Sacrifice, Sin and Leadership

As we open the Book of Leviticus, also known as 'Vayikra' (Hb: 'He called'), we find not a series of action-packed stories, but a series of laws or instructions unveiled to the Israelites gathered at Mt Sinai: how to worship, how to behave, how to deal with transgressions. Through a system of order and repetitive ritual, the identity of Israel, as G-d's holy, chosen people, is solidified.

Chapter 4 of Leviticus describes a particular kind of sacrifice, the *chatat* offering or 'sin-offering', applying to unintended violations of ethical or ritual prohibitions. The ritual is carried out in four different ways, depending on the role or status of the sinner – namely, whether it is a priest, a representative body of the community, a chieftain/leader, or an ordinary individual.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, following the searchings of Jewish tradition, notes a curious anomaly in the way the four categories are treated in the Torah. In three of the four categories, the text prefaces the law by using the word *im* ('if'):

"*If* the priest sins…",

"*If* the community leadership sins…",

"*If* an individual sins…".

However, when it comes to the chieftain/leader, it uses a different word, *asher* ('when')"

"*When* a leader sins…"

Note that the Hebrew word for chieftan/leader here is *nasi*, which usually refers to someone who rules with political power, such as a king or community elder (unlike a religious authority or prophet). The Torah seems to say that while priests, people and community bodies *might* sin, it can be presumed that the leader *will* sin.

What do you make of this curious detail? Read and ponder chapter 4. Talk it over with a friend or study partner. Why would the Torah single out this form of leadership as being particularly vulnerable to doing the wrong thing?

This question fuels the interpretative energies of the sages and we find a number of different reasons offered in Jewish tradition. Here we mention three, as unpacked by Jonathan Sacks.

First, those who have political power often have greater wealth and influence than others and therefore are more likely to be corrupted by that wealth and power. (This is the opinion of the Italian Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno, d.1549)

Second, whereas priests are regularly in contact with the realm of the sacred, leaders are constantly dealing in secular affairs and therefore more easily swayed by what is politically expedient rather than what is holy. (See the work of French Torah commentator Elie Munk, d.1981)

Third, leaders with political power rely on popular support in a way that priests and individuals don't, and can be swayed by what people want rather than what G-d is asking. (The opinion of Meir Simcha ha-Cohen of Dvinsk, Eastern Europe, d. 1926)

Sacks suggests other explanations. Explore them in his commentary and compare them with your own thoughts on this fascinating topic.

Sacks offers a profound conclusion to his discussion. Rather than leave us viewing political leaders in a poor light or standing in moral judgment of the sins of others, he notes that the Jewish approach to leadership deftly holds together both realism and idealism. In the light of Torah, we can say that leaders, who bear a heavy burden of responsibility and are often dealing with impossibly complex circumstances, are not expected to always get it right, but what matters is that they admit mistakes and are responsive to prophetic critique that keeps calling them back to transcendent standards.

One particular rabbinic interpretation sums up with a word-play on *asher* ('when') and a similar sounding word, *ashrei* ('happy'): "Happy is the generation whose leader is willing to bring a sin offering for their mistakes."

Bibliography: Jonathan Sacks, "The Sins of a Leader" in *Covenant and Conversation. Leviticus: The Book of Holiness.* Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2015