the sacred text. What further insights emerged for you as part of this Torah discussion?



## Faith & life

The midrashic picture of Moses as a reluctant prophet-leader, gradually finding himself more and more enmeshed in God's service, speaks volumes to the life of faith. How many of us have offered a tentative 'yes' to an invitation to become involved in a parish community or in a work of the church, only to look back years later and see how it was the gateway to so much more; perhaps a lifetime of discipleship! Share some thoughts on your experience of 'God's call', its blessings and its challenges.

1. Leviticus Rabbah, 1, 15

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (London/NY: Soncino, 1983); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1992); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (NY: Avi, 2007). Scripture: NJPS