

Bethel AME Church

Insights from the Rabbis Class Notes 6/14/20

Last week we began looking at the animal sacrifices that are described and regulated in the book of Leviticus. We saw that although Christians tend to think of sacrifices as a means of dealing with sin, in fact in Torah sacrifices are a way of worshipping God, of drawing near to God. They are first and foremost expressions of joy, not remorse. And we saw that one of the main types of sacrifice, the fellowship offering, required sharing the meat with other people. Sacrifices were a way of giving to God and to others, an offering of love and praise and thanksgiving that necessarily included other people. Joy, as Rabbi Sacks says, is happiness shared.

So central to the purpose of the sacrificial system was creating a community whose joy in the Lord came through giving. Sacrifice was not simply about giving to God but also about sharing with others. It is a gift to be able to give. As we have seen, Judaism considers it important to human dignity and respect to have the ability to give. Even the poor are expected to give to others. That is why Leviticus makes accommodations for those who cannot afford to give an expensive animal. It is not the cost of the sacrifice that matters to God. It was the act of giving itself.

Sacrifices are not about paying God something to make God love us again. The Scriptures make it clear that God cannot be bribed or appeased (Deut. 10:17). That was a pagan idea, that you could manipulate the gods with sacrifices. God does not need our sacrifices because he already owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:9-13; Isaiah 1:11). Yet immediately after saying that, the Psalmist goes on to say, “Sacrifice thank offerings to God” (v. 14). God clearly wants Israel to offer sacrifices while at the same time saying that He doesn’t need them.

To explain this seeming paradox, Rabbi Sacks tells a wonderful story about when he was a young boy and wanted to give his father something to show his gratitude for all his father had done for him.

Eventually, in some shop I found a plastic model of a silver trophy. Underneath it was a plaque that read, “To the best father in the world.” Today, all these years later, I cringe at the memory of that object. It was cheap, banal, almost comically absurd. What was unforgettable, though, was what he did after I had given it to him. I can’t remember what he said, or whether he even smiled. What I do remember is that he placed it on his bedside table, where it remained—humble, trite—for all the years that I was living at home. He allowed me to give him something, and then showed that the gift mattered to him. In that act, he gave me dignity. He let me see that I could give even to someone who had given me all I had. (from his weekly online Torah commentary,

“What Do We Receive When We Give?” rabbisacks.org/terumah-5780/).

Whatever we give to God cannot compare to what God has given us. From an objective standpoint, what we give to God may not look like much. But in God’s eyes, it has lasting value. In the sacrifices, God gives Israel the blessing and the dignity of giving, giving to God and giving to others.

Despite the extensive rabbinic discussions in the Talmud of the sacrificial system, by the time the Talmud was written, animal sacrifices had long since disappeared from Judaism. The destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and the subsequent banishment of all Jews from Jerusalem in 135 AD created a crisis for God’s people. How could they continue to be faithful to God without their Temple and holy city?

A first century rabbi, Yochanan ben Zakkai (30-90 AD), a disciple of Hillel, is credited with ensuring the survival of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple. He established a center for Torah learning in Jamnia (modern-day Yavne, near Tel Aviv) to replace Jerusalem. This created what has been called a “portable cult,” a religion based on a text rather than a temple. The Talmud affirms that Torah study is greater than sacrificing the daily offerings (*Megillah* 3b). Torah study replaced the sacrificial system as a way of coming close to God and fellowshiping with him. This became the basis for rabbinic Judaism.

So although in the Talmud the Jewish sages conducted lengthy discussions about the details of the sacrifices, they also understood how they could get along without them. That understanding was based on the biblical prophets’ critique of the system, which had already relativized the value of sacrifices. R. ben Zakkai is remembered for his reply to a disciple who was lamenting the destruction of the Temple. “Do not be grieved, my son. We have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of loving-kindness, as it is said, ‘For I desire mercy and not sacrifice’ [Hosea 6:6]” (*Avot d’Rabbi Nathan* 4). Jesus quotes this same verse in disputes about how best to follow the Law (Matt. 9:13; 12:7).

