

Torah Table Talk

Sacrifices or Obedience?

Parshat Tzav

Leviticus 6:1 – 8:36

Jeremiah 7:21- 8:3; 9:22-23



This week's Table Torah Talk has been generously sponsored by Robin and Joel Cutler in honor of their children Ian and Justin

The prophet Jeremiah lived in the generation prior to the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE by the Babylonians. He had the unenviable job of telling the nation that their sinful behavior would lead to destruction and exile. Rabbi Louis Jacobs writes: "Jeremiah is fearless in denouncing the faithlessness of both the people and the noblemen. It is righteousness and knowledge of Him that God wants, and it is in these alone that man can take pride." Persecuted for his outspoken point of view, according to a tradition he died a martyr at the hands of his own people. In the end, however, Jeremiah mourned along with the Jewish people over the destruction of the temple and tried to bring comfort to them even as they went into exile.

Today's Haftorah stands as a counterpoint to Parshat Tzav. The weekly Torah portion the complex laws regarding the offering of sacrifices. Jeremiah seems to condemn this practice. One can picture Jeremiah standing in the Temple and telling the people that their sacrifices are meaningless; that this is not what God wants of them. He even says that God never commanded the people to bring sacrifices. This statement would seem to contradict the Torah.

Jeremiah 7:21-23

Thus said the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat! For when I freed your fathers from the Land of Egypt I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offering or sacrifices. 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 go well with you.

1. Leviticus 7:37-38

Such are the rituals of the burnt offering, the grain offering, the purification offering, the reparation offering, the offering of ordination, and the sacrifice of well-being, and which the Lord charged Moses on Mount Sinai, when he commanded the Israelites present their offerings to the Lord, in the wilderness of Sinai,

2. Hosea 6:6-7

For I desire loving-kindness, not sacrifice; obedience to God and not offerings. But they to a man have transgressed the covenant; this is where they have been false to me.

3. Avot D'Rebbe Natan 4

Once, as R. Yohanan was walking out of Jerusalem, R. Joshua followed him, and, upon seeing the Temple in ruins, he said: Woe unto us that this place is in ruins, the place where atonement was made for Israel's iniquities! R. Yohanan: My son, do not grieve--we have another means of atonement which is as effective. What is it? It is deeds of loving-kindness, concerning which Scripture says, "I desire loving-kindness and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6)

4. Rabbi Max Artz, Justice and Mercy

(Commenting on Mordechai Kaplan's understanding of the Avodah service on Yom Kippur, Rabbi Artz writes :) The sanctuary can be for us symbolic of the home, the synagogue, the school, and other fundamental institutions, of the community. These institutions which should be an abode of God are often contaminated by people's avarice and self-seeking. Even religious institutions, need to be cleansed of corruption. Have not monumental cruelties been practiced in

the name of religion. Everyone one of us should therefore recognize his individual responsibility for the contaminations of our social and religious institutions.

Questions for Discussions

1. How do we reconcile the statement in book of Jeremiah in which he claims that God never commanded the Israelites to offer sacrifices with the explicit statement in this week's Torah portion that the laws of the sacrifices were not given at Mount Sinai to the Jewish people? Do these two statements contradict one another or is there a way of reading them so that they can be reconciled?
2. Hosea, Amos and other prophets also were critical of the sacrificial system. Do you think they were the prophets opposed to the sacrifices? Why or why not? What does Hosea mean when he says that God desires loving-kindness and not sacrifices?
3. What would Jeremiah say to Rabbis Arzt and Kaplan about the modern day synagogue? In what ways is ritual often an excuse for not addressing the pressing moral and social issues in our communities and our lives.
4. The early classical Reform movement took Jeremiah's statement at his word. They argued that ritual practices are secondary and unimportant to the survival of Judaism; that Judaism is basically a religion of Ethical Monotheism and the ritual practices were simply the (superstitious) folkways of a bygone age. How would you respond to this idea? How did Conservative Judaism try to address the complaints of Early Reform Judaism?
5. Reform Judaism has evolved considerably from its nineteenth century ideology as expressed in the Pittsburgh Platform. Why do you think Reform Judaism is much more sympathetic and open to ritual today than it was a generation or two ago? Why? How is the attitude toward the ritual practices in Conservative different from Reform Judaism today?

Torah Table Talk is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org or contact Rabbi Mark B Greenspan at Haravmark@Optonline.net

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

Copyright 2005 Rabbi Mark B Greenspan