

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis**  
**Class Notes 5/31/20**

We have been looking at the interrelationship between love and law, and we have seen that they are not mutually opposed concepts, which is how Protestants have been taught to read the Bible, but are part of the central biblical idea of the covenant. We saw that the Law is not exhaustive: it does not cover every possible situation. Rather it serves more as an example of the types of behaviors God wants from his people. The Law, like all laws, needs to be interpreted and applied, and for that judges and teachers are needed who are guided by the larger principles of love and compassion and justice.

That is why Jesus and Paul along with the rabbis talk about fundamental principles like love and justice, because they are the starting point for how we understand the Law, how we understand the covenant relationship we have entered into with God and with the rest of God's people. But by themselves, ideals like love and justice can remain on a very abstract level. The Law brings things down to earth. By itself, love can narrow our focus to an in-group, to a small circle of family and friends. But the Law forces us to think more broadly, with its constant reminders that there is a big world out there over which we have been given dominion and which also needs our attention.

So Rabbi Sacks makes an important point when he declares that love is not enough. Biblically a covenant relationship includes both faithful love and laws that govern that relationship. Law divorced from love becomes legalism, obeying rules for their own sake apart from their context in living interpersonal relationships, from the context of the covenant and an ongoing love for the God who has created and redeemed us. But love apart from law can be mere sentimentality or favoritism, or worse, a kind of moral anarchy where there are no rules and everything is permitted in the name of a nebulous idea of love. ***A law-free gospel is not good news.***

In 1985, sociologist Robert Bellah published a book called *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. In it, he discusses the shift in American religion towards an extreme individualism. As an example, he cites a woman named Sheila Larson who explained her unique faith: "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice ... It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other." Note that her personal religion begins with the supposed command to love yourself. Bellah sees this as what faith is becoming in America, slowly fragmenting into the absurdity of hundreds of millions of individual American religions. (A comedian, Judy Tenuta, poked fun at the idea of Sheilaism, saying she was going to create her own religion and call it Judyism.) Such thinking about faith and love cannot create community, which is precisely the problem highlighted by the book of Genesis. It is only when they receive the Law that Israel becomes a people, a nation. It is the covenant, not love alone, that creates community.

Torah envisions a covenant-shaped community that is characterized by both love and law, grace and responsibility, individual freedom and corporate accountability. The *torah*

of messiah, the law of Christ, is no different. That law is the foundation for the new covenant community Jesus called the kingdom of God. Love is not enough to create such a community nor to sustain it.

I want to turn now to look at several major aspects of the Law of Moses that Christians think are an exclusive part of Judaism, of the religion of Israel: animal sacrifice, the Sabbath, and keeping kosher. We will consider some of the things we can learn from them as *torah*, as teaching or instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16).

#### K. The Gift of Sacrifices: Shared Joy

Animal sacrifices are an ancient form of worship found not only in Israel but in most of the surrounding nations. Yet to us they are utterly foreign and strange, almost incomprehensible. We cannot imagine taking a live animal, cutting its throat while catching the blood, skinning and gutting it, and then roasting it over a fire as a way of worshipping God. So I want to explore what Torah has to say about sacrifice.

Christians have been brought up with a particular understanding of sacrifice that focuses on atonement for sin. Yet of the five types of sacrifices discussed at the beginning of Leviticus, only the last two are explicitly said to be for purification from sin. And those are only for inadvertent, unintentional sins and for ritual impurity, which in itself is not sinful. There was no sacrifice possible for deliberate sin, such as lying, or adultery, or coveting your neighbor's well-kept lawn. The Day of Atonement did provide for cleansing the effects of such sin from the Temple and the community, and we will talk more about this in the next section. So let's look more closely at what the text says about sacrifices and how they function.

The opening chapters of Leviticus outline the procedures for five different types of sacrifices. The first three have nothing to do with sin, but rather involve voluntary offerings given out of love, thanksgiving and praise to God (7:12).

Note several things here: first, the sacrifices are largely voluntary, not commanded. Each section begins, "When you bring an offering..." or "If you bring an offering..." (Lev. 1:2; 2:1; 3:1). Torah assumes that people will want to offer sacrifices from time to time and seeks to regulate how that is done. Only the sin offerings are required for specific situations, and most of those have to do with ritual impurity.

Second, not all of the sacrifices involve animals or blood, not even the main offering for sin, which allows poor people to bring grain (5:11-13). There is no insistence in Torah that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin" (Heb. 9:22). Again, we will talk about this more in the next section.

Third, when speaking about sacrifices, Torah's emphasis is not on guilt feelings or remorse. Torah repeatedly affirms that these are occasions of joy and thanksgiving for what God has provided for us (Deut. 12:5-7, 11-13, 18; 14:26; 27:7). Most sacrifices are not about sin but about fellowship with God. Sacrifices are a form of worship; the sacrificial system presupposes that the relationship between Israel and God is fundamentally in order. Sacrifices are not about establishing a relationship with God but rather serve to help maintain that relationship and deepen it.

