

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis
Class Notes 6/21/20

In the past couple of weeks we have begun to look at animal sacrifice in Torah, and have discovered that they are an ancient form of worship, of drawing near to God and expressing joy and praise and gratitude to God. Sacrificing the fruit of your labor is a way of offering a gift to God. And we saw that in Leviticus the fellowship offering also meant sharing that gift with others. So one of the functions of sacrifice in Torah was to teach joy through giving, through sharing. God gives Israel the gift of giving.

We also saw that when the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD and sacrifices were no longer possible, the rabbis reinvented Judaism based on Torah, not Temple. In the biblical prophets they found support for the idea that acts of loving kindness and prayer were equally valid forms of sacrifice, of offering to God and to others. Studying Scripture, prayer, and acts of love towards others already were the core of Jewish synagogue life throughout the Roman Empire, and it was the synagogue that gave shape to the religious practices of the early Christians as well. So Judaism and Christianity, although they soon began to diverge from one another in other ways, had as their basis the same core values.

Neither the rabbis nor Jesus ever suggested that offering sacrifices was a bad thing. It was, after all, part of God's Law. Some Jews, and even some Christians, still look for the day when the Temple will be restored and sacrifices resume. Orthodox Jews pray for this daily. And Jesus assumes that his disciples will follow his pattern of offering sacrifices in the Temple (Matt. 5:23-24) We see in Acts that the early Christians came to the Temple regularly (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:12; cf. Luke 24:53). Even Paul, late in his career, risks his freedom to offer a sacrifice with other Christian believers in the Temple (Acts 21:23-26). But like the prophets, both Jesus and the rabbis recognize that one can offer sacrifices as a mindless ritual, attempting like pagans to placate an angry God, and then go one's way and ignore the heart of Torah as well as the real meaning of sacrifice. A sacrifice that does not come from the heart has no value, and a sacrifice that does not lead to justice and mercy for others is not a true act of worship.

Christians can be guilty of this as well. Our anti-Judaism has led us to look down on the physical aspect of sacrifice. We have "spiritualized" the sacrifices, and glibly speak of bringing a "sacrifice of praise" into the house of the Lord (Heb. 13:15). That usually is translated to mean singing an up-tempo praise chorus in church. The sacrifice of praise is simply the song itself. But Hebrews, despite its denial of the value of sacrifices for sin, is still thinking in OT terms and echoing its language.

A sacrifice of praise or thanksgiving was an animal offered in praise or thanksgiving (2 Chron. 29:31; Psalm 107:22; Jer. 33:11). We have seen that such concrete physical offerings were a regular part of Temple worship. The author of Hebrews is not speaking of animals here, but he (or she) is also not just reducing sacrifice to the "fruit of lips." The next verse makes this clear where, like the rabbis, the author defines sacrifices that please God as "doing good and sharing with others" (v. 16). To rip verse 15 out of its context and reduce Christian sacrifice to another type of ritual performed in church (and "praise and worship" can be just such a clichéd formulaic ritual) is to do exactly what the prophets

were criticizing. As Amos so pointedly proclaims: “Take away the noise of your songs; I won’t listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice (*mishpat*) roll down like waters and righteousness (*zedakah*) like an ever-flowing stream” (5:23-24). People would come to the Temple to get their praise on and then leave and go back to participate in a corrupt and unjust society. In doing so, they were ignoring the heart of what it means to worship God.

So the sacrifices in Torah teach us that worship of God has a concrete, physical, tangible nature. It is not purely “spiritual.” When Paul talks about offering your bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), he is reflecting this understanding of sacrifice; he is thinking about a physical offering. He immediately goes on to exhort the Romans to humble service of one another as members of the body of Christ, a worship that includes generous giving and sharing with those in need (vv. 3-13). Leviticus teaches us how to read Romans.

Sacrifice is shared joy and the joy of sharing, both with God and with others. Torah teaches us that it is a communal activity that reflects the compassionate justice God desires. It is not simply a private transaction between you and God. As Jesus said to his disciples, you cannot come to offer a sacrifice on the Temple altar if you are on bad terms with others. For the rabbis, sacrifice means heartfelt prayer, in-depth study of Scripture, and sharing what we have, our wealth and time and energy and lives, with others. To offer a real sacrifice of joy and praise and fellowship with God, to draw near to God and worship God properly, you have to give to others.

