

## Does God Want Sacrifices—or Not?

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### Parashat Tzav 5781

Parashat Tzav continues the Torah’s teachings of sacrifices, gives guidelines for priests to bring them to the altar, and describes the consecration ceremony of the priests to serve in the tabernacle. The various sections are introduced with “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying” or equivalent words that make clear that God is instructing the Israelites to bring sacrifices.<sup>1</sup>

Yet there are insistent countervoices in the biblical tradition that say that God does **not** want sacrifices. After the Second Temple was destroyed, Avot de-Rabbi Natan<sup>2</sup> tells of a panicked student who asked Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai how the people will be able to gain forgiveness now that they could no longer bring a purification or reparation offering. Rabbi Yoḥanan replied: We have a more efficacious method to obtain forgiveness—the practices of loving kindness. To support his point, he cited the words of God according to the prophet Hosea: “I want covenantal love (*hesed*) and not sacrifices” (Hosea 6:6).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Leviticus 1:1-2; 2:1; 4:1; 5:20; 6:1; 6:12; 6:17; 7:28; 8:1 and so on.

<sup>2</sup> Version A, chapter 4. The student is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananyah.

<sup>3</sup> See also the prophet Samuel’s words, “...to obey [God’s voice] is better than sacrifice” (I Samuel 15:22).



There are other prophetic passages that seem to express outright divine rejection of sacrifices. Take Isaiah: “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to me? I am fed up<sup>4</sup> with the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fat cattle; I have no delight in the blood of bullocks or lambs or goats... Bring me no more vain offerings...” (Isaiah 1:11, 13). However, the rejection stems from the evil behavior of those who bring the offering—apparently in the belief that they can “buy off” God even as they sin. As Isaiah added: “...when you make many prayers, I will not hear, [because] your hands are full of blood...” (1:16).

So are sacrifices a positive service of God—or not? In this week’s Haftarah, Jeremiah offers a clarification and resolution of the tension.<sup>5</sup> In God’s name, Jeremiah says: “[You might as well] add your burnt offerings to your peace offerings<sup>6</sup> and eat the meat. I did not speak to your fathers and I did not command them on [bringing] burnt offerings on the day that I took them out of Egypt... I commanded them, saying: Obey my voice and I shall be your God and you shall be My people...” (Jeremiah 7:21-22). In other words God did eventually instruct the Israelites to bring sacrifices, but offerings were not God’s priority. On the very first day of liberation, the Lord spoke of the primary way to respond to God, that is, to listen to the word of God and “to walk in all the ways that I will command you” (7:23). Above all, what God wants from humans is partnership, walking together.

Behind this internal debate about sacrifices is a deeper issue: How should humans respond to the encounter with an Infinite Universal Force and cosmic Loving Presence? Before discovering the divine dimension of reality, people see the world out of their self-centered

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<sup>4</sup> Literally, “my appetite [for such offerings] is totally satisfied [and I want no more of them].”

<sup>5</sup> The Haftarah is always selected to confirm or illuminate or critique the Torah portion.

<sup>6</sup> Burned offerings are totally consumed on the altar whereas the sacrifice owners eat most of the peace offering. Since God does not want their burned offerings, they might as well eat that meat also.



personal lens and act out of their body's picture of reality. The encounter is meant to pull the human being out of the mortal orbit they live in. Thus the Creation story is meant to reframe individuals' worldview and get them to look at the world from a divine perspective. Then they will recognize that the world is bigger than them, that it should be treated with respect as God's creation and that, as temporary sojourners, they should safeguard the Earth and pass it on to the next generations, improved over what they received. They should identify the three rhythms that the Creator has implanted into Creation—chaos to order; non-life to life; lesser to greater quality and capability of life—and join in to advance the cosmic plan. However, human beings are not asked to totally self-abnegate, to abandon the “trivial” pursuits of daily life and live in the eternal. They are recruited to find the balance of the eternal and temporal, the mortal and the immortal, and to walk in God's ways, alongside fellow humans, lovingly, toward a repaired and perfected world.

Some people are so blown away by the discovery of their dependence on Divinity for existence that they want to give God of their best, be it out of gratitude for what they have or out of awe. This is what the sacrifices represent. Given the dietary norms of that time, fat was the richest food and most prized; so the fat of all sacrifices was burned on the altar.

