

Give me that Old-Time Religion

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By Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis

Recently Creekwood Christian Church down here in Flower Mound built a 1/3 scale replica of the *mishkan*, the portable sanctuary the Israelites used while wandering the desert. It is an awesome project, and as part of the program I was asked to speak on the meaning of sacrifice in Jewish tradition. When I arrived they even had a kid staked out, waiting to be sacrificed (not really, he was just there for show –whew!). It was a lot of fun and, as I shared with the group there at the time, the *mishkan* is proof-positive God is a Texan – there is nothing He likes better than a campout and good barbeque!

Frankly, for the majority of Jews today the animal sacrifices of old are not of much interest. Most of us would say we have spiritually evolved beyond that sort of thing. Yet I find Christians like those at Creekwood have an unsurpassed interest in *avodah* (trans: sacrificial service). In fact, questions about the role of sacrifice are the most frequent I deal with. I think this is because sacrifice is a central motif linked to the death of Jesus on the cross. So I am often asked, “do Jews still make sacrifices?” To which I immediately answer, “Yes, of course we do!” Now in all honesty, Jews today only make burnt offerings accidentally, usually on their backyard grills, so my answer requires further explanation.

The English word “sacrifice,” which means to give up one thing for another, is really a misnomer when applied to the Israelite cult. The key to understanding the meaning of the temple service is found in the Hebrew term for an offering, *korban*, which means, “to draw close.” This should come as no surprise; worship in any form is usually meant to draw one closer to God. For our ancestors animal and vegetable offerings were a meaningful way to do that.

Yet Israelites tended to confuse the form with the goal. As a result, they came to believe that the mechanical act of slaughtering and burning an animal was essential to pleasing God. After the giving of the Torah, however, God sent us prophets to amplify, clarify and expand its meaning. They made it clear that sacrifice was *not* the sine qua non of relationship to God. Virtually all the prophets reiterate that it is our hearts and minds God demands, not burnt offerings (I Samuel 15:22; Is 1:11-17; Micah 6:6-9; Ezek. 18:21-23; Jer. 7:21-22; Amos 5:21-25; Hosea 6:6, 14:2-3; Ps. 51:18-21 – I could go on, but I would become tedious).

In fact, the Rabbis note that God demands we *avodah bekol levavecha* -- literally “sacrifice the entirety of your heart.” In Talmud it is asked rhetorically, “What are these ‘sacrifices of the heart?’ – prayer!” And from this insight Jews have come to understand the prophetic principle: God’s Temple is really the person and our heart is meant to be God’s altar.

Yet confusion about this persists even after prayer had replaced sacrifice. Moderns still get stuck on the issue of live sacrifice because of a single verse, Lev. 17:11. Some take this to mean there will be no forgiveness whatsoever of any sort without a blood sacrifice. Yet the verse itself appears in a specific context – the prohibition against consuming blood when we consume animal flesh. The point is made three times in the Torah (here, Gen, 9:4 and Deut. 12:23-24): abstaining from blood is the expiation required for the specific act of consuming a *beriah*, a sentient being. This rule is still observed today. Kosher meat is drained and salted to remove all blood before it is eaten. But the rule has no application beyond the issue of food. By contrast Lev. 5:11 shows that a sacrifice does not have to involve blood to effect forgiveness. And elsewhere Torah makes it clear Divine forgiveness can be had through simple and sincere contrition (Numbers 14:20).

So we Jews in fact do continue to offer up sacrifices. But where once we made our material offerings in Jerusalem, today prayer, repentance, and service to humanity are our *korbanot*, our daily offerings. These are the only true *olat tamid*, eternal offerings. For the prophets have taught and we have come to understand this: only a sacrifice that is made upon the altar of the heart is capable of bringing a person close to the Holy One of Israel.

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