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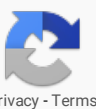
Parashat Vayikra 5780

Rabbi Alexandra Wright – 27 March 2020

'When a person (nefesh) presents an offering of meal to the Eternal One...'
(Leviticus 2:1)

There can hardly be a more appropriate *parashah* for these unprecedented times than this week's *sedra*, *Vaykira*, the opening portion of the Book of Leviticus. Overlooked by the pioneering rabbis of the early Liberal Jewish movement, who substituted these weekly portions about the sacrificial cult with other, more palatable and ethical verses from the *Torah*, their content was thought to be obsolete or worse, distasteful. What relevance did animal sacrifice, or any other kinds of sacrifices have two thousand years after the destruction of the Temple? To read of some hapless animal from the herd or flock, slaughtered by the priests, its blood dashed against the sides of the altar, its flesh flayed and cut up into sections and its fat, entrails and legs turned to smoke on the altar, turned the stomach and only proved that Judaism had progressed to a higher form where the cultic *Avodah* (sacrificial worship) of the Temple had become *Avodah she-hi-ba-lev* – 'service of the heart,' in other words, prayer (Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 2a).

The Rabbis of late antiquity, unwilling to overlook these texts, offered interpretations that substituted for sacrifice – prayer and Torah study, charity and even certain forms of asceticism, such as fasting. Examples of this kind of



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substitution were exemplified by the story of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai who was leaving Jerusalem with Rabbi Joshua walking behind him. When the latter saw the Temple in ruins, he cried out: *'Woe to us that this is in ruins – the place where the sins of Israel were expiated!'* Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai replied: *'My son, be not grieved, we have a means of atonement that is commensurate with it. What is this? It is the performance of acts of lovingkindness, as it is said, 'For I desire lovingkindness and not sacrifice' (Hosea 6.6), (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 4:5).*

Acts of lovingkindness, hospitality, giving up one's possessions and fasting were accounted as equal to the burnt offerings that were offered up on the altar in the Temple. Literary puns on the texts of Leviticus allowed the Rabbis to give homiletic purpose to the Levitical texts – *'The School of Hillel said: 'Kevasim – male lambs (are so called) because they cleanse [kov'sin] the sins of Israel' (Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, p. 120).* A prayer attributed to Rav Sheshet explicitly draws a parallel between the reducing of the fat and blood of an animal on the altar and the shrinking of his own body through the act of fasting. In this way, the ascetic practices against his own body become a replacement for the atonement effected by the sacrifices:

'Sovereign of the universe, it is known to You that when the Temple was in existence, if a person sinned, they would bring a sacrifice, of which only the fat and the blood were offered up, and they would be granted atonement. Now I have observed a fast and my own fat and blood have been diminished. May it be Your will that my diminished fat and blood be accounted as though I had offered them up before You on the altar, and show me favour' (Berakhot 17a).

If the Rabbis allowed these texts to resonate in their own age, how can we find meaning in them for our own time? In the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish people found themselves living in unprecedented times, grieving for the loss of their cultic centre, exiled from their land and trying to make sense of a new and altered reality. They saw themselves as responsible for the catastrophe of Roman destruction and occupation. Suffering and death required repentance and atonement; they were in danger of reverting to an indelicate ancient theology that saw both as a punishment for wrongdoing.

In discussing this *parashah* with Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah of Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue, I wondered – as we began this week a series of restrictive measures to reduce the number of those dying and suffering from the coronavirus – what it is we are being asked to sacrifice. For we are losing our freedom, the

freedom to go to work, to earn a living, to move around as we wish, to enjoy seeing friends and family and instead, are being confined in our homes, except for the most necessary errands.

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This is the price we are paying, the sacrifices we are making, to save human lives and to ensure that the NHS does not become overwhelmed by thousands of sick patients over the next weeks and months.

But Rabbi Elli suggests that we are sacrificing something else. As she put it to me: maybe one of the things we are being asked to sacrifice is our certainty. *'We are being challenged to give up all our certainties and, instead, to give/devote the best of ourselves.'*

We cannot know what lies ahead; how long we will have to endure this exile from our daily lives. We must learn to live in the 'now' of uncertainty and unpredictability. And at the same time, fulfil the words of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai to a grieving Rabbi Joshua, that although we have lost the certitudes and patterns of our daily life, study and work, it is acts of lovingkindness that demand the very best of ourselves.

When we gather again as communities of personal encounter, may it be with greater compassion for each other, increased respect for our planet, with a quietness of spirit and humility before the Divine Presence.

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