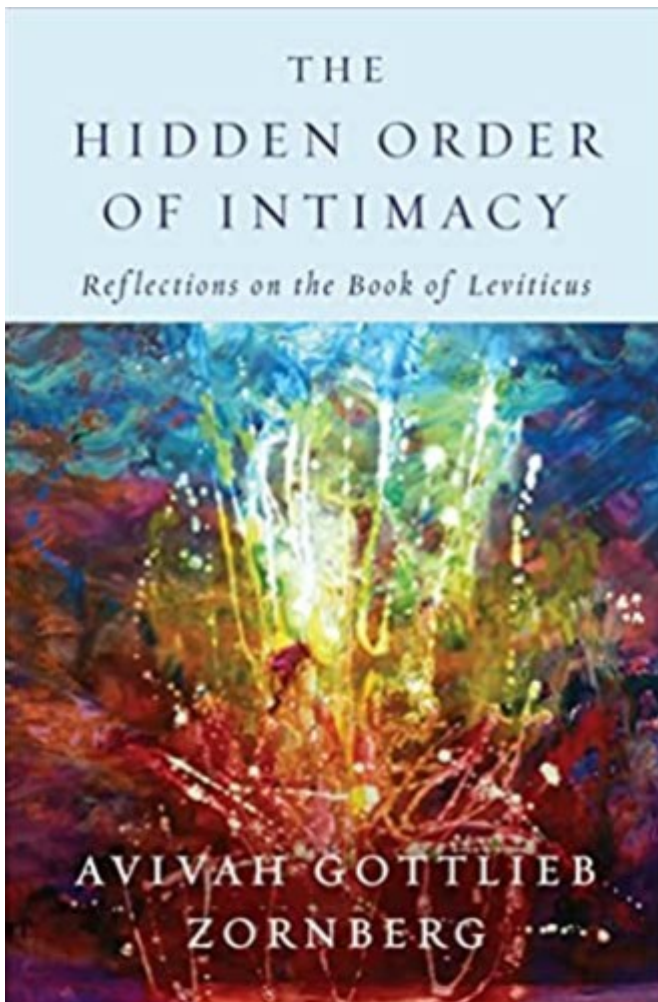


Avivah Zornberg finds the plot of Leviticus

The eclectic scholar masterfully uncovers the subterranean threads and tensions that underlie this nonnarrative text.

by [Beth Kissileff](#) in the [December 2022](#) issue

In Review



The Hidden Order of Intimacy

Reflections on the Book of Leviticus

By Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg
Schocken

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Read Mordechai Beck's [interview with Avivah Zornberg](#).

Most readers think Leviticus is about dull things: priests and their sacrificial offerings, blood taboos and bodily fluids, the holiness code. In her new book, Avivah Zornberg shows that there is more to the story. She masterfully uncovers the subterranean threads and tensions that underlie the written text of the myriad laws and rituals encompassed within the third book of the Bible.

There is no way to precisely describe or distill Zornberg's methods. She is an eclectic scholar who trained with her Orthodox rabbi father at home in Glasgow, at the rigorous Gateshead yeshiva in England, and in the English department at the University of Cambridge, where she earned a PhD. She makes use of traditional Jewish texts as well as literary and psychoanalytic sources, creating a unique exposition of each part of the Bible she tackles. So far, she has written on Genesis (*The Beginning of Desire*), Exodus (*The Particulars of Rapture*), Numbers (*Bewilderments*), Moses (*Moses: A Human Life*), and various other biblical characters (*The Murmuring Deep*).

The emergence of her Leviticus book wasn't a foregone conclusion. Over the years, some people have wondered whether Zornberg's previous methods could apply to Leviticus, since it is not a narrative book. Further, because she often lectures and travels during the time of year when Leviticus is read liturgically, it has not been part of her teaching schedule. However, she explains in the acknowledgments, the seclusion imposed by the pandemic allowed her to devote her time to this book as a "purely *literary* project."

The Hidden Order of Intimacy uncovers the drama underlying the central event of Leviticus: the construction of the tabernacle (*mishkan*) and its importance as "a therapeutic device for healing the national disorder that is called the Golden Calf." The drama centers on how a wayward people once devoted to idolatry can learn to function as a community, worshiping God without an image and listening to this God in a "posture of aspiration."

In Leviticus, the people are described as stiff-necked. Zornberg paraphrases the 12th-century Jewish commentator Rashi, who explains the phrase as “an inability to *turn one’s head to hear something new*.” She sees this problem—the difficulty of turning from the calf and the Egyptomania that it represents—as the central concern of the text. She enhances her thesis by putting it in conversation with the work of various writers, ranging from traditional Jewish interpreters to George Eliot, Franz Rosenzweig, and Sigmund Freud. Of the calf’s appearance and reappearance, Zornberg writes: “As in dreams, the details of law and ritual turn out to be haunted by something repetitious, a sense of nameless loss; and by a secondary revelation of a different kind, which involves time and work and the birth of compassion.”

Readers who want an introduction to the modes of thinking exemplified by the rabbis of the Midrash will enjoy this modern take on Leviticus, which is well informed by literary exegesis. Though Zornberg’s thinking is complex, her prose is fluid and poetic, enabling readers to follow her arguments with a sense of coherence and pleasure. She quotes Octavio Paz’s description of poets as those who have “experienced the fascination of non-meaning and the no less terrifying fascination of meaning that is inexpressible.” In both language and ideas, Zornberg grapples with both of these poles—non-meaning and inexpressible meaning—of one the most difficult books of the Bible. In so doing, she uncovers hidden understandings and shows them to be seamlessly woven into the fabric of the text.

In speaking of the blasphemer of chapter 24 (one of the few narrative sections in Leviticus), Zornberg writes:

A story has the power to arouse empathy in the reader or the listener. But its power may also lie in its ability to evoke deep ambivalences. While the law will cut through these ambivalences with its decisive readings, the narrative will allow full play to the inner world of the reader/listener.

In that spirit, Zornberg’s exposure of a narrative that constitutes the inner world of Leviticus is unparalleled—and necessary.