

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis
Class Notes 6/29/20

We have been looking at the different sacrifices in Torah, and discovered that animal sacrifice was an ancient form of worship, of expressing praise and gratitude and love to God, of giving to God and to sharing with others. Only two of the regular sacrifices outlined in Leviticus had anything to do with sin, and those were only for unintentional sins. God gave Israel a special day once a year, Yom Kippur, to deal with the sins of the community. Last week we began looking at the unusual rituals for that day, specifically the selection of two goats to effect atonement. One of the goats was designated “to the Lord,” and its blood was used to cleanse and purify the Temple sanctuary. The other goat was designated “to Azazel,” and as we saw there is no certain meaning for that word. I rejected the highly speculative fantasies about fallen angels and goat demons that have sometimes been postulated for this word by over-imaginative scholars. More plausibly, it may simply mean the goat that is sent away, which is where we get our English word “scapegoat.” That goat is sent off into the wilderness symbolically carrying the sins of the people, banishing them from the community. It is a visible sign that God has forgiven them and that their sins are no more.

What is crucial to understand about this goat is that *it is not a sacrifice*. It is an impure animal that is sent away alive in the opposite direction from the sanctuary and the altar where sacrifices were performed. In no sense of the word can it be thought of as an offering to God. And it certainly is not a sacrifice to any other being, such as a “goat demon” or devil. Such an idea would have been abhorrent to the whole OT. Nor is it a bloody sacrifice, and therefore cannot be understood in Christian terms as a vicarious substitute for Israel. There is no indication that the animal is punished, much less killed. It is simply a vivid symbolic vehicle to banish the impurities and sins from the community to an inaccessible place in the wilderness. The poor creature has a greater chance of survival there than it does in Israel’s camp.

All of this muddies the waters considerably in thinking about Jesus’ death as a sacrifice for sin. I don’t think I have ever heard anyone speak of Jesus as the goat of God who takes away the sin of the world. So the connection to *Yom Kippur* is more metaphorical than literal. And we have seen that the Passover lamb (which could also be a goat: Exodus 12:5) was not a sacrifice for sin, but rather a special type of fellowship offering. Sin offerings were not eaten. So connecting this all to the traditional understanding of the cross requires some creatively convoluted theological gymnastics. Theologians have tried hard to read much later Christian ideas about Jesus’ sacrifice back into Leviticus, but I don’t think their efforts make sense of Torah.

If we were to focus more on Jesus’ words that his blood/death was part of the establishment of a covenant (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20), we could connect his death with covenant-making ceremonies in Torah, which involve animal sacrifices (Gen. 15:9-18; Ex. 24:3-8). But neither of these is a sacrifice for sin. The mysterious ritual in Genesis where Abraham cuts some animals in two and walks between the pieces does not specifically mention blood, and seems to be a form of solemn oath pledging faithfulness to

the covenant under penalty of death. In Exodus, Israel ratifies her covenant with God by sacrificing burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but not sin offerings. Interestingly, this is the only time that sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the people. Here it is not for cleansing from sin but rather a sign of the seriousness of the oath that they are taking: “Everything the Lord has said we will do.” Kind of like a mafia induction ceremony, which is not the usual way we think about our communion celebrations.

So I think that the early Christians and the NT writers, struggling to understand the shocking horror of Jesus’ death, have tried to find a meaning for it in a combination of different OT passages, but in doing so have blurred the distinctions found in Torah. If you press the metaphors for the crucifixion too far, as many Christians do, you distort what the Scriptures teach. Christian theologians have read their ideas about Jesus back into the Old Testament, whereas I have been insisting that we need to start with the Old Testament and see what it can teach us about the New.

3. *Teshuvah*: Jewish repentance

So how exactly do sacrifices atone for sin, and what happens when the sacrifices end? As we have seen, rabbinic Judaism developed in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple when sacrifices were no longer possible. The rabbis quickly adjusted to the new situation by searching the Scriptures and finding a basis for replacing sacrifices with Torah study, prayer, and acts of lovingkindness. This reflects what I have been saying, that sacrifices were about much more than simply dealing with sin. They were about communion with God. With reference to sin offerings and Yom Kippur, the rabbis developed a rich and complex doctrine of repentance as the real meaning of sacrifice. Sacrifices are effective because of repentance.

The Hebrew word for repentance, *teshuvah*, comes from the root word *shuv* meaning “to turn” or “to return.” It can refer to a literal turning around or returning home, as well as an inward change of heart. This word runs through Moses’ exhortation in Deuteronomy 30 (you can easily see it in the KJV) about the people in exile turning back to God and once again being faithful to his commandments. This word also appears repeatedly throughout the oracles of Jeremiah (111 times!): “(Re)turn, turning Israel” says the prophet literally, making a wordplay on the same root (3:12, 14), or “Turn me and I shall be turned” (31:18 KJV; also Lamentations 5:21). Israel has turned away from God and needs to return so that God will turn again towards them. The prodigal son is a perfect illustration of such turning.

To establish the point that the heart of sacrifice for sin is repentance, the ancient rabbis cited important biblical examples of repentance and forgiveness that occur without sacrifices, especially in the prophetic literature. As a parallel to Deut. 30, 1 Kings 8:46-50 also envisions a future time of sin leading exile. While in exile the people have a change of heart and turn back to God and sincerely repent and are forgiven. So also in Jonah, when the prophet preaches, the people of Ninevah repent and are spared judgment. None of this involves sacrifices.

