

BOOK REVIEW

Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Leviticus (Urim Publications, 2019, 104 pages), by R. Francis Nataf. Reviewed by Yitzchak Etshalom

As numerous modern commentators on Humash have found, the sense of excitement and innovation (*hiddush*) that drives the writer when commenting on the narrative portions through the Exodus comes to a potential sharp standstill when the Tabernacle is erected and its laws are given. The challenge of reorienting study and re-routing commentary from the narrative to the legal, from the readily relevant to the anachronistic and archaic is a grand one. It is grand in that it provides an awesome shift of focus – and it is grand in that, for many, it is an insurmountable obstacle.

Rabbi Francis Nataf has authored four volumes of his series "Redeeming Relevance in the Book of X" – where X represents four of the five Humashim. His clear aim in these volumes is to make the broader themes of each book of the Torah accessible and message-worthy to contemporary readership. In a sense, this approach makes tackling Vayikra (Leviticus) an even greater challenge – nearly all of the first 17 chapters are currently theoretical and, with the exception of the delineation of acceptable foods in chapter 11, have no practical expression in a world without a Temple. Nonetheless, Nataf has undertaken the challenge and has completed his series with the recently published *Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Leviticus*. He opens by admitting to the challenge and to his own reticence to write - but then does a masterful job of "redeeming" the themes of Offerings, Purity, Sanctity, as well as the significance of the two mini-narratives in the book. Both the tragic death of Nadav and Avihu (ch. 10) as well as the unnamed blasphemer of Danite ancestry (ch. 24) are assessed, all with a view to messages that the reader can take into her own life and to lessons that the casual student can appropriate into his world. Using both classical rabbinic literature as well as both medieval and modern commentators, the author paints a picture which, to many, is a new perspective on the world of ritual and one which makes that world accessible and meaningful.

Yitzchak Etshalom received rabbinic ordination from the Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem, and is an educator and a leading teacher of Tanakh in North America. He is the author of Between the Lines of the Bible: Exodus and Between the Lines of the Bible: Recapturing the Full Meaning of the Biblical Text.

As is the case with any work of this sort, the reader can quibble both with the premises as well as the conclusions that Nataf proffers, but the potential for finding meaning in the most inaccessible of the *Humashim* is an argument which more than redeems the book and argues for its value on the educator's and layman's bookshelf.



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