

„You shall love your neighbour as yourself.“
(Lev 19:18)

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The book of Leviticus

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JEWISH PREACHING ON LEVITICUS

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My presentation is divided into three sections illustrating uses of the Book of Leviticus (primarily the chapters highlighted by the Conference) in three different contexts: Internal Jewish Issues, Jewish-Christian Relations, and Social Justice.

I. Internal Jewish Issues

a. Many sermons deal with issues relating to Jewish doctrine, some of which were contentious. I begin with an example of a sermon that somewhat unexpectedly turns into a discussion of the nature of the messianic age. It was delivered by Saul Levi Morteira, who served as rabbi of the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam from the year 1619 until his death in 1660. This was a fascinating, dynamic community, created ex nihilo in a city with no Jewish presence until around the year 1600, which I have written about extensively in my book *Exile in Amsterdam*: all of its members in the first generations were immigrants from Portugal, the descendants of those native Portuguese Jews and those refugees from the 1492 Expulsion from Spain who were victims of a universal forced conversion in 1497. They knew that they wanted to be Jews, but they had very little knowledge of what Judaism was—except that it rejected the New Testament and several core Christian beliefs. For such a community, the sermons delivered in Portuguese by their rabbi (who had grown up and been educated in Venice) were an ongoing programme of adult education: rooted in Scripture, presenting problems of interpretation and exploring conceptual problems in a clear and accessible manner that did not presume extensive prior knowledge.

The sermon I would like to discuss, delivered around 1626, is based on the seventh verse of one of our conference chapters, Leviticus 25, presenting the institution of the Sabbatical year. After reading his theme-verse (25:7), Morteira begins with a general perception of human psychology:

It is very common that when people have experienced good, successful times that have gone by, they set up markers and reminders in order to remember the period of their prime in the period of their affliction ...

He then moves from the life of the individual to experience and memory in a much broader sense, familiar to all who know the way the Bible begins:

Now what could be more worthy of longing and nostalgic desire than the primordial period when God created the first human being before he was cursed—that period called by some the “Golden Age”. After the sin of the first human being, the blessing was lost and transformed into a curse. Surely it is appropriate to yearn with sighs for that time, a period of

tranquil gratification (nahat) for God and for human beings. This is especially so since God will comfort us with the restoration of this period if we steadfastly await it.

Note how that last sentence signals that the issue is not merely about the relationship between the present and an ideal past, but the future as well. It is indeed this theme, just hinted here, that will turn out to be the central topic of the sermon.

Still in the introduction, the preacher introduces the lesson from the Torah that his congregants have heard read from the Torah scrolls:

*In order that this blessed time will never depart from our memory, God has commanded us the Sabbatical year, in which everything will be ownerless (hefker), so that it might be a model (dimyon) of that good time when the verse "By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread" (Gen 3:19) was not yet in effect, and so that the land might have a rest, a Sabbath of the Eternal (cf. Lev 25:2), when no one will toil and grow weary but there will be plenty to eat. Furthermore, in that year, as in the primordial days, "the small and the great alike are there, and the slave is free of his master" (Job 3:19), and all are equal as originally. For the Torah says, "You, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound labourers who live with you" (Lev 25:6). And yet more than this: even the animals will eat with us, as the Torah says, "**and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield**" (Lev 25:7): a model equally for the time of creation and for the future."*

He has now arrived at the sermon's theme-verse—once again with a hint of its relevance not just to the past but to the future messianic era anticipated by Jews. The point is clear: the Sabbatical year provides a memory of Eden and a foretaste of the messianic age. But the content of the theme-verse—pertaining to the status and behaviour of animals—is not without problems, and that will be the focus of his sermon.

The body of the sermon and turns away from the Torah verse to a discussion of the famous messianic verses in Isaiah 11:6–9: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together ... the cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw ..." This is clearly a messianic vision of an idealized future that may indeed be understood as a restoration of the Garden of Eden. The issue for the preacher—as it had been for many previous Jewish thinkers—is whether these verses are to be interpreted literally or metaphorically. At stake is the conception of the messianic age: whether it is the result of a supernatural intrusion into history and an inversion of the natural order, or in essential continuity of our own experience of history and nature with the messianic age.

