

Shabbat shalom!

Tonight is Hag Purim, and that means that today is Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath of Remembrance. And what are we supposed to remember? How the Amalekites attacked our weary stragglers from the rear at the time of the Exodus. The Maftir ends with these stirring words: "Therefore when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you...you should blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!" (Deut 25:19). And the Haftarah recalls the mission of King Saul as commissioned by Prophet Samuel to attack the Amalekites and avenge the People of Israel. This is all tied to Purim, as Haman the villain in the story, is described as an Aggagite, i.e. descended from Aggag, the King of the Amalekites, who is ultimately slain by Samuel. None of this sits well with modern sensibilities.

So let's turn our attention to the Torah reading itself. Tzav is the second parashah in Leviticus and gets into the details of ritual sacrifice, i.e. the sacrificial cult. We spent quite a few of the last weeks reading about the construction of the Mishkan. Now we are learning about what was to be done there.

It is difficult to discuss the sacrificial cult, as it is an ancient practice, far from our own notions of religious practice. We all know that after the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, that ended Jewish animal sacrifice. We also have been taught that the synagogue became the main focus of Jewish worship, and prayer was substituted for animal sacrifice. But despite nearly 2000 years separating us from the era of animal sacrifice, it surprises me how much the Beit HaMikdash (The Holy Temple), and its rituals of sacrifice are recalled again and again in our rituals and prayers.

To be fair, we should acknowledge two important facts:

1. Animal sacrifice was a universal practice, not exclusively a Jewish one.
2. The variety of sacrifices functioned for many centuries and provided the Jewish nation a satisfactory manner of worship.

Here is a brief list of the types of sacrifice discussed in today's parasha:

Daily offerings: the olah, a burnt offering; the minchah, a grain offering.
Voluntary offerings: the chatat: a sin offering; the asham: a guilt offering;
shelamim: a thanksgiving offering; miluim: an ordination offering

So if someone sinned, this was the way for the individual to atone. (The Yom Kippur ritual with the scapegoat was a communal atonement). Today we have other better methods: psychiatry, judicial courts and a police system, a penal system (doing time).

We even have a wonderful description in our Hallel of an individual who was ill or injured and then recovered. He declares that that his vows will be paid "in the courtyards of the Lord", i.e., he will provide a shelamim thanksgiving offering to repay his oaths and debts.

I think the Hannukah story confirms the place of the Temple cult in that some people went to war to regain control of the Temple. The joy of the Rededication is obvious even in our own celebration of the holiday.

But was the cult of animal sacrifice always a roaring success? Not according to our prophets. The designated Haftarah for Tzav is Jeremiah 7:21-8:3, 9:22-23.

"For when I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or 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 that I enjoin upon you, that it may go well with you." JER 7:22-23.

Here is Isaiah 1:11-14: "What need have I of all your sacrifices? Says the Lord. I am sated with burnt offerings of rams and the suet of fatlings and the blood of bulls; and I have no delight in lambs and he-goats. That you came to appear before me, who asked that of you? Trample my courts no more, bringing oblations is futile, incense is offensive to me....your new moons and appointed seasons fill me with loathing.....For I desire goodness, not sacrifice; obedience to God, rather than burnt offerings."

Here is Amos 5:21-22. "I loathe, I spurn your festivals. I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies. If you offer me burnt offerings, or your meal offerings, I will not accept them; I will pay no heed to your gifts of fatlings."

It is clear from these excerpts and many others not cited that the prophets saw a gap between the sacrificial cult and true ethical behavior.

The good news is—we did not read this scathing, indicting Haftarah because it is a Leap Year and therefore we read the special Haftarah for Shabbat Zachor. If it were not a Leap Year, today would be Shabbat HaGadol and we would read a special Haftarah for that occasion. Nevertheless, isn't it remarkable that the Rabbis instituted this anti-sacrifice Haftarah as a companion piece to Tzav.

This gets all tied together when we listen to Samuel's words to King Saul. Who probably felt that a giant communal BBQ would make up for his backsliding: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obedience to the Lord's command? Surely, obedience is better than sacrifice, compliance than the fat of rams." SAM A15:22

The tension between ritual and ethics continues, even in our own day. In my view, we need both. We can explore this further, when we break into small workshops at the Kiddush.

SPK
3-15-14