The Talmud affirms this assessment as well. R. Elazar ben Pedat, a third century teacher, says that doing righteous deeds of charity is greater than offering all of the sacrifices, and quotes Proverbs 21:3 as support: “To do *tzedakah* and *mishpat* is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” He goes on to distinguish between acts of charity (giving to the poor) and acts of kindness, which he argues are greater because they involve more than giving money and can be done to anyone, not just the poor. Ultimately, R. Elazar says, even study of Torah must be done as an act of love. He quotes Prov. 31:26, which literally speaks of a “*torah* of loving-kindness,” and infers from that phrase that there must also be a *torah* that is not of lovingkindness, recognizing that one can study Torah for selfish reasons or ulterior motives and use that study in unloving ways (*Sukkah* 49b). Jesus also had harsh words to say about those who use Torah in this way, people, for example, who use the Bible as a self-promoting prop.

Translation note: one of the most important biblical words is *hesed* (sometimes spelled *chesed* to indicate the harsh guttural sound of the first letter), for which there is no one good English translation. The ancient Greek OT translated it primarily as “mercy,” which is how it often appears in the NT (as in the quote from Hosea 6:6). William Coverdale (1535) coined the English word “lovingkindness” for his Bible translation, which was adopted in some passages by the KJV. But *hesed* is not the regular OT word for love. *Hesed* carries a strong sense of faithfulness, loyalty, commitment, persistence, and is often associated with God’s faithfulness to his covenant with Israel. It is perhaps more adequately translated as “steadfast love” (NRSV), a loving commitment that does not falter no matter what the circumstances. “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his *hesed* endures forever” (Psalm 106:1). The rabbis tend to use the word with reference to human acts of love and kindness, which are greater than sacrifices.

In addition to Torah study and acts of lovingkindness, the Talmud also views prayer as a substitute for sacrificial offering. It again quotes R. Elazar as saying that prayer is greater than sacrifices, using a kind of tortured exegesis of Isaiah 1:11 (*Berakhot* 32b). Other rabbis have made the same point by quoting passages like Psalm 69:30-31—“I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull.” Or Hosea 14:2, which literally speaks of prayer as offering the “young bulls of our lips” (see KJV “calves”). The ancient Greek translation of the Scriptures misread the Hebrew here as “fruit of our lips,” which is where we get the phrase in Hebrews 13:15.

The connection of prayer to sacrifice, then, is not an arbitrary one but reflects a biblical understanding that sacrifices are always an expression of prayer—of praise and thanksgiving and repentance. Sacrifices are a way of addressing God and worshipping God. Indeed, the structure of the weekly prayers in Jewish synagogue liturgy is intentionally patterned after the cycle of sacrifices in the Temple.

So in a remarkable response to the destruction of the Temple, which had dealt a major blow to their religious practice, the rabbis were able to reinvent Judaism. These three elements—prayer, Torah study, and acts of love—not only replaced the sacrifices; they were viewed as an improvement on them, as “better than.” These three have been the heart of Jewish life for two thousand years.

But as radical as the change may seem, it was not a complete innovation. In the Bible itself, we already see change and development in the sacrificial system. Early in Israel’s history, people offered sacrifices on their own, without a priest, and in various places, simply building an altar out in the open when they had a desire to sacrifice (Gen. 12:8; 22:9; 33:20; 35:6-7; Ex. 17:15; Judges 6:24). But the Law of Moses restricts sacrifices to one central sanctuary, which eventually would be established in Jerusalem and presided over by a Levitical priesthood (Deut. 12:10-14). That greatly limited the practice of sacrifice for most Jews, because unless you lived close to Jerusalem, you could not offer an animal sacrifice to God. So even when the Temple was still standing, most Jews had little or no contact with the sacrificial system, and rarely, if ever, actually offered an animal sacrifice.

Instead, centuries before Jesus' day, Jews throughout the world had already established synagogues that served as houses of prayer, Torah study, and centers of care for the local community. The early Christians modeled their assemblies (later called "churches") on this Jewish form of worship (Acts 2:42). So by the time the Temple was destroyed, Torah study, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness were already central elements of Jewish religious practice. Although on occasion people were able to make it to Jerusalem for one of the pilgrimage feasts, from day to day they worshipped God without sacrifices. So the rabbis, many of whom had grown up outside the land of Israel, were simply recognizing both what Scripture emphasizes and also what had already been the long-standing practice in Jewish communities. Animal sacrifices were not essential to a relationship with God.