So there is plenty of biblical precedence for the Talmud to argue that, in fact, atonement for sin comes through words of repentance. To argue this point about Yom Kippur, the rabbis point to Leviticus 16:10, which speaks of the live goat being a means of atonement, which must come from the confession of sin made over it, since it is not slaughtered nor is

its blood used. The passage goes on to argue that even in Aaron's case, it is not the blood of the bull he brings for his own sins that provides atonement but rather his words of repentance. "Just as atonement is stated with regard to the goat as achieved through words, so too is atonement stated with regard to the bull as achieved through words." (*Yoma* 36b) That argument depends on a close reading of the words of the text, where atonement is mentioned before the bull is slaughtered. Because it is clear that the atonement from the live goat comes from the confession, they draw the conclusion that the same thing must happen in Aaron's case.

The rabbis also cite Hosea 14:2 to argue that "God is appeased by words, as it is stated, 'Take with you your words and return to God.' The verse ascribes him credit as though he had sacrificed bulls, as it says, 'So we will render for bulls the offering of our lips'" (*Yoma* 86b). We have already seen this verse in reference to prayer in general; here the context in Hosea specifically refers to confession of sin, to repentance as a sacrificial offering. So biblically, what makes sacrifices for sin effective is confession and repentance.

The same section of the Talmud also argues that repentance of deliberate sin and rebellion, for which there was no sacrifice, changes that sin in God's eyes to an unintentional sin, for which sacrifice was possible. The rabbis' logic is impeccable. If sin offerings were not possible for intentional sins, then how do those offerings atone on Yom Kippur? It must be through the act of confession. Again, their reasoning is not just proof texting but comes from the Scriptural understanding that a contrite heart is the key to offering sacrifices that please God. That is how Yom Kippur can provide atonement for all sin through its rituals. Repentance, not sacrifice, is the key to forgiveness.

So the rabbis argued that contrition and repentance were the heart of the sacrificial system and therefore could actually replace sacrifices. An important third century authority, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, is quoted in the Talmud: "When the Temple stood, if a person brought a burnt offering, he had the reward for a burnt offering, and if a grain offering he had the reward for a grain offering. But for the one whose spirit is humble, Scripture ascribes to him as though he had sacrificed all the offerings, as it says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit." And furthermore his prayers are not despised, for it is written, "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." [Psalm 51:17] (*Sotah* 5b). The same verse is cited by an ancient commentary on Leviticus to prove that "One who does *teshuvah* is considered as if he went to Jerusalem, rebuilt the Temple, erected an altar, and offered all the sacrifices ordained by Torah" (*Leviticus Rabbah* 7:2).

For the rabbis, once Temple sacrifices were no longer possible, the Scriptures suggested that all along God had been able and willing to forgive sin without them. Repentance was the key. Christians have often quoted Psalm 51:17 out of context to suggest that the sacrifices were not important and all God really wants is for you to feel bad. But David's point is that coming to God with the proper attitude of repentance is what enables you to offer a pleasing sacrifice (v. 19). Repentance is what makes the sacrifice effective.

But in Judaism, a contrite spirit is only the beginning of *teshuvah*. Here we need to look more closely at the rich Jewish concept of repentance because it has much to teach us. To help us think about this, I want to present a situation to help us think more deeply about this.

Simon Wiesenthal, an Austrian Holocaust survivor and well-known Nazi hunter, tells a story in his book *The Sunflower* about when he was on a concentration camp work detail in 1943 that was sent to an army hospital to clean up medical waste. There he is summoned (randomly) to the bedside of a dying Nazi soldier, who tells him that he is seeking a Jew's forgiveness for a crime he committed a year earlier. The soldier had taken part in the brutal slaughter of 300 Jews trapped in a house, which they set on fire and then shot anyone trying to escape. He asks Wiesenthal to forgive him so that he can die in peace but Wiesenthal leaves the room without saying anything. The next day he finds out that the soldier had died. The experience troubles him, and he wonders if he did the right thing. He actually sends out the question to a variety of religious thinkers and world leaders, including people like Bishop Desmond Tutu, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and the Dalai Lama.

Wiesenthal's question: ***did he do the right thing by refusing to forgive the Nazi or should he have forgiven him? Why or why not?***

When I first heard this story from Rabbi Sacks, he said that the non-Jews responding to Wiesenthal said he should have forgiven the Nazi while the Jews said no, showing the great divide between the two groups in their understanding of repentance and forgiveness. Doing more research (i.e., Wikipedia), I found out that things were not that simple. Some Jews and Christians were uncertain and some Christians said not to forgive. The Dalai Lama said forgive, as did Bishop Tutu.

Rabbi Sacks argues that from a Jewish perspective, Wiesenthal had no right to forgive the man for what he had done. The crime he had committed was against 300 other people, and only those people could forgive the sin. Thus the subtitle of Wiesenthal's book is: "On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness." Judaism is not an unforgiving religion. The rabbis insist that it is a cruel sin not to forgive someone who is genuinely repentant.

But Judaism recognizes that when you sin against someone else, you are actually committing two sins: one against the person and one against God. God cannot forgive what you have done to someone else until you have gone to that person and made things right. The Mishnah says that Yom Kippur only effects atonement for sins between humans and God (*Mishnah Yoma* 8:9). For sins against other humans, one must first put things right with that person or persons. Only then does God forgive that sin.