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Radically Different, Radically the Same

This week, our parasha deals exclusively with korbanot – sacrifices.

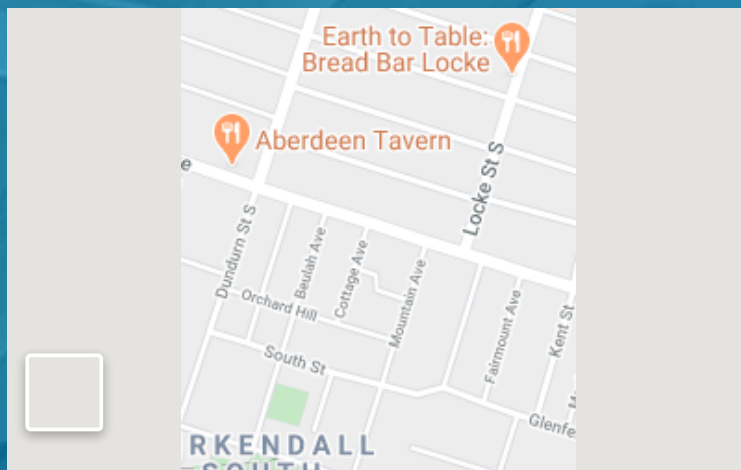
The concept of animal sacrifices is certainly one that is foreign to most of us, yet they played an enormous part of our communal religious life for at least 1400 years, from the construction of the Mishkan (tabernacle) in the desert until the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. When the Temple was destroyed, sacrifice was replaced with prayer and Torah study, and the physical centre of worship moved from the Temple Mount to each of our homes, synagogues, and study halls. But we continue to remember the sacrifices and many of our prayers express a deep national longing for them. While they are not being physically performed anymore, there must be themes expressed in them which can still be applicable in our lives.

One thing which can be noticed when reading our parasha is that transgressions committed towards another person, such as stealing, lying about objects placed in our possession for guarding and the like, also require a sacrifice to achieve complete atonement. On first thought one could think that sacrifices, for which God is the recipient, should only be required for transgressions for which God is the recipient, ritual transgressions. Transgressions towards other humans should be atoned for by monetary compensation to the offended party and attempting to achieve their forgiveness. What would sacrifices accomplish under those circumstances?

But the lesson is clear. A sin to another person is also a sin to God. One cannot be dishonest in one's dealings with other people yet meet all of God's ritual requirements and hope to have God's approval. And so, after returning stolen objects, paying for the damage we have caused, and hopefully received the other person's forgiveness, we still need to ask God to forgive us for those transgressions as well. The opposite is also true. The sacrifices were all centralized in Jerusalem and performed publicly, because a personal violation of our traditions was also an affront against our fellow Jewish people, and in correcting that, some aspect of communal forgiveness was needed too.

Jewish life drastically changed with the destruction of the Temple and it was very hard for our people to give up the sacrifices which were so entrenched in their religious lives. It took hard work to apply the values they learned in a very different world. Yet we managed to do so, and Judaism lived on. Our lives have recently been drastically changed too, with us all suddenly becoming forced to stay home because of the Coronavirus. We, too, are forced to find ways to retain as much of normalcy as possible in this very unnatural reality. But we're doing the best we can to make the most of it for ourselves and to help each other out as much as we can. When this passes, the experience will certainly have taught us valuable life lessons applicable forever.

As we are all staying at home doing our part in fighting the Coronavirus, this is the perfect opportunity for us to focus on those obligations which often get neglected due to the fast pace of life. We can focus on our families, we can think about how we can help others in need. It's the perfect time to re-realize that by becoming better people towards each other, we are better people in our own eyes, and in God's.



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