



Avodah: Sacrifice, Prayer, and Worship

Parshat Va-yikra, Leviticus 1:1- 5:26 | By Mark Greenspan

“Prayer” by Rabbi Karen G Reiss Medwed, (pp. 5-60) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

As we enter the Book of Leviticus we struggle with the role that sacrifice played in the lives of our ancestors in ancient Israel. These offerings seem not only foreign to us as modern Jews but terribly pagan as well. The first seven chapters of this book outline the complex system of sacrifices offered by the Israelite priesthood. We find descriptions not only about different types of offerings but also different ‘grades’ of offerings so that no one is excluded from participating in the ancient rites of sacrifices. Yet the *Torah* says little about what these rites looked like or what happened when an individual brought an offering. In addition we don’t know what was said during the ritual and if anything was said at all. The sacrificial rite is also a theological statement about our ancestors’ conception of God. Writing about the sacrificial offerings Professor Nahum Sarna states: “God desires sacrifices not out of the need for sustenance but out of a longing for the devotion and fellowship of worshippers.” (As it is noted in the *Etz Hayim*). It is this insight that helps us understand the connection between sacrifice and prayer. Both are forms of *Avodah*, service of God.

The Torah Connection

The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When any of you presents an offering of cattle to the Lord, he shall choose his offering from the herd or from the flock.

-Leviticus 1:1-3

Reuven Hammer discusses two examples of biblical prayer: the cry for help from Egypt and the song at the Red Sea.

What is remarkable about this biblical story is that in neither case are the acts of prayer accompanied by sacrifice or other ritual actions or incantations, elements found in every pagan ritual of which we are aware. Even Noah offers sacrifices immediately upon leaving the ark, although he has no word of thanksgiving. The Israelites at the sea, on the other hand, have only words and no sacrifices...No one can deny the importance of sacrifice in biblical and rabbinic Judaism. Nevertheless, the words of the sages in the Midrash are clear: when God performs miracles and wonders for us, the proper and necessary response is song and praise... Sacrifice was divorced from prayer in biblical Judaism and prayer could develop apart from it because of the radically different nature of the religion of Israel. The Bible represents a revolution in mankind’s conception of the sphere of the divine. Since all worship is an attempt to communicate with the divine, the way in which we conceive of the divine is going to influence our approach to worship... Thus pagan worship was more than an attempt to influence the gods: it was a method of controlling them. Worship was accompanied by gifts which pleased the gods because they needed those gifts. Sacrifices were not symbolic offerings but actual nourishment to be consumed... In contrast, the God of Israel as expounded by Moses is not subject to physical need and not controllable by magic...no power exists outside of God... Therefore, the sacrificial system as practiced in ancient Israel became something very different. The outward forms were similar, but the inner meaning was completely revolutionized...

Rabbi Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service* (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1994)

We have been taught: "To love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 11:13). What service (Avodah) is that with the heart? It is prayer.

-BT Ta'anit 2a

Simon the Justice was among the last members of the Great Assembly. He used to say: "The world stands on three things: on the Torah, on the Avodah, and on acts of loving kindness."

-Pirkei Avot 1:2

So long as the Temple service is maintained, the world is a blessing to its inhabitants and the rains come down in season. ... There is no service (Avodah) more beloved to the Holy One than the Temple service.

-Avot D'rabbi Natan Chapter 4

It has been stated: Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina said: The T'fillah (the Amidah Prayer) was instituted by the Patriarchs. Rabbi Joshua son of Levi says: The Tefillah was instituted to replace the daily sacrifices. It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Jose son of Hanina, and in accordance with Rabbi Joshua son of Levi.

It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Jose ben (son of) Hanina: Abraham instituted the morning T'fillah, as it says, "Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the Lord" (Genesis 19:27) and 'standing' means prayer, as it says, "Then stood up Phineas and prayed." (Psalms 106:30) Isaac instituted the afternoon t'fillah, as it says, "Isaac went out to meditate in the field at eventide," (Genesis 24:63) and 'meditation' means prayer, as it says, "A prayer of the afflicted when he faints and pours out his meditation before the Lord." (Psalms 102:1) Jacob instituted the evening prayer, as it says, "And he lighted (wa-yifga') upon the place," (Genesis 28:11) and peg'ah means prayer, as it says, "Therefore pray not thou for this people neither lift up prayer nor cry for them, neither make intercession to (tifga') Me." (Jeremiah 7:16)

It has been taught also in accordance with Rabbi Joshua ben (son of) Levi: Why did they say that the Morning T'fillah could be said till midday? Because the regular morning sacrifice could be brought up to midday. Rabbi Judah however says that it may be said up to the fourth hour because the regular morning sacrifice could only be brought up to the fourth hour. And why did they say that the Afternoon T'fillah can be said up to the evening? It is because the regular afternoon offering can be brought up to the evening. Rabbi Judah however says that it can be said only up to the middle of the afternoon because the afternoon offering could only be brought up to the middle of the afternoon. And why did they say that for the evening T'fillah there is no limit? Because the limbs and the fat which were not consumed [on the altar] by the evening could be brought for the whole of the night. And why did they say that the additional T'fillah could be said during the whole of the day? It is because the additional offering could be brought during the whole of the day. Rabbi Judah, however, said that it can be said only up to the seventh hour, because the additional offering can be brought up to the seventh hour.