L. Sacrifices: the Fruit of Repentance

We have been discussing some of the implications of the first three types of sacrifice in Leviticus. We turn now to consider the other sacrifices that were specifically for sin. We will look first at the two sacrifices for unintentional sins found in Leviticus 4-6. Then we will discuss the very odd rituals that are part of *Yom Kippur*, the day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). Because Christianity has come to think of sacrifices almost exclusively as having to do with atonement for sin, we need to look carefully at what is actually in Torah.

1. Unintentional Sin Offerings (Leviticus 4:1-6:7)

The first sacrifice (Lev. 4) is often called a “sin offering,” translating a word for sin that literally means “misses the mark.” (Interestingly, the Greek word for sin has the same meaning.) I have used Robert Alter’s translation “offense,” as a slightly more neutral term that recognizes several key aspects of this sacrifice. First, this offering is for something someone has done unintentionally, unwittingly, in ignorance, a mistake (4:2, 13, 22, 27). When people realize that they have done something wrong and feel sorry about it, they bring this offering. A deliberate, brazen, presumptuous sinner cannot make a sacrifice for their sin, but is cut off from the sanctuary and the people and their guilt remains (Numbers 15:30-31). (Kind of like the difference between a misdemeanor and a felony.) The sin offering is essentially a penalty for carelessness, for inattention to what you are doing. You can’t just say, “Well, I didn’t mean to do it,” and walk away. The offense offering is an act of contrition.

Second, this offering is used not only for actions that might be considered sinful but also for the restoration of someone with ritual impurities—situations like childbirth and

skin disease, the completion of a Nazirite vow, and the dedication of a new altar. None of these is a sin. Not all ritually impure persons are required to bring an offense offering, only those whose impurity lasts more than seven days. Otherwise a simple ritual washing is sufficient. This seems to be the kind of sacrifice Paul offers (Acts 21:20-26), although Luke is not completely clear on this.

That is why some prominent biblical scholars prefer to call this offering a purification offering rather than sin offering (the NIV has a footnote to Lev. 4:3 giving “purification offering” as an alternative translation). The blood of sacrifices always functions as a cleansing agent, a detergent. Notice that the blood is not applied to the persons but rather to the altar and the sanctuary which have been polluted either by sin or ritual impurities. Nobody here is washed in the blood of the lamb. Biblically, sin affects the community, not just the individual sinner, and the primary focus of sacrifices was to cleanse the sanctuary, so that God’s presence could continue to dwell in their midst. It is the community’s responsibility to keep sin and impurity from flourishing unchecked and to deal with it when it occurs.

Finally, notice that a wide variety of offerings are allowed for this sacrifice, including small birds and grain for the poor (5:7-13). This is the sacrifice Joseph and Mary bring after Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:24). As I have said, there is no sense that “without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.” The costliness of the offering and the blood are not what matters most to God. The sacrifice is not a payment for sin.

The reparation offering, which is often called a guilt offering, seems to be a sub-category of the offense offering, and the distinction between the two is not completely clear. The text highlights the function of making restitution for the wrong committed, which seems to be some kind of unintentional theft or fraud (5:16). The sacrificial laws in Leviticus, like many others, regulate what were already ongoing practices which the people understood. But the text doesn’t always make clear the meaning of those practices. Here the offense is said to be specifically against the sanctuary (5:15) or a neighbor (6:2-5), where financial restitution is possible. This is the only sacrifice where money is a part of the offering. We will talk more about restitution when we consider the idea of repentance.

2. *Yom Kippur* (Leviticus 16)

So what happens if you commit adultery or steal from your neighbor or tell a deliberate lie? None of these is covered by the sacrifices at the beginning of Leviticus, which are only for unintentional sins. To deal with such sin in the community, God ordains one special day each year, what we call *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. It contains an elaborate, and somewhat bizarre, ritual to secure atonement for the whole nation. Let’s look at the details.

First, it is to take place on the tenth day of the seventh month, and it is to be a day of complete rest, literally a “sabbath of sabbaths,” a very special day (16:29-31). Because of the nature of the day, it is to be a day in which you “afflict yourselves” (vv. 29, 31; KJV), a vague phrase that is usually taken to refer to fasting, although it could mean more generally any type of self-denial. It is the one day of fasting mandated in Judaism, though people may choose to fast on other days.

Second, the word translated “atone” (*kipper* in Hebrew) may mean “to cover over” or “to wipe clean” but there is no certainty about its root meaning. What is clear from the text is that again it carries the primary sense of cleansing or purification from sin (v. 30). Nowhere in Leviticus is it suggested that sacrifices appease an angry God. The object of the verb *kipper* is not God but the offense, the sin. Our word “atonement,” literally “at-one-ment,” is a relational word suggesting reconciliation. But the offense sacrifices, including the ones on *Yom Kippur*, are for purification of the sanctuary, not the people.

