

## “You have forgotten me”

**Credit:** by Patrice Fischer, Ohr Chadash, Clearwater, FL

This week’s Torah portion from Leviticus is difficult reading. Instead of stories of God’s great actions on behalf of our people, soaring encouragement about his love for us, or even anecdotes concerning the comings and goings of the patriarchs, we get a list of rules. Lots of rules.

- Rules that can be readily appropriated and used by 21st Century people: (19:11) “Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another.”
- Rules that are not so easily applied in modern life: (20:1) “Any Israelite or any alien living in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech must be put to death.”
- Rules that, if our congregations enforced now, would send us to prison or even worse: (20:9) “If anyone curses his father or mother, he must be put to death.”
- Rules that do not apply to us at the current time, at all: (19:5-7) “When you sacrifice a fellowship offering to the Lord . . . it shall be eaten on the day you sacrifice it, or on the next day; anything left over until the third day must be burned up.”

Granted, these rules may seem long ago and far away to many of us. It seems as though these are the kinds of statements that make millions of modern people, both Jewish and Christian, skip quickly over Leviticus to get to the “good stuff” (actually, they also tend to skip over Numbers, too, but that is a story for a different day).

As modern, enlightened people, we hate lists of rules that are not explained, yet must be followed. We like our instructions for how we should act in life to be reasoned out, buttressed by pertinent examples, explicated through case studies, and reached through consensus. Finally, we believe that the final questions that must be answered to each individual are: “What’s in it for me? Why should I buy into this law code? How will it enable me to get what I want?”

The compelling reason that these rules do not seem to apply to us today (well, some of them do, but it seems like less than half that apply to us or are doable today) is that they represent a different paradigm. Briefly stated within this context, a paradigm is the world view that governs the text we read and which informs us what appropriate assumptions to make to understand what is being said. We often have trouble comprehending these lists of rules because we live with a different world view, as 21st century Western hemisphere dwellers, from that of the original audience. But it is more than just a worldview difference, it is a paradigm difference. Shifts in paradigms down through the centuries mean that not only do rules given at one point in history become dated and seemingly irrelevant, but that these statements in Leviticus do not seem to answer the questions that we ask about life today.

A wise professor once said: “A paradigm shift not only means that the answers to your questions change, it means that your questions themselves change.” We have changed from people who want to hear about us to a people who a people who demand to hear about me. Our culture is full of “me” expectations. These are sometimes known as entitlements. We in the Torah-believing community see this underlying selfishness within our society as real and undesirable, yet we feel helpless to really change ourselves.

That is the point where the descriptions found in the Haftarah this week are very helpful. When the Jewish elders in their Babylonian exile came to Ezekiel, they wanted to inquire of the Lord about what was happening in their homeland (Ezek. 20:1 ff.). Perhaps, underlying it all, was their lack of understanding what the Lord was doing during their times. Thousands of Jews (most of them upper-class and well-educated) pushed into exile. The oppression around Jerusalem by Babylon, who was now calling the shots. Evil practices both inside and outside the temple. How could these things be? What is God thinking? The answer given by the Lord during these two sections of Ezekiel is quite harsh, even to our modern ears.

The list of the charges against the Jewish nation at that time is found specifically in our Leviticus reading this week. They have been judged and found guilty by their own God, based on plain-spoken directions in the word of God that had been there for all to see, for centuries. The list of the crimes that Jerusalem in particular was being punished for is extensive (Ezek. 22:6ff.): Princes shedding blood, treating father and mother with contempt, oppressing the alien, mistreating the orphan and the widow, despising holy things, desecrating Sabbaths, committing lewd acts openly, slandering each other, accepting bribes, violating women, extorting neighbors, etc.

The coup de grace, which applies to us all in any paradigm or worldview, is in v. 12: “‘and you have forgotten me,’ declares the sovereign Lord.”

We also, not just the Jewish civilization at that time, have participated in this extensive list of crimes, and need to remember the Lord. Let’s reread this week what it is he wants, what he expects from us, how he wants us to conduct ourselves in our world, and ask for his help, guidance and forgiveness as we step forward.