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D'var Torah: Tsav

This D'var Torah is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Norman Gill z"l. My grandfather was a lifelong Jewish learner, who took so much pride in my decision to become a rabbi that he started referring to me as "rabbi" almost from the moment I submitted my application to RRC. I learned he was dying the same night that I learned I had been invited to deliver this talk as the George Goldman Torah Scholar at Or Hadash.

I haven't met many people who enjoy giving Divrei Torah on the book of Leviticus. Few people truly relish plunging their hands into the literal blood and guts of the sacrificial code and pulling out a lesson for our time. I've worked with a lot of students whose Bar and Bat Mitzvahs fell in the early to mid-spring. I can tell you, it's not an easy task helping them come up with their words of wisdom. We've usually found some point in the text to disagree with, or been saved by an exciting moment in the Haftarah. Then we skip as soon as possible to the "I'd like to thank everyone for coming" part.

So, I'd like to thank everyone for coming.

For myself, I've often had trouble distinguishing one section of Leviticus from another. So I think a good first approach to a parsha in this book is to discern what makes it unique.

TSAV is the second parsha in Leviticus. It continues the explanation of animal sacrifice begun in the preceding parsha.

The word "tsav" itself means command: "Vayidaber Adonai el Moshe laymor: Tsav et Aharon vi'et banav..." These are the first words of the parsha: "And the Lord spoke to Moses saying: command Aaron and his sons …" Aaron and his sons represent the priestly family, those directly responsible for administering the sacrificial service in the Mishkan, or tent of meeting. God has some instruction for them, to be delivered through the mediation of Moses, and these instructions make up the bulk of the parsha.

The great 20th century Torah scholar Nehama Leibowitz points out that Tsav details sacrificial instructions meant for the priests specifically, rather than for the entire Israelite populace-who were addressed in the preceding chapters.

Tsav is therefore not only full of arcane doctrine, detailing a practice we no longer perform, in a place that no longer exists. It is also an elitist doctrine-one we were perhaps never meant to see. What then is its relevance to our religious lives? Why do we bother to read it? For that matter, why do we read any of the sacrificial code set forth in Leviticus?

These questions aren't new to our day, or to our century, or to our millennium, or even to the Common Era. Tradition itself asks these questions. Every parsha of Torah is paired with a passage from the Prophets, the Haftarah, which in some way reflects the theme of the Torah portion. Tsav's Haftarah comes from the book of Jeremiah. It begins with a very striking verse, a slap in the face.

Jeremiah 7, verse 22: "When I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifice."

The prophet Jeremiah, and whoever ordained the pairing of Tsav with the seventh chapter of Jeremiah, and the innumerable hands that have maintained the texture of these interwoven passages as they passed them down to us, seem to be offering us a paradox. We hear in the Torah reading the detailed instructions given by God through Moses, in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, concerning animal sacrifice. Then, in the Haftarah, we hear Jeremiah claim, in God's voice, that precisely this did not happen. We read these two messages side-by-side. God says: command them to sacrifice. God says: I did not command them to sacrifice.

One perspective within our tradition sees no contradiction here, but only a strongly worded, later-day critique of an earlier practice. From this perspective, we read the two passages, the sacrificial and the prophetic, as different strata in the evolution of the Jewish religion: the second layer trumping the first. The sacrificial cult of ancient Israel, we are given to understand, was either a primitive expression of religious worship, to be transcended, or a corrupt usurpation of religious power-a kind of meat-eating aristocracy-to be abolished. The "prophetic tradition," exemplified by Jeremiah's denial of the validity of sacrifice, is considered an advancement-from blood sacrifice to prayer and ethical action, from the abuse of power to the defense of the meek. The continuation of the Jeremiah Haftarah affirms this perspective: Verse 23: "[I did not command them to sacrifice,] but this is what I commanded them: Do my bidding that I may be your God and you may be my people. Walk only in the way I enjoin upon you, that it may be well with you." In other words, there is a Jewish path, a halakha, which does not involve the sacrificial system.

This powerful argument has had other persuasive champions, in addition to the prophet Jeremiah. The Talmudic sages were forced to come up with a vision of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple, the site of the sacrificial cult. They may have seen salvation in Jeremiah's claim that sacrifices were not commanded at Sinai: Israel and God remained bound in a sacred covenant, even after the ceremonial affirmation of that covenant, animal sacrifice, could no longer be practiced. The great medieval thinker Maimonides theorized that sacrifice was never meant to be permanent. It was only the first stage in a process of spiritualization, which developed naturally from sacrifice to prayer, and would culminate in a kind of intellectual meditation. The philosophers of Reform Judaism, the real champions of the "prophetic tradition," chose to cut out all mention of sacrifice from the liturgy. Instead they embraced the doctrine of "ethical monotheism"-a universalist creed that saw ethically appropriate behavior to be the true goal of the religious life.

