

Sacrifices & Voting

Parashat Tzav (Leviticus 6:2-5)

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Shabbat Shalom! Just one week ago, as we here at CBE began our Purim celebrations, we also began reading the book of Leviticus. This book is both the shortest in length, and contains the most amount of mitzvot, commandments, than any other book in the Torah. And, it is also notorious amongst our people for these many, many commandments: portion after portion about the intricacies of sacrifices, the dread on the faces of b'nei mitzvah students as they find out they must speak, out loud, in front of family and friends, about these burnt sacrifices, or commandments about the sprinkling of blood, laws around purity and impurity, or about scaly skin disease. Perhaps a similar dread on the faces of clergy and clergy students as they prepare to lead their communities during Shabbat.

Last week's portion started us on this path, providing us with the details of the five main types of sacrifices that the Israelites must perform. And this week's Torah portion, Tzav, picks up right where last week ended, except these are supplemental instructions meant specifically for Aaron and the priests. We read again and again **זאת התורה**, "This is the teaching" or "This is the ritual" for all the different kinds of sacrifices that the priests must perform on behalf of the people. And our Torah provides that specific procedure for the ritual. For example, "This is the ritual of the burnt offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it. The priest shall dress in linen raiment, with linen breeches next to his body; and he shall take up the ashes to which the fire has reduced the burnt offering on the altar and place them beside the altar. He shall then take off his vestments and put on other vestments, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a pure place. The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out: every morning the priest shall feed wood to it, lay out the burnt offering on it, and turn into smoke the fat parts of the offerings of well-being."¹

¹ Leviticus 6:2-5

In Torah, the word for sacrifice is קָרַבַּן. The root letters of this word, ק-ר-ב, mean “to come close, or draw near.” So anytime we’re thinking about sacrifices, it’s important to remember that their purpose is to bring the people close to God. And, they can still feel foreign to us. As Bible scholar Robert Alter astutely notes, “Most of the laws...are focused on topics that may seem less than urgent to audiences not part of the ancient world in which they were framed.”² So, if these sacrifices that fill the book of Leviticus were framed and understood for this ancient context, how could we think about them in 2024? Well, tonight I’d like to try and argue that the processes for this sacrificial ritual system draw some parallels to our modern day ritual system of...voting. It may sound a little wild, but let me explain.

² Robert Alter. *The Five Books of Moses*, Leviticus Introduction. Pg. 539.

The sacrifices were supposed to be completed at a particular time or under a particular circumstance. Our election system has specified times in which we should vote, and includes provisions for when we need to have a special election. The sacrifices required being at the altar, sometimes even specifying which part of the altar. We all have our assigned polling places, and the voting booth? That's our altar. The sacrifices all have an intention, a particular purpose for making that sacrifice among the variety of options. When we vote, we come in with an intention (hopefully we've done our research), choosing a particular candidate that we hope represents us well. And the priests wearing all their specific garments? Well, that's the same as the little sticker we get. But most importantly, both the sacrificial rituals of the Torah and our modern day voting rituals are systems that allow us to do something, to take action, in order to create a little more wholeness in our community.

The second time ever that I was able to vote in a presidential election in this country was 2016. Earlier in the year, I had graduated from the University of Kansas, and that fall, I had just moved to the Upper West Side. I remember walking out of my apartment on Election Day, and being thrilled to see so many people in line to vote at the middle school around the corner. Like so many of us, that fall had felt incredibly stressful, watching the debates, following the headlines, trying not to freak out at every poll from FiveThirtyEight. Before walking into that voting booth to participate in this modern American ritual, I felt I had done my duty. I had registered to vote in my new city and state, and texted friends to make sure they were voting. I was incredibly nervous, but also proud to be able to participate in this ritual, a ritual that in the past had been kept from so many of my ancestors. And yet, by the next morning, it was clear I had not done enough. We had not done enough to keep a volatile, dangerous candidate from ascending to the presidency. Looking back on 2016, even with all of my intentions, even with my fulfillment of the ritual of voting, one of the most important things we can do to participate in this society, I had not done enough.

In our Haftarah this week, our reading of the prophets that coincides with each Torah portion, the prophet Jeremiah exclaims God's fury toward the people because of the sacrifices they are making. But, God isn't displeased because the Israelites were confused on how to implement the system of sacrifices; God is angry because the people have confused the purpose of the sacrifices. Channeling God's anger, Jeremiah preaches: "Add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat!"³ In a prophetic style of a major insult, Jeremiah is saying that the people's sacrifices have become so worthless, they might as well just do all the sacrifices together and just get them over with.

³ Jeremiah 7:22

Jeremiah continues: "On the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice."⁴ Now, this isn't saying that God never commanded us to perform sacrifices, because we see that clearly in our parsha this week. Rashi, one of our commentators, explains that Jeremiah is referring back to Exodus, saying that the system of sacrifices came after God freed the Israelites and reestablished their covenant with one another.⁵ Essentially, performing the sacrifices alone, without any of the deeper work involved, just isn't enough. As Rabbi Rachel Joseph notes, "Jeremiah calls out the people for their empty rituals. He is reminding us that the sacrificial system is not the goal of the covenant, but rather, a vehicle through which the people can express their relationship with God."⁶ This elaborate system of ritual sacrifice is the culminating act of a larger commitment. Voting, again the most important of our modern American rituals, is the culminating act of a much, much larger commitment to creating a country, and world, where every person lives with dignity, justice, wholeness, and peace.

⁴ Jeremiah 7:23

⁵ Rashi on Jeremiah 7:23

⁶ Rabbi Rachel L. Joseph. Kindness, Justice, and Equity. *Prophetic Voices* Pg. 192-193.

As we continue to get closer and closer to this election in November, what would it look like to heed the words of Jeremiah? For us, all of us here tonight, all of us here in this community, to take seriously the ritual act of voting. And, for us to see that moment of filling in those tiny bubbles and submitting our ballot, as the culmination of months of work to encourage others to vote, to counter misinformation about the election, to advocate for the issues we care about most in our lives. Since January, more than 100 members of CBE have started connecting with various organizations, run by CBE members, to start this important, holy work. We are sending postcards to encourage people to vote, signing-up to be poll workers, and coming up on Sunday April 14th, I'll be driving to Philadelphia with other folks here to knock on doors and get even more people prepared to vote this year. And more is yet to come, so watch your emails, check the website, and let's start fulfilling our commitment right now.

After receiving all of these intricate instructions for ritual sacrifice, our ancestors began to be so concerned with the holy act itself, they forgot it was a culmination of a larger commitment to God and living out goodness in the world. The words of the prophet Jeremiah shook them out of that position, reminding them of the bigger purpose. For us, voting is a necessary, holy act that has the power to change our country and world. And, when we make our way to the polls this year, may it be the culmination of weeks and months of work, showing our much larger commitment to building the world as it should be. Shabbat Shalom.

Shabbat Drash Tzav 3/29/24

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