After discussing the various options, Morteira eventually reaffirms his own position: that the messianic age will be a restoration of the Edenic past, when wolves and lambs did indeed lie down together, although he held that this would apply only to the circumstances in Land of Israel.

*If so, it is appropriate to understand these verses [from Isaiah] according to their simple, obvious meaning. As a remembrance of the past, arousing desire for the great perfection of the future, God commanded the Sabbatical year, which teaches us both about the time of Creation and the time of the Messiah. God commanded, "**and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield**" (Lev 25:7) ... meaning, if you fulfil [the commandment of the Sabbatical year], that time will come when the domesticated cattle and the wild beasts will eat together, "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb ... the cow and the bear shall graze", and even the lion—the king of the beasts—will come to gather food, for "the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw".¹*

¹ Saul Levi Morteira, *Giv'at Sha'ul* (Amsterdam 1645); in the Warsaw 1912 edition, pp. 201–05.

Thus there was a golden age in past, and there will be a golden age in future. At least for those Jews living in the Land of Israel, the Sabbatical year was an obligation at present as a source of memory and of hope. Note that the sermon addresses only one aspect of the messianic age, containing nothing about its other components: messiah himself, who is included, what happens to Gentile nations or to “New Christians” choosing to remain in Portugal, resurrection of dead, and so forth. Such themes would be addressed in other sermons.²

b. I leap now from the 13th to the 20th century, when intense of antagonism by the Orthodox against the flourishing Reform movement in Judaism generated strong language from the pulpit. The account of the death of Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Abihu, in Leviticus chapter 10 is a classical conundrum, open to various interpretations, eminently usable by polemicists for a variety of purposes. Louis Rabinowitz, a distinguished scholar of medieval history as well as an Orthodox congregational rabbi, became Chief Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues of the Transvaal in South Africa following the Second World War. In a sermon delivered in the late 1940s, he describes this passage as

the most poignant personal tragedy in the whole range of Biblical literature, the death of the two eldest sons of Aaron at the very moment of their chiefest joy.

What was the sin that justified such a tragic event? Where the Bible is ambiguous—saying merely that they offered *esh zarah*, “strange fire, which [God] had not commanded them” (Lev 10:1), the Rabbis enter to fill in the gap. One interpretation is that

“they expounded the Law in the presence of Moses,” presumptuously claiming a greater authority than his.

This interpretation opens the gates to a litany of sectarian movements throughout Jewish history that have

attempted to contaminate the pure oil of the lamp of the Lord by the admixture of foreign polluted doctrine. Samaritans, Sadducees, Essenes, Jewish Christians, Karaites, Shabbatai Zvi’ists, Frankists, and lastly Reformists.

These sectarians were guilty of two kinds of offence: setting up their own intellect as the arbiter of behaviour rather than accepting the authority of appointed leadership, and allowing “emotionalism, mysticism, irrationalism” to sweep them off their feet. The preacher notes that the sectarian groups of the past have all but disappeared; those who affirmed the true Torah tradition have survived.

It is the last-mentioned group, the “Reformists”, that represents the challenge of the present. They may claim to be the wave of the future, but

*Inexorably and inescapably, they must die before the Lord and be dead to Judaism ... Show me Reform Jews of the third generation in any appreciable numbers and I will withdraw all my strictures. The apathetic son of the Orthodox Jew becomes a Reform Jew, and the son of the Reform Jew becomes a Christian ... They are our own children who are committing spiritual suicide before our eyes. We cannot be indifferent, we grieve and we mourn, our hearts bleed, but we carry on; we carry on with the true service of the Lord.*³

² For a full treatment of Morteira’s messianic doctrine as reflected in the sermons, see Marc Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Morteira’s Sermons to a Congregation of “New Jews”* (Cincinnati: HUC Press 2005), pp. 341–74.

³ Louis Rabinowitz, “Strange Fire”, in: *Out of the Depths: Sermons for Sabbaths and Festivals* (Johannesburg, Eagle Press, Ltd. 1951), pp. 122–25.

