**PARASHAT TZAV**

First Year of Triennial Cycle

*Va-Yikra* 6.1 – 7.10

*Eitz Hayim* 613; Hertz 429; Plaut 781

Fifteen years ago, I gave a d’var on *Va-Yikra*, the first parashah in the book of *Va-Yikra* (aka *Leviticus*). Today’s parashah is Tzav, which we read on the immediate next Shabbat. Because the same issues arise, I am going to start my d’var this morning with a summary of my old d’var on *Va-Yikra.* Then, in the second part of the d’var, I will explore the question of what it means to be cut off (כרת; Karet) from one’s family and relatives, a punishment that is cited numerous times in the *Book of Va-Yikra.*

**PART ONE**

My previous d’var began with the question: Why deal with anything in the first seven chapters of *Vayikra*, which focus on the sacrifices brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. How can this priestly stuff, which ceased to be observed after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, say anything to us modern Jews living two millennia later in the Diaspora? I for one have not the least desire to see the Temple rebuilt, the Priesthood re-established, and sacrifices reinstated.

Nevertheless, I can accept the argument that we should read these chapters of the Torah, at least once every three years. After all, it is not just Torah in the general sense of Jewish learning but *The* Torah in the specific sense of the first five books of Moses. We would be out of step with every other Jewish community in the world if we ignored this part of our tradition. Moreover, the Temple and the sacrifices are part of our history. There really was a Temple, and the Temple really was served by priests, and those priests really did offer sacrifices. The Temple and the sacrifices are mentioned in every Amidah, and it would be inconsistent if we decided not to read about something that is included in the central prayer of our service.

In addition, it is essential to remember that, over and over again, using some of the greatest poetry ever written, Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Micah and Samuel all thundered that sacrifices were at best a means, that God wanted good deeds, or in some cases obedience, rather than sacrifice. At no time in Jewish history did sacrifices replace, or even substitute for, prayer. So, ironically, we read about sacrifices to learn that, in the end, they are not so important as formerly believed.

Finally, it is important to remember that, in contrast to sacrifices, prayers require words, even if they are said silently. Thus, we have the lovely anecdotes quoted on pages 15 and 17 of *Sim Shalom*. In one, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai tells Rabbi Joshua not to grieve over the destruction of the Temple because we can equally well gain atonement through deeds of loving kindness. In the other Rabbi Elazar states that charity is more important than any of the sacrifices.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**PART TWO**

So much for sacrifices by priests at the Temple! I now want to learn what it means to be subject to the punishment of *Karet*, being cuf off, which is in some places coupled with the words, “from one’s kin” or “from one’s people” or just “completely”? The answer has been debated by many rabbis. Some of them throughout the ages just guessed at the meaning of Karet and offered easy-to-understand explanations, as dying prematurely or dying childless.

Such simplistic answers are put to one side by wiser heads, but they too are not definite. However, four things do seem to be widely accepted: First, *Karet* does not mean the death penalty because, in a few cases, people are condemned to death *and* *Karet*. Second, it is only applicable if the sin is deliberate, not accidental. Third, it only applies to Jews. Fourth, and most important, *Karet* is not a punishment handed down by a worldly court but by some other-worldly process. This position that *Karet* must be a divine process is argued most strongly in modern times by Rabbi Dennis Prager in his new book, *The Rational Torah-Exodus.* To the contrary he also argues that assertions that *Karet* means premature death, or no family members that remain Jewish, are empirically wrong.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rabbi Louis Jacobs, writing in *My Jewish Learning*,[[3]](#footnote-3) is also in favour of confining *Karet* to other worldly processes but brings forward some different arguments. He writes:

. . . the penalty of *Karet* is limited to purely religious offences and is never enjoined for offences such as murder, the penalty for which we have judicial execution. Consequently, the unanimous Rabbinic view, as stated in the Talmud, has much to commend it, that *Karet* is a form not of human but of divine punishment, though it is unclear how *Karet* differs from the other divine penalty mentioned in the sources, death by the hand of Heaven.

Unfortunately, he does not cite the source for that unanimous position in the Talmud, which is a pity because the scholars working on the Talmud were seldom agreement on anything.

The problem of defining *Karet* stems in part from the wide variety of sins for which the Hebrew Bible specifies *Karet* as punishment. Mishnah Kerithoth 1:1 (7th tractate in order Kedoshim) lists 36 instances where the term appears in the Hebrew Bible, and the application ranges from such simple sins as eating chametz during Passover to such horrible sins as child sacrifice (commonly described as “delivering the child to Moloch”). In between are over a dozen forbidden forms of sexual relationships, and, in the case of the *Book of Va-Yikra*, violating the rules surrounding appropriate preparation or use of animal sacrifices.

Therefore, let’s jump directly to Jacob Milgrom, who more than any other modern scholar has studied *Karet* and paid particular attention to the verses about *Karet* in today’s Parashat Tzav:[[4]](#footnote-4)

As for the exact nature of *Karet*, two opinions command attention. The first is that *Karet* means extirpation, meaning that the offender’s line is terminated. He may live a full life or an aborted one. His death needs not be an immediate one, as would be the case if his execution were the respon-sibility of human court because divine power is ensuring that . . . he will leave no offspring on this earth.

The other possible meaning of *Karet* is that the punishment is indeed executed on the sinner but only after his death; he is not permitted to rejoin his ancestors in the afterlife.

We could just read Milgrom and close the book, but of course there are other views. To cite only one of the several Orthodox commentaries that I found, Rabbi Yimiyahu Ullman cites the classic Torah commentator Rabbeinu Bachya--Rabbi Bachya ben Asher ibn Halawa (1255-1340)--as defining three different forms of Karet: one afflicts only the physical body; a second afflicts only the soul; and the third afflicts both body and soul. Not surprisingly, the sinner falls into the appropriate category depending upon the seriousness and the frequency of his sins.

Fortunately, almost all commentators agree that repentance and thereafter avoiding the sin for which one incurred *Karet*, will be sufficient to avoid all or most of the punishment. However, be careful not to be too sinful. Some commentators argue that the general rule does not apply to people who desecrate God’s name.

By way of conclusion, I will try to end by noting that Rabbi Jacobs ends his commentary on *Karet* with the straightforward statement:

This whole area is very obscure and is largely ignored in present-day Jewish theology.

However, before I can truly end, I must add, *but not by Rabbi Prager*.

Shabbat shalom,

1. The original of the story about R. Zakkai appears in *Avot d’Rabbi Natan* 11a; R. Elazar bases his statement on Proverbs 21:3, where the reference is to both justice and charity exceeding the sacrifices. A similar sentiment appears in *I Samuel* 15:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Prager, D. (2018). *The Rational Bible-Exodus*. Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, pp 140-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/Karet/](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/karet/)) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://books.google.ca/books?id=ep3XiyuinhMC&pg=PA66&lpg=PA66&dq=to+be+cut+off+from+one%27s+kin&source=bl&ots=wsJ7T5QjgC&sig=ACfU3U0D1wYatNPpmrIZ9W6D7HLA9mt9Bg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwicps71l5fmAhUFT98KHZGkCUAQ6AEwD3oECA0QAQ#v=onepage&q=to%20be%20cut%20off%20from%20one's%20kin&f=false> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)