

Foreword

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The Torah is compared to water, sustaining life, never running dry, a constant well from which to draw up new insights. We relate to the colorful narratives of Genesis and respond to the powerful liberationist themes of Exodus. The prophets call us to social justice. The language and imagery of these works have infused and sustained some of the great movements in American culture—abolitionism, first-wave feminism, and the civil rights movement.

Yet the Priestly material in Leviticus and Numbers leaves many of us still thirsty. For Jews, the material can make us self-conscious. Its seemingly bizarre and archaic rituals and practices of exclusion do not sound very spiritual. Many a *devar Torah* (mini-sermon on the weekly Torah reading) on *Tazria-Metzora* (Lev. 12:1—15:33) has begun with a rueful remark about one's bad luck in being assigned a Torah portion on skin diseases and seminal emissions. Numbers is more pliable, but most Jewish preachers shy away from its themes of war and bloodshed. A common interpreter's strategy is to take a small

part of the portion and use it as a springboard to talk about other matters.

In nineteenth-century liberal religion, the “ritual and ceremonial laws” were divorced from the ethical laws, and the former were assigned to a more primitive stage of religion. Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), a founder of Reform Judaism in Germany, championed Judaism as the flagship of ethical monotheism but rejected the validity of most of the laws and promoted Judaism as a tradition evolving away from ritual and commands to more abstract principles.

Nor have Christians warmed to this material. For some, it has been useful for supersessionist interpretations, providing a bleak backdrop against which Jesus shone for his message of inclusion of social outsiders like lepers and the sick and his preaching of peace. At times the first-century Pharisees have been folded in with other sectarians and with the Priestly material to create a great anachronistic essence called “Judaism,” a caricature of a legalistic religion without compassion. Jesus’ teaching was then presented as its improved replacement and the religion of universalism.

Adolph von Harnack (1851–1930), a highly influential representative of liberal Protestant scholarship, was typical of this characterization of Judaism as empty, harsh, and in its death throes in the first century. Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), the scholar most commonly associated with the Documentary Hypothesis, subscribed to the idea of progressive revelation, relegating the Old Testament and, by extension, Judaism to a more primitive stage of humanity. Although the term “late Judaism,” a term for first-century Judaism that encompasses these assumptions, is no longer acceptable for New Testament scholars today, its assumptions (and occasionally the term itself) still surface.

The dichotomy of ethics and law is a false one. After all, “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18), the demand to give sanctuary to

the runaway slave (Deut. 23:15-16), and the command to leave the edges of one's field unharvested for the poor and the foreigner (Lev. 23:22) are both laws in the Torah. Two generations of historical Jesus scholarship by Jews and Christians have reminded us that the Torah and Prophets were Jesus' Scripture, and first-century Judaism, which was really multiple groups and persuasions, was the vibrant tradition from which he drew his teaching and healing. Furthermore, rabbinic Judaism is understood now not as the forerunner of Christianity but as its sister religion. Both postbiblical Judaism and the earliest forms of Christianity are developments out of biblical Israel, or, in Alan Segal's words, all are "Rebecca's Children."

In the following pages, Rabbi Jo Hirschmann and Rabbi Nancy H. Wiener truly engage these Priestly laws, not as a superficial excuse to talk about something else but as revealing deep mythic structures that speak to humanity's needs. The writers show that the biblical categories of *kedushah* (separation, holiness), *tumah* (impurity), and *taharah* (purity) continue to function in human experience and inform the big questions around which all the world's religions coalesce. These questions include change and its inevitability, the body with its limits and possibilities for experiencing the sacred, our lives in relation to community, boundaries and boundary crossings, and the role of witness and accompaniment in suffering.

Chaplains, like the ancient priests, live in the midst of life's messiness and finitude. As individuals, they share the normal human reactions to pain, death, and illness. But this book articulates how each one is also a conduit for tradition, providing access to larger, sacred community. To be part of a tradition is to draw on its resources, to live at a nexus of past, present, and future life.

Wise and accessible, this book delightfully weaves together biblical and other scholarship with the experiences of healthcare and pastoral professionals. Classic works by Mary Douglas, Robert Alter, and

Jacob Milgrom appear alongside more recent scholarship by David Kraemer and Barbara Mann. This book will be useful not only to therapeutic professionals but also to teachers, students, and preachers. Many a sermon could be inspired and informed by this work.

As our authors dip into the waters of Torah, they reveal the hope that is at the heart of the Priestly tradition. Written from a place of exile and dislocation, this tradition uses memory as a way to maintain identity when outside a familiar time and place, and asserts that God goes with the people into exile. As they delve into the Priestly material, our authors demonstrate that the usual maps by which we orient our lives can be redrawn. They show us that *tumah* is unavoidable and essential to wholeness. Finally, they maintain that a person isolated because of illness, trauma, or military service nevertheless remains bound to community.

One need not be religious to find comfort in the humane insights of this book. The authors show that everyone has resources to draw on—ancient traditions, universal themes, and social connectedness. They show the fundamental need to be seen and known as we are, with acceptance and truth, reminding us that God is called *El Roi*, “the one who sees.” Our two rabbis teach us that in brokenness, loss, or isolation, we can make meaning. Anyone journeying into “the kingdom of the sick,” as Susan Sontag calls the strange territory we all visit at some point, would be privileged to have these two as their guides.