Indeed, the Hebrew word for the sacrificial offerings in Leviticus comes from a root meaning “to draw near.” The goal of the sacrifice is to draw near to God and have God draw near to the offerer. Sacrifices in the Bible are a way of inviting God into our lives and making room for Him. As Rabbi Sacks says, “*God sacrifices something of Himself to make space for us. We sacrifice something of ourselves to make space for Him*” (Leviticus, p. 19). In the sacrificial system (as we saw with the building of the Tabernacle itself, which was the place where sacrifices were offered), God gives Israel an opportunity to do something for Him. Remember: ***what we do for God changes us more than what God does for us.***

The first sacrifice (ch. 1) was offered daily by the priests and was the most extravagant. It involved completely burning the whole animal on the altar. (This is what sometimes has been referred to as a “holocaust,” from the Greek word “burnt whole.”) Its name in Hebrew refers to something that “goes up” and what pleases God about this sacrifice is not the death of the animal or the blood on the altar but the aroma of the smoke, the smell of barbeque that rises to the divine nostrils (1:9, 13, 17; 2:2). Those with fewer resources could bring a bird rather than a large animal, as Mary and Joseph do (Luke 2:24). The second sacrifice (ch. 2) is usually called a grain offering but the Hebrew word actually means “tributary gift” and comes from a term used in diplomatic circles, implying a recognition of God’s sovereignty. Most scholars think this was a poor person’s burnt offering. In both cases, the costliness of the sacrifice is not what matters most.

The other major type of sacrifice in Leviticus is the fellowship or communion offering, sometimes translated as “peace” offering because its Hebrew name comes from the word *shalom*. It was sometimes given as a thanksgiving offering, which then included not only the animal but also four different types of bread (7:11-12). This offering differs from the rest in that the people who bring the sacrifice share in eating it (ch. 3). Only a small portion of this offering is burned on the altar as a nice smell for God. The rest is to be eaten on the day it is offered and there are to be no leftovers (7:15).

The Passover sacrifice, by the way, falls into this category. The Passover lamb was not a sacrifice for sin, but rather an expression of the ongoing covenant relationship between God and the people that began at the Exodus, of the fellowship and peace that already existed between them. It was a joyous feast, akin to a party to celebrate a wedding anniversary. Christians have confused this in their understanding of the NT.

For a person who brings a young bull or a sheep or a goat as a fellowship offering, that is a lot of food. So the rabbis ask why it all has to be consumed the same day. R. Isaac Abravanel (15<sup>th</sup> century) offers one explanation: having to consume so much food in such a short time would force the sacrificer to invite family and friends to join in and share his joy. (Torah makes that point explicit with reference to the Passover sacrifice: Exodus 12:4). This sacrifice is a feast, a celebratory offering of fellowship with God and others, “rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God” (Deut. 27:7). True gratitude, true rejoicing, true communion with God, necessarily involves sharing with others.

Fellowship offerings would have been an important part of all three of the major pilgrimage feasts (Passover, Booths, Pentecost) in which coming to Jerusalem allowed people from other parts of the world to offer sacrifices. Again, Torah sees those festivals as

times of joy: “You shall rejoice in your festival with your son and daughter, your male and female servant, the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow in your town” (Deut. 16:14). Note the typical concern here not only for your own inner circle but also for others in need.

Maimonides (12<sup>th</sup> century) provides a helpful commentary on this type of sacrifice: *“He who locks the door to his courtyard and eats and drinks this feast with his wife and family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in soul—his meal is not a rejoicing in the divine commandment but a rejoicing in his own stomach....Rejoicing of this kind is a disgrace to those who indulge in it.”* Real joy looks outward, and we cannot rest content with being recipients of God’s gifts without becoming givers ourselves. We are channels of God’s blessings to others, and an essential part of true worship is sharing with the needy, the economically marginalized, the immigrant.

Indeed, Rabbi Sacks insists that the biblical word for joy does not refer so much to a private emotion as to what he calls “happiness shared” (*Deuteronomy*, pp. 125 ff.). Joy is not something we can feel alone or can keep to ourselves; we cannot have joy without sharing. This theme is especially prominent in Deuteronomy, as Moses is preparing the Israelites to enter the Promised Land. As we have seen, their biggest challenge will not be the conquest or external enemies. The biggest threat to their national existence will be their wealth, the blessings of this land of milk and honey. Rabbi Sacks comments: *“Suffering, persecution, a common enemy, unite a people and turn it into a nation. But freedom, affluence, and security turn a nation into a collection of individuals, each pursuing his or her own happiness, often indifferent to the fate of those who have less, the lonely, the marginal, and the excluded. When that happens, societies start to disintegrate. At the height of their good fortune, the long slow process of decline begins. The only way to avoid it, said Moses, is to share your happiness with others....Blessings are not measured by how much we own or earn or spend or possess but by how much we share”* (*Deuteronomy*, p. 129). The strength of a society, its national security, depends on its generosity to those in need and its care for all its members.

***So central to the purpose of the sacrificial system was creating a community whose joy in the Lord came through giving.***