

**Parshat Vayikra**  
**March 15, 2008**  
**“What does the torah say about the governor?”**  
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Will he or won't he? Will he speak about Eliot Spitzer or will he avoid the subject completely? How many think he'll speak about it? How many think he'll avoid it completely?

Well, I wanted to avoid the subject completely. I wanted to declare that Temple Beth Shalom would be an Eliot Spitzer Free Zone and this could truly be a sanctuary – a place of refuge from the deluge of reports and stories and characterizations and information that have inundated us these past few days. *Maspek k'far* My heart goes out to all of us who have been subjected to conversations and characterizations we would have preferred not having. My heart especially goes out to parents who have had to deal with questions from their children that could not have been easy to answer. The youngest of our children may not have been able to understand what the governor did and why he had to resign his office but they may see his wife standing next to him on the news and wonder why she looks so sad. Older children might focus on his three beautiful daughters and wonder how could this happen and could it happen to my family?

And through it all the coverage has been so demeaning and the wisdom and insight so lacking -- the award for the dumbest most insensitive comment of the week has to go to Dr. Laura – Laura Schlesinger the Conservative talk show host who when asked why men cheat responded: “Men need validation. When they come in to the world they are born of women and getting their validation from mommy is the beginning of needing it from a woman. And when the wife does not focus in on his needs and feelings...” well you can see where this is going. Well it just got so ridiculous that as much as I wanted to avoid this subject – I felt compelled to offer another voice, a Jewish voice, a torah voice on the very sad events and the human tragedy of this past week.

This morning we began in our reading *sefer vayikra*, the third of the five books of Moses, the Book of Leviticus. The sacrificial system which we confront in today's torah reading is at one and the same time the most archaic element of our tradition and yet possibly the most contemporary and relevant. What could be more out-dated than the subject of animal sacrifices? Yet, what could be more contemporary than five Biblical chapters on the subject of sin and remorse and the desire to achieve wholeness following our human tendency to fall short? As Chancellor Ismar Schorsch once commented, “in the sacrifices of *Vayikra*, we are dealing with a case of ritual inspired by morality.”

I guess the first thing that shocked me this past week was our shock – the sense of surprise and outrage that wound its way through the remarks of one after another commentator. The idea of a leader who does not measure up to the high expectations we held out for him or her – this is news? The list of contemporary leaders who have been brought low by inappropriate dealings when it comes to sex or money is long and significant. It is a reality as old as the Bible itself. In today's *Haftarah* we read how God removed the kingship from Saul and gave it to David out of disappointment that he did not live up to his expectations and alas David did not fare much better – remember Batsheva? Need I say more?

And how will Governor Spitzer be remembered? Well, if the pundits of this past week have anything to say about it – it seems clear that his legacy is to be remembered as a liar, a cheat, an immoral reprobate and an arrogant hypocrite.

How does the Bible, the Talmud and Jewish tradition remember David whose sin was arguably much worse than Governor Spitzer's? (At least Governor Spitzer did not have anyone killed to get his woman) Ask any school child who King David is – why one of the first songs every child learns as part of their Jewish education says it all: *sing: David, melech ysrael – hai, hai v'kayam* – which can be translated simply as “David, king of Israel, lives and endures” or more poetically and maybe more accurately: “David, king of Israel lives on in the hearts of the people!”

What is going on here? We Jews celebrate and sanctify King David – despite his moral failings. Why is contemporary American society so judgmental and traditional Judaism that established these morals to begin with – so, well, forgiving and understanding?

To begin with – I think it has more than a little to do with our expectations – what we expect from our leaders and how we respond when they do not live up to the highest standards of their office. I believe that there is a lot of hypocrisy involved in this Spitzer story and it is not limited to the actions of the Governor.

Many have commented on the role that arrogance has played in the downfall of the Governor – his holier than thou righteousness – that he had been so unforgiving, so unsympathetic to those he prosecuted over the years and that what goes around comes around. That the glee felt by many over the revelation of the Governor's own less than stellar behavior – was in fact in direct proportion to his conceit, egotism and superiority that he lorded over so many others in their times of vulnerability during his rise up the political ladder.

I think there is some truth to this. The rabbis insist that the torah demands humility from the leaders of the people. The rabbis note the unusual use of the adverb *asher* in verse 4:22 of today's Torah portion - look at it with me if you will - page 598, v. 22: *asher nasi yechetah*, "When (*asher*) the chieftain does wrong by violating any of the Lord's prohibitive commandments..."

Since the more common word used throughout our *parasha* is *im*, "if," - look at v. 3, v.13, v. 27, v.32 - the use of *asher* here in v. 22 struck the rabbis as somewhat odd - the anomaly stimulates an inspired *midrash* by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai,: "Fortunate (reading *ashrey* as opposed to *asher*) is the generation whose leader is prepared to bring a sacrifice for his or her error." Fortunate is the generation whose leader is prepared to admit his mistakes... hmm

The statement grants an illuminating insight into Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's conception of leadership. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai led the battered Jewish community of Palestine after the destruction of the Second Temple. He knew that the times called for bold action, but he was also acutely aware that grave mistakes could be made. The correct pose was not to avoid any initiative, but to act assertively in a spirit of humility. A sense of **fallibility** ought to deter leaders from defending acts of omission or commission when the evidence shows that they were deeply flawed. A leader who never errs, never grows. *Ashrey*, fortunate is the generation whose leaders are prepared to bring a sacrifice and quick to admit their own fallibility."