Here the biblical text expanded by the rabbinic comments provides a foundation for a strong polemic against diversity within the tradition.

II. Jewish-Christian tensions

The second theme for Jewish preaching on Leviticus is attitudes toward Christianity.

a. I begin with one of the two most famous verses from entire book of Leviticus: *Kedoshim tih'yu, ki kadosh ani H' eloheikhem*, "You shall be holy for I the Eternal your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). The preacher is Jacob Anatoli, who flourished in southern France and Sicily in the first half of the 13th century. Highly influenced by Maimonides, Anatoli was engaged in translation of Arabic texts, working together with the Christian scholar Michael Scotus, sponsored by the Emperor Frederick II. His sermons provide a philosophical rationalistic reading of Scripture, frequently citing interpretations by Scotus and occasionally even an insight to the Emperor.

The sermon on the lesson *Kedoshim* (Leviticus 19) is a homiletical exploration of contesting concepts of holiness. The injunction to be holy, addressed to an entire people,

should be a source of great trepidation and concern for us: that God demands of a people a quality that is attributed to Him. Indeed, at first sight, it might seem as if God is seeking a pretext to punish us.

Obviously, he cannot accept this view, which might be identified with the Pauline critique of Judaism as system of Law setting standards impossible to reach. The challenge, therefore, is to understand the commandment properly. This is rooted in the rabbinic association of the word, *kedoshim*, "holy," with *perushim*, "separate". Something is holy, sacred, if it is removed from ordinary usage and set aside for a special purpose. That is Anatoli's model for the Jewish people:

We are the people called by God's name, as we segregate every aspect of our way from that of the other peoples, and remain separate from them in our good qualities that God has taught us, cleaving unto him and imitating him to the extent of our apprehension of reality. This is that the Sages said: "You shall be holy": you shall be separate ... As I am separate, so shall you be separate". This implies a similarity regarding the separateness, not that God's separateness is actually similar to ours, but rather just as He is distinct from every other being, so we should be distinct from the other peoples in the cleanliness of our bodies, and in [the nature of] our pleasures, and in our unwillingness to go astray after them.

The sole path to holiness for the Jew is the observance of God's commandments. Here the preacher identifies explicitly an alternative pattern that he rejects, identifying it with a form of extreme, world-renouncing asceticism. Holiness is *not* to be attained

through different kinds of difficult service that the other peoples have seized upon, involving affliction of soul and body, and dwelling on mountains and other [such] places, until they even burn their sons and daughters by fire. God does not require this or anything like it from us, only that we abandon all that is superfluous ... For God does not hate the body at all, but desires that it fulfil His words justly in order to bring life to the soul, and wants the body to live out all the days apportioned to it.⁴

⁴ Jacob Anatoli, *Mamad ha-Talmidim* (Lyck 1866), pp. 103b–104a). The reference to "burning their sons and daughters with fire" (cf. Deut 12:31), is apparently a metaphorical reference to the burning of enforced celibacy and of fasting among children given over to monastic life. For a fuller treatment, see Marc Saperstein, *Christians and Christianity in the*

Here, and elsewhere in his writing, Anatoli counters the Pauline critique by maintaining that God's expectations of the Jewish people are actually *less* burdensome than the religious discipline that Christians impose upon themselves. What is essential is to preserve the uniqueness in the life of the commandments, remain different from the surrounding peoples.

b. Here again is the 20th-century Orthodox rabbi, Louis Rabinowitz of South Africa, anchoring this ideal in a different verse from our conference chapters: "You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws. My rules alone shall you observe, and faithfully follow My laws: I the Lord am your God" (Lev 18:3–4). Rabinowitz begins by relating these verses to their original historical context, although it is not the Egypt of the archaeologists but the Egypt of biblical mythos that he invokes. The commandment responds to the influence of the "utterly corrupt Egyptian civilisation of the time, with its animal worship, its incestuous licentiousness, its utter moral depravity", which he says are "too well known to need detailing". The lingering influence of that environment was a mortal spiritual danger for the recently liberated Israelites. And the environment of the Canaanites was "infinitely worse". In order to withstand these potential influences in their past and future environments, there was need for a counterbalancing force: "My rules alone".