This train of thought is clearly characteristic of liberal Judaism, as opposed to the strains of orthodoxy that still believe sacrifice will be re-established. We hold that sacrifice is well in our past, that Jeremiah's critique is a good one, and has lead our religion in a positive direction-toward spiritualized worship and ethical behavior. But why, then, should we continue to tell the story of the sacrificial cult?

Because it is ours, first of all, and because, I believe, it is powerful.

A running joke at the Rabbinical College, especially around Purim, is that in our excitement to Reconstruct Jewish tradition, we will revive the sacrificial system. But since there are so many vegetarians among us it will involve the sacrificing of meatless hamburgers and tofurkey. This joke is influenced, as we all are according to the requirements of our curriculum, by the thinking of Mordecai Kaplan.

Kaplan himself was very critical of the "ethical monotheism" of the Reform movement. He felt that in their rush to make Judaism modern and universal, the Reform

philosophers had eviscerated it. They had stripped it of the specific cultural heritage that made it unique. Kaplan believed that tradition was the stuff that bound us together as a people, and gave us the basis to formulate conceptions of the divine. A purely philosophical religion was to him insubstantial.

We are therefore encouraged to interact with all of the aspects of the Jewish tradition, adapting and Reconstructing according to our communal sensibilities. We are encouraged to study the sacrificial codes, even if our understanding of the good life makes the prospect of reviving them abhorrent.

We study them because they are ours, but what is their power? What do we gain by studying them? What is there to reconstruct?

Some interesting ideas have been offered in answer to this question. Richard Rubinstein, the author of the collection of essays called After Auschwitz, comes at the matter from a psychoanalytic perspective. He suggests that the very reading of what is to him the violent imagery of the sacrificial texts helps us to work through the hostility and aggression inherent in our natures. This is similar to a popular symbolic interpretation of the purpose of sacrifice, which suggests it is a ritualistic slaying of the animal inside of ourselves.

You can take this or leave it, but either way it is hard to deny that the sacrificial system speaks to us in a powerful symbolic language. Think of the number of terms that it has added to our vocabulary: the word "sacrifice" itself, the notion of "offering," the concept of the "scapegoat," and even the troubling idea of "Kiddush HaShem," or martyrdom. The language of sacrifice speaks to the imagination. It is a kind of poetry.

A large section of Torah is devoted to the establishment of the sacrificial cult, beginning with the command to build a Tabernacle in the book of Exodus, and ending with the ordination of the first priests mid-way through Leviticus. Oddly enough, it is a beautiful section of the Torah. Through a process that is slow and painful, interrupted by human failings and divine misunderstandings, human beings build a dwelling place among themselves for the divine. They are taught how to care for this holy place, how certain actions accentuate its sanctity and certain actions detract from it, but that neither triumph nor defeat are permanent. In the glow of a light that is always burning they sin, they atone, and they make peace.

This tabernacle is above all, however, the site of animal sacrifice. It is undeniably a poetry of blood. But even if this makes us uncomfortable, there is still a vital meaning we can find in it. Incorporating sacrificial language and imagery into the poetry of our spiritual lives, through the yearly reading of parshiot like Tsav, gives us the opportunity to transform this ritual of spilling blood into a means of appreciating the mystery of our own living blood.

The priest performed a ceremony of life and death before the altar of God, revealing the physicality, the vulnerability of a living body. Some theorize that the animal he sacrificed was a substitute for his own life-the life of his own body, which he owed to God. In this ceremony is the recognition that our life and death, our fragile physicality, is wondrous. The sanctuary that we build for God in our midst derives its very vibrancy from this constant demonstration of flesh and blood before the altar of the divine, from the constant realization that the miraculous is manifest in the fragile fabric of the living body.

I remember driving home once in the midst of a heavy rushhour. Sitting in my metal car, on the concrete highway, watching exhaust rise from the tailpipes of other cars, hearing a barrage of bad news on the radio. I remember wondering, in absolute frustration, if this was what my life was really about. And as if in answer to my question, in a flash of insight, I suddenly felt how even in the midst of metal, concrete, and smoke, I was still flesh, bone, and blood, part of the living substance of the universe. My eyes were the eyes nature had made to see itself, and in my lungs the world breathed itself. I felt a thrill, and a cry of joy rising in my throat; a sudden and fulfilling reaffirmation of the worth of life.

The "prophetic tradition," the voice of Jeremiah, has led to profound articulations of worship and ethics. But in Tsav, in the poetics of the sacrifice, we are reminded that our holiness begins in the thrill of our blood-in the tenuous miracle of our physical existence. In a mechanized age, at a time when bombs are synonymous with power, we are reminded that our fragility does not mean that we are weak. It means that we are sacred.