Humility is in short supply in our times. The motto of contemporary political and business leaders is “never apologize and never explain.” And yet if Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai is

correct, it is a key element of real leadership. In politics, in sports, and certainly in the world of pop stars - humility is out and arrogance is in. This is the age of Donald Trump - "You're Fired" - not exactly the epitome of compassion and understanding for human frailty. This is the age of Simon Cowell of American Idol fame – crushing the hopes and dreams of contestants to the glee of millions. And even in the world of academia or medicine, arrogance is in and humility is out. A recent study showed that there would be far fewer medical mal-practice suits if doctors would just say, "I'm sorry when they make a mistake..." This study suggests that some law suits are born out of a frustration by patients who just want to hear an apology for the wrong they perceived was done to them. Doctors respond that there are times they would like to own up to their mistakes but the legal system does not permit them - as any hint of humility or error, will result in mega-million dollar lawsuits that can destroy a career. And round and round we go.

In a society where one avoids apologizing at all costs, where an apology has been equated with career suicide – well in such an atmosphere I understand why the press takes such delight in the drama of Eliot Spitzer being forced to make the dreaded apology with his wife at his side and under the glaring lights of complete public humiliation.

Infallibility is not a Jewish concept. Today's torah portion is about fallibility - it is about human failing. It is about what we are supposed to do when we and when our leaders do wrong. Chancellor Schorsch points out that: "with the end of the sacrificial cult, things have gotten more complicated. Bringing a *hattat* offering spared one the need for a confessional statement. The ritual said it all. In our day we must put remorse into rhetoric, as well as deeds, and if the words are uttered begrudgingly, parsimoniously and selectively they remain ineffectual, the stain of moral contamination endures."

So what would I tell my children – if they were still young and not already adults living on their own – I would teach them *parshat Vayikra*. I would teach them that the ritual of bringing a sacrifice to the Temple was a powerful acknowledgement of the fundamental humanity of us all. I would say to my children, as I hope you will say to yours, that in Judaism we acknowledge that human beings are not good or evil but have the potential to do good or bad things. We make choices—and sometimes, too many times we make bad choices.

This past Monday night I taught my Machon Beth Sholom High School class a section from the Talmud that I did not realize would be so useful to them on Tuesday. We studied the section from *Brachot* that teaches that each of us is created with a *yetzer hatov* and a *yetzer hara* - with the good and evil inclinations, tendencies as part of our fundamental natures. These are two forces that are in each of us. There are times when we want things, we want to succeed, we will do anything to get ahead – and these are natural urges that we all have. They are not necessarily bad urges unless we allow them to go unchecked and undisciplined – then they can and will become destructive forces in our lives. The *yetzer hatov* and the *yetzer hara* are part of all of us – they make us who we are, but, we must learn to balance them and keep them in check.

And the more successful you are – the greater the temptations and the greater the *yetzers*. People in positions of authority often have powerful *yetzers* – inclinations that motivate and urge them to succeed and dominate – it's that inner drive that compels them to succeed and to rise to the top of their class, their profession. But they were never taught the need for humility and balance. Everything in contemporary society bows at the altar of success – and the downfall is just around the corner. The truth is and too many learn it like Governor Spitzer, the

hard way, the truth is that they are bound by the same moral standards and values as the rest of us.

Allow me to end by teaching you a short piece of *gemorrah* – it is from Sukkot 52a. First I'll read it, then I'll try and explain it: “The sage Abbaye once heard a certain man say to a certain woman, “Come let us arise and travel together.” “I will follow them,” thought Abbaye, “and keep them from sinning with one another.” He followed them across the meadows. When they were about to separate, he heard one of them say to the other, “Your company was pleasant, and now the way is long so I must say goodbye. Abayee begins to cry and says: “If it had been I, I could not have restrained myself.” In deep despair, he went and leaned against a door post. An old man came up to him and taught him: “*the greater the man, the greater the evil inclination.*” *Sukkot 52a*

What is going on here? The great rabbi and teacher Abayee overhears a conversation between a man and a woman whom he knows are not married to each other. They propose to travel off together alone. Abayee assumes the worst and decides to follow them and if in fact they are up to no good intercede and prevent them from sinning. Alas they part ways and Abayee discovers that their intentions were honorable all along. He however begins to cry – why? Because he ultimately comes to realize that this incident revealed more about himself - than it did about the couple. Their intentions were harmless –his thoughts were not. And he is honest enough to admit to himself: “If it had been I, I could not have restrained myself.” He is overcome by his own inadequacy and vulnerability. He cries and is comforted by an old man – not a rabbi or scholar or teacher – but an old man – someone who probably has seen his share of life – and the old man places his arm around the great sage and teaches him – “the greater the man, the greater the evil inclination...” In essence – don't be too hard on yourself – it is not an easy struggle that engages us all – and an even more challenging one for someone like yourself.

There is so much to learn from this *gemorrah* and I hope we will have a chance to study it together at greater length on some other occasion – but for now, let me simply point out – that ours is a tradition of compassion and understanding. It is one that expects much from its leaders – but also understands that they are *basar v'dam* – flesh and blood like you and me. It is a story of humility and not arrogance. What separates the story of King David or Abayee from the story of Governor Spitzer is not the sin or the human frailty – but rather the attitude that each leader brought to their task. David and Abayee brought humility and humanity and they therefore earned and deserved our compassion and our forgiveness.

Teach your children to succeed. Teach them to strive to be the best that they can possibly be. But first, teach them *Sefer Vayikra* – teach them humility first.