Rabinowitz proceeds to apply this pattern to the history of Israel in exile: a people that "retained its spiritual values in surroundings of degeneracy and moral corruption".

The world has seen no worse example of the corruption of morals than the Roman Empire during the centuries of its decline, the Dark Ages which followed, the gloomy Middle Ages. Through these ages the Jew walked, despised, reviled, persecuted, expelled, discriminated against, yet he retained his spiritual values and his moral sanity. What was it that enabled him to do so? ... It was his adhering to "My judgments and My statutes", his passionate adherence to the dictates and tenets of his faith.⁵

This model takes Egypt and Canaan as a paradigm for all of Jewish experience. It is a strong expression of what has been called "the lachrymose conception of Jewish history" as an ordeal of uninterrupted suffering—somewhat disturbing in that it comes from a medievalist historian who knew better. It recognises nothing of value in external culture, which—despite the apparent glories of medieval Gothic cathedrals, scholastic theology, Franciscan spirituality and their Islamic counterparts—are nothing more than seduction to depravity. The Torah stands in stark opposition to the world outside. It is clearly not the most promising model for contemporary religious dialogue.

An alternative model refuses to take the caricature of Egypt and Canaan in this verse as a paradigm for later civilisations. It recognises that Jewish experience under Christianity and Islam was not that of a people hermetically isolating itself from the world around them. It is rather a story of Jews encountering the Other, identifying aspects of the surrounding culture that could indeed be integrated with Jewish tradition, and, while safe-guarding against the temptations to abandon Judaism completely and join the majority group, enriched the Jewish tradition with elements drawn from the dominant religious culture.

Sermons of Jacob Anatoli, in: *"Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn": Themes and Texts in Traditional Jewish Preaching* (Cincinnati: HUC Press 1996), pp. 54–74.

⁵ Rabinowitz, "The Vacuum of the Mind", in: *Out of the Depths*, pp. 134–37.

c. This alternative model is illustrated in a sermon by the late Rabbi Louis Jacobs on precisely the same verses from Leviticus 18. He presents the phrase, “nor shall you follow their laws” as the basis for an important principle in Jewish law, “the law of the Gentile” (*hukkat ha-goy*), which was used by some legal authorities to prohibit for Jews any pattern of behaviour that predominate in Gentile society. Jacobs notes, however, that some practices clearly derived from Gentile usage were permitted by Jewish legal experts. A compelling example was the use of an academic gown in 15th century Italy, which clearly came from the Christian universities but was not universally condemned. Through much of the 20th century, Orthodox British rabbis (including Jacobs himself) wore clerical collars patterned after those of the Christian clergy, as a sign of their position. “Provided a practice was universal among human beings, or had no close association with religious or superstitious ideas, even if peculiar to a particular people, it did not fall under the heading of *hukkat ha-goy*.” Rather than reading the Leviticus 18 verses as a broad prohibition, Jacobs saw a grey area, with a line “finely drawn by the good taste and sense of discrimination of the Jewish community”.⁶

III. Social justice

A third theme is of Jewish concern for problems of social injustice in the broader society. I confess that it is difficult to find much evidence of this theme in pre-modern Jewish preaching; Jewish leaders apparently assumed that they had enough problems in their own communities, and rarely expressed outrage at the lot of the serfs who were bound to the land. As Jews become more integrated into the society and began to feel that they were indeed part of the body politic, the universalistic concerns with social justice began to enter their sermons.⁷

a. This type of preaching could be especially precarious for a rabbi in the middle of the 20th century attacking segregation in the American south, or apartheid in South Africa. We have encountered Louis Rabinowitz twice already, in a passage on “strange fire” condemning sectarian movements within Judaism, and a passage on the depravity of Egyptian and Canaanite society applied to the need for Jewish separatism. Here is a third sermon, in which he appears perhaps in a more enlightened manner. It is on one of the most challenging lessons for preachers, containing Leviticus chapters 14–15, entirely devoted to the details of rituals concerning the leper, fungal rot on the walls of a house, and various discharges or secretions from the human body that produce ritual impurity. It is notoriously difficult to find homiletical material from these chapters. In addition, as Rabinowitz notes, the lesson ends with the word *tame’ah*, “unclean / impure”, a negative conclusion quite unusual for liturgical readings from the Bible.