In fact, there is no mention in the text that the people are even present for the *Yom Kippur* ritual or that they receive pardon for their sins. That contrasts with the earlier offense sacrifices, where forgiveness is specifically mentioned (4:35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7). The point of the sacrifice here is that if God is to be present in the sanctuary on an ongoing basis, it has to be a place not spoiled by things that conflict with who God is. In effect, the collective offenses of the people, both intentional and unintentional, and at times even unavoidable (like corpse contact) have contaminated the sanctuary over the past year and it needs to be cleansed. Sins of individuals affect the whole community and its relationship to God, and must be acknowledged publicly and dealt with.

Finally, there is the unique ritual for dealing with the people’s sin on *Yom Kippur*. Two goats are brought, and one is chosen randomly “for the Lord” and one literally “for azazel” (v. 8, NRSV). The one for the Lord is sacrificed and its blood taken into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled on the covering of the Ark of the Covenant. That solid gold covering (*kapporet*), sometimes called the “mercy seat,” was a kind of symbolic throne and the focal point for God’s presence in the sanctuary (Ex. 25:17-22). In that way the whole *mishkan* (later the Temple) is cleansed (16:16). Subsequently, the altar outside the sanctuary is also cleansed (16:18-19).

Like the offense offering (4:11-12), this goat is not roasted on the altar, but rather its body is taken outside the camp and burned (v. 27). Here is where the reference in Hebrews 13:11-12 comes from, but as I insisted when we studied Hebrews, you can’t understand this passage literally. The author of Hebrews is making a sermonic point, a midrash if you will, not giving us a reliable interpretation of Leviticus. The details don’t quite match. Jesus was killed outside the city walls, but here the goat is killed inside the city or camp. Only its carcass is disposed of outside the camp. Jesus’ crucifixion does not exactly match anything in Torah.

Once the sanctuary is cleansed by the blood of the first goat, we come to the most distinctive part of the ceremony. The second goat is taken by the High Priest (Aaron), who lays his hands on its head and confesses over it all the sins of the people (v. 21). That goat, now bearing the people’s sins, is taken out into the wilderness and the sins are thus banished from the community. Here the text is clear: the sins are not simply inadvertent or unintentional ones; they include “wickedness” and “rebellion,” serious intentional sins for which there were no other sacrifices. *Yom Kippur* wipes the slate clean.

Several things need to be said about this second goat. First is the mysterious phrase, “for azazel” (16:8, 10, 26 NRSV, the Message). Scholars both ancient and modern have puzzled over what this means, because the word occurs nowhere else in the Bible. In later Jewish visionary literature, Azazel is the name of a fallen angel. So some interpreters have

connected this with Leviticus 17:7, which prohibits sacrifices to goats. The King James, following speculative traditions about demons, translates that word in Lev. 17 as “devils,” while the NRSV says “goat-demons” and the NIV says “goat-idols.” So some people speculate that in Lev. 16 the second goat is sent into the wilderness to the abode of goat demons, a thoroughly bizarre idea, especially since in Leviticus the people themselves are in the wilderness. Leviticus 17:7 uses the normal Hebrew word for “goat,” the same one used of the two goats in chapter 16. The OT has nothing anywhere else about demons and reading later speculations into it is not plausible or helpful.

There are other scholarly guesses as to the meaning of “azazel” based on etymology, but the most interesting one is found in the King James translation, which reflects the understanding found in the ancient Greek translation of the OT. “Azazel” is understood to come from a Hebrew root meaning “to remove, to send away.” In his 1530 English translation, William Tyndale rendered the phrase as “escape goat,” and the KJV created a new word out of this that has passed into common usage: “scapegoat.” The NIV has followed suit, and this is a much more plausible reading, although still only scholarly guesswork. As the NIV translation footnote to this chapter says, “the meaning of the Hebrew for this word is uncertain.”

Whatever the word means (and I only put you through this technical discussion because the translations vary so much, and there is a lot of wild speculative Christian stuff out there), the function of this goat is clear: it is a concrete, tangible agent to carry or remove the sins from the community and take them into a far off place. It is a visible sign from God to the people that their sin is no more. Unlike our modern use of the word scapegoat, which means blaming someone else for our troubles, here on *Yom Kippur* the whole community acknowledges its sin, accepts responsibility for it, and thus is able to be set free from it.