All ideas have a spread of meaning. For some people the awe at God spilled over to fear, particularly as a deity was understood in that culture as a demanding—even tyrannical—one who would punish people strictly for any misbehavior or shortfall in worship. Among such people, the offerings often became a bribe. The search for giving God the best turned into: give God the most precious or most dear to you. This led some to actually sacrifice their children. Such a ghastly sacrifice was seen as heroic and an extraordinary proof of total dedication by the surrounding culture. In Jeremiah's time, Israelites sacrificed their children



to Molekh in the Valley of Gehinnom, thinking that this was an ultimate level sacrifice to God. The horrified prophet, Jeremiah, cried out in God's name: "I never commanded this; it never came into my heart" (7:31)—meaning: that God could not even conceive that such an abominable deed could be considered an act of worship and dedication.

Of course, there can be more constructive applications of this sacrifice idea. In certain Greek Orthodox churches, the concept of total dedication to God was interpreted as priests giving up family and the life of the flesh. They spent the rest of their lives in singing God's praises and reciting liturgies in God's honor in a monastery or chapel. These monks are honored as giving the highest expression of religious devotion.

The Jewish tradition chose a more balanced way of responding to God's presence. It called for individual shifting to constant effort to improve and elevate **everyday life**, while continuing to be rooted in human activity. The Torah called for extraordinary efforts to love neighbors as one's self, and to meet God in ongoing human activities, such as family, feasting, constructive work such as healing, and practicing honesty in business and commerce, as well as sharing with humans in need. One Rabbinic aphorism captures the balancing act. Asked how to spend the time of holy days and how to divide it between divine service and human enjoyment, the Rabbis answered: [Spend time, pray, eat with family, learn Torah, enjoy] "Half to God and half to you."<sup>7</sup> Celibacy for clergy, or life as praying monks, did not make much inroads in Jewish practice.

Pirkei Avot flirts with the idea that a Torah scholar should only "eat bread with salt, drink measured amounts of water, sleep on the ground, live a life of hardship but keep on laboring

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<sup>7</sup> See Rabbi Yehoshua's opinion cited in Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 68b.



in Torah” (Mishnah Avot 6:4). Yet the broader community and Rabbinic culture sidelined asceticism, arguing that God does not begrudge humans. God created a beautiful world with many delights and wants God’s creatures to enjoy them and meet God that way. In fact, the Nazirite who temporarily took on extra forms of pleasure denial (such as drinking of wine) was judged to be both living a more holy existence and a “sinner” for shutting out legitimate pleasures.<sup>8</sup>

The main point, then, was that people should not be so overawed as to see God as a demanding authoritarian ruler who rated subjects higher if they “sacrificed” quality of life or gave up measures of pleasure in order to please or impress God. The primary divine goal was to enter into relationship with humans, to be listened to and imitated. God wants to be followed by humans who are creating and embracing life and upholding their fellow human beings—just as God does.

If humans (following their cultural context) want to bring sacrifices and give of their best to the Temple and the priests, then God was fine with that—as long as they kept their priorities straight. Above all, they must treat fellow human beings and God’s creation with love and respect. However, if they turned sacrifices into mechanisms to (attempt to) manipulate God, the offerings were not acceptable. If they turned sacrifices into “bribes” to get God to overlook their exploitation or abuse of fellow human beings, then God was outraged and rejected the offerings and the Temple in which they were offered.

Giving to God is best shown in giving to fellow human beings and in embracing God’s creation. An act of enjoyment and shared pleasure can be just as worthy as an act of self-denial or

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<sup>8</sup> See Numbers 6:8, and compare to the Rabbinic treatment of v. 11 there in Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 10a.



discipline. Sometimes, to uphold a principle, to defend a value, to protect the world, one must act sacrificially—literally, bring a sacrifice. Such a sacrifice is appreciated and honored. The same held true liturgically in biblical times. If people wanted to bring an offering out of gratitude or to purge a sin or to honor the divine, that was accepted. But the offering had to grow out of a life well lived. A sacrifice—no matter how costly—had no value as a substitute or alternative to a good life. Living for and with God rather than dying or damaging one’s self for God was—and is—the divine priority.

Perhaps the prophet Micah put it best. “With what shall I come before the Lord? ...with burnt offerings or with calves of a year old? ...will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams... rivers of oil (libations)? ...shall I give my first born for my transgression? ...God, has told you, man, what is good and what does God [really] ask of you? Only to do justly, offer covenantal love, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:6-8).