Rabinowitz entitled his sermon, “The Seamy Side of Life”. After reviewing the unpleasant content in these central chapters of Leviticus, he makes a general point about the human tendency to “turn ... away from unpleasant things and to adopt the traditional ostrich-like policy of believing that if one does not see a thing it does not exist”. He notes that there may even be some in the congregation who believe he has already gone too far in his sermon by dwelling on what is unpleasant, what is not nice. But he pushes on to his central claim:

By ignoring the existence of filth and uncleanness and evil, we not only fail in our divine duty of purifying the world, but we actively, if unconsciously, cause the spread of the contagion until it affects our own lives and our own bodies.

⁶ Louis Jacobs, *Jewish Preaching: Homilies and Sermons* (London: Vallentine Mitchell 2004), pp. 120–21.

⁷ See the brief review in Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War*, pp. 54–64.

This claim is concretized with reference to an article in a leading South African newspaper from the previous Sunday, a “vivid and horrifying account” of a non-European hospital in Johannesburg, with 48 beds for 160 tuberculosis patients, most of them lying on the floors. It is a picture, the preacher states, that cries out for “immediate redress *solely in the name of suffering humanity.*” But he continues with an appeal to self-interest, for the article states that when even the floors are filled, those least ill are asked to leave the hospital, still suffering from a disease which can infect anyone—including Europeans—whom they approach. And so the conclusion: “we ignore unpleasantness and filth at our own personal peril.” Therefore the need on occasion to turn our mind to unpleasant things, “to the seamy side of life ...” That is the meaning of these chapters.⁸

This is a sermon that does not abandon the subject matter of this section of Leviticus by verbal plays that transform leprosy into the sin of insulting speech, as the Rabbis did. It confronts the subject matter directly and applies it to a real problem in the society where the preacher was living. To be sure, many were indeed not pleased with this kind of preaching. In another sermon, Rabinowitz says to his listeners that he is sure they will be “wryly amused, for instance, to hear that a member of my congregation wrote a letter to the Council asking them to forbid me from speaking on the native question, but to confine myself to Jewish ethics!”⁹

b. I end with the most famous verse in Leviticus, as discussed by Rabbi Louis Jacobs.

*The word ve-ahavta [“you shall love”] in “ve-ahavta le-re’akha kamokha” [“you shall love your neighbour as yourself”] in our text refers to the sympathy and understanding and the desire for identification with other human beings that results from reflection on such things as our common humanity; that all human beings have the same basic needs, are hurt in the same way and are pleased in the same way, that their happiness is our happiness, and their misery our misery ... Above all, the way to cultivate the love of one’s fellows is to reflect that they are all created in the image of God; that He loves them all and has a place for them in His purpose.*¹⁰

This is not a sermon that engages directly concrete problems of social injustice, as does the sermon by Rabinowitz. Rather, it establishes the verse from Leviticus as the basis for an underlying solidarity uniting all human beings, an obligation of empathy, a common dignity that cuts across divisions of ethnic identity, social class, even religious commitment. I would guess that this is a sentiment that any Christian priest or pastor, fundamentalist, evangelical, or liberal could express from the pulpit using precisely the same words as this orthodox Rabbi.

“Strange fire” representing challenges from within one’s own community, the command to be “holy” requiring separation and insulation from the majority religious culture, “the seamy side of life” as mandate confront the oppressed within our societies—these are some of the ways in which the Book of Leviticus has served Jewish preachers from the Middle Ages to our own times.

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⁸ Rabinowitz, “The Seamy Side of Life”, in: *Out of the Depths*, pp. 130–33.

⁹ Rabinowitz, *Sparks from the Anvil* (New York: Bloch 1988), p. 198.

¹⁰ Louis Jacobs, *Jewish Preaching*, pp. 124–25.