

The Imaginative Power of Sacrifice

Leon A. Morris

Nothing lasts forever. Upon resolving to build the Temple, Solomon sends a message to King Hiram of Tyre requesting wood and additional craftsmen. He writes about 'dedicating a House in the name of God, "as is Israel's duty forever." (II Chronicles 2:3)

The rabbis, in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction, are faced with the challenge of redefining what is meant by "Israel's duty forever." Though Rav Gidel, in the name of Rav, suggests that this refers to a heavenly altar and the sacrifices made upon it, Rabbi Yochanan writes that it is "the students who engage in studying the laws of sacrifice. The verse regards them as though the Temple were built in their days." (*Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot 110a*)

The conceptual disagreement between Rav Gidel and Rabbi Yochanan is about what constitutes *avodah* (the sacrificial service) in their day, and by extension, in ours. Rav Gidel posits a "virtual" temple in which the angels continue to perform the ancient rites of the Temple. For him, the meaning of sacrificial service is literal even though the locus had changed. In contrast, Rabbi Yochanan claims that the very meaning of *avodah* has become transformed in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction. The place of *avodah* has shifted from the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple) to the *Beit HaMidrash* (study hall). Going forward, the study about sacrifices would become the offerings themselves.

Rabbi Yochanan's boldly adaptive interpretation is representative of a larger rabbinic project in which the human-God encounter shifts from the Temple to the *Beit Midrash*; sacrifice lived on, not in a performative manner but rather in memory, language, and imagination. Study is redefined, not simply as learning in order to do, but as the quintessential religious act.

Prayer is likewise redefined as *avodah*. Drawing on the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*, "If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart..." (Deut. 11:13), the Talmud famously asks and answers: What is the *avodah* of the heart? This is prayer. (*BT Taanit 2a*)

The relationship between sacrifice and study and between sacrifice and prayer is

more complex. Both study and prayer may be understood either as substitutions for sacrifice or as replacements. By substitution I mean to suggest that prayer or study evokes the sacrifices themselves and reminds one that these words recall and represent the sacrificial service that can no longer be performed. The recitation of these words in prayer or study is a substitute for the act itself. In contrast to this, by replacement I mean to suggest that prayer or study obviates the need for sacrifice. Prayer or study has replaced sacrifice altogether regardless of whether the words reference the ancient sacrifices.

For example, following the debate between Rav Gidel and Rabbi Yochanan presented above, the same page of the Talmud presents the opinions of Rava, Resh Lakish, and Rabbi Yitzchak. Their voices cover a spectrum of opinions regarding the relationship between study and sacrifice. On one end of the spectrum Rabbi Yitzchak suggests that study of a particular type of sacrifice is the equivalent of offering that specific sacrifice. For him, study and sacrifice are most closely linked when study parallels the sacrifice for which it serves as a substitute. On the other end of the spectrum, Rava suggests that there is no need to measure study against sacrifice. Ours is a whole new world, and the study of Torah, regardless of its subject, replaces sacrifice and precludes the need for engaging the sacrificial system at all.

Prayer also is presented as both a substitute and a replacement for sacrifice. The *Amidah*, for example, and the time limits for its recitation may be understood as substitutes for the sacrifices offered at specific times of the day. "R. Yehoshua ben Levi says: The *tefillot* were instituted to correspond to the daily offerings." (*Berachot 26b*) In contrast, the Midrash interprets Hosea 14:3, "so will we offer the words of our lips instead of calves," as prayer replacing sacrifice: "What shall we pay in place of bullocks and in place of the scapegoat? The utterance of our lips." (*Song of Songs Rabbah 4:12*)

Because modernity has exclusively championed words as a replacement for sacrifice, the centrality of sacrifice has been masked and its memory deemed insignificant. Now is the time to consider reclaiming the other part of that ancient rabbinic dialectic — study and prayer as substitutes that offer us once again

Rabbi Leon A. Morris is executive director of the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning at Temple Emanu-El in New York, and serves as rabbi of Adas Israel in Sag Harbor. Many of the ideas in this essay were shaped by his fellowship at the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem where he wrote a study guide based upon the Avodah service of Yom Kippur. He is indebted particularly to Yehuda Ben-Dor, Jen Glaser, and Moshe Halbertal for ideas that informed his thinking.

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the opportunity to engage and to relate to the sacrificial service.

For modern Jews, sacrifice was anathema; those ancient forms of worship seemed primitive and outmoded. The notion that God is to be found in one central place was objectionable. The burning of animals in service to God seemed unnecessarily cruel. The language of the Temple and sacrifice, which could have lent itself so easily to metaphor, art, and poetry, disappeared, and the vast number of sources that were rooted in such language were cut off. We need these

sources today, particularly during Yom Kippur when the *Seder HaAvodah* serves as the climax of the entire sacrificial system. The language of these sources expresses vital ideas about relationship, closeness and distance, gift-giving, and the connection between human behavior and God's willingness to abide among us.

We need new approaches to reclaim these difficult texts. Although Temple and sacrifice have long ceased to exist, the imaginative, interpretive, and linguistic influence of these texts can indeed last forever. ●