BT, B'rakhot 26b

Reflections

As a modern Jewish people we struggle with the meaning of prayer: Why pray? Does God hear or answer our prayers? Imagine how much more complex it is to understand the meaning and significance of sacrifice! From the time of Cain and Abel altars are built as vehicles of sacrifice and communications with God. In this regard Israel was not so different from her neighbors. The people of Israel inherited a system of worship which involved the offering of animals and other food items to God. The second half of Exodus is devoted to the building of the Tabernacle, a large complex in which these offerings would be brought. The first several chapters of Leviticus along with large sections of Numbers and Deuteronomy are then devoted to the types of offerings to be brought to God by the individual, the community, and the priesthood.

The sages came to refer to this type of worship as *Avodah*. According to Simon the Justice, the high priest in fourth century BCE, the world stands on three things: "*Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Hasadim.*" Given Simon's

role as high priest in the Temple in Jerusalem it stands to reason that for him *avodah* was the sacrificial rites of the Temple. Judaism was built on three pillars: the learning of God's teachings, worship through sacrifice, and kindness. When we read Simon's words from *Pirkei Avot* we realize that they have a much broader meaning. They refer to prayer and all acts of worship carried out communally and individually. We worship God when we eat properly dress according to Jewish law, observe sacred moments, and treat others with kindness and carrying. Prayer is only one form of worship.

Yet how did Judaism make the transition from sacrifice to liturgy? The Bible is entirely silent on the liturgical side of sacrifice. And we are left to wonder about the sacrificial aspect of the liturgy. The *Talmud* offers two perspectives on the origins of our liturgy. According to some, prayer originated with the patriarchs independent of the sacrifices. Others contend the daily services were substitutes for the daily offerings in the Temple. As we participate in services we might consider that these are two different ways to think about what we are doing when we engage in prayer. Patriarchal prayer is individual, spontaneous, and focuses on dialogue with God while the sacrifice system is institutional, obligatory, and is wholly impersonal. The sacrifices had to be offered each day – they were not necessarily inspired by a desire to connect with God as much as an obligation to maintain a system of worship. We find both patriarchal and cultic elements in our daily services and in our attitudes toward synagogue worship. There are rules that we must follow in prayer as well as set structures just as there were set sacrifices both for the community and the individual but there is also a desire for *kavvanah*, focus and intentionality, as well as spiritual and emotional meaning.

It's easier to present the rules of prayer than to prescribe a life of prayer. Prayer is one of the few commandments for which proper behavior is not enough. If one does nothing more than to recite the words in the prayer book in the proper order and at the right time one hasn't yet participated in a life of prayer. There is an inner piece of engagement, self-awareness, and spirituality that is also necessary for prayer to be prayer.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

1. *T'fillah, Jewish prayer, is more than the sum of its parts and encompasses far more than just the obligation to recite specific prayers three or more times a day. Jewish prayer incorporates b'rakhot, benedictions, designed to sanctify, thus to grant a deep spiritual dimension, to experience as diverse as eating a peach, smelling a rose, hearing a clap of thunder and seeing a head of state. But T'fillah, also incorporates spontaneous prayer, words we say when we find ourselves in moments of ill-ease and worrisome need, or in moments of sublime gratitude...we pray as a people eager to communicate with God in the context of an ongoing covenantal relationship, but also as individuals intent on establishing an intimate and wholly personal relationship with God.*
- *The Observant Life*, p. 5
2. *One of the ways that humans express need is through prayer. In our formal prayers, we have different opportunities to petition God for things wanting or lacking in our personal lives or the lives of our community... But prayer is not only petition. It also serves as a vehicle to assist worshippers in coming to recognize God's presence in their midst. In this sense prayer is both the path to faith and the response to faith...*
- *The Observant Life*, p. 6
3. *Within the formalized context... Jews are expected to pray with the highest level of kavvanah, that is to say, with the most powerfully focused spiritual intentionality. It is the new meaning or the alternative emotional response to the ancient text.*
- *The Observant Life*, p.9

Questions to Ponder

1. What were some of the purposes of the various types of sacrifices described in Leviticus? Do we seek the same goals when we pray?
2. Karen G. Reiss Medwed speaks of prayer as an expression of anger and even doubt. In what way does prayer help us deal with these reactions to the world?
3. What is *kavvanah* in prayer? How does one go about nurturing and developing a sense of *kavvanah*?
4. What do you like most about prayer? What do you find most difficult about prayer?
5. The Talmud offers two different theories for the origins of the three daily services: the patriarchal and the cultic theories. How might each one affect your experience and attitudes toward prayer?
6. To what extent do you think we should have a fixed liturgy based on tradition and to what extent should prayer reflect our changing perspectives on the world? When and how should we go about changing the prayers we recite as part of our tradition?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan