

CyberTorah: Lay Our Burdens Down

As we encounter the sacrificial system over the next couple of months in our Torah reading cycle, we feel as though we are encountering primitive religious expression. We cannot imagine scattering blood as anything other than outdated and outmoded. The notion of slaughtering an animal as a vehicle to finding God seems barbaric. As a result, we find these sections dull because they appear to describe a foreign outdated mentality.

We take refuge in Maimonides, the one Rabbinic Sage who questions the value of the sacrificial system. According to Maimonides, God establishes the sacrificial system after the sin of the Golden Calf. Once God realizes that the people lack the maturity to have a direct unmediated experience of God, God gives the people the sacrifices. Here is a religious expression familiar from Egypt. Here is a step that can lead from primitive religion to philosophical religion.

All these modern sophisticated responses show our own bias as we read the text, and our own inability to see the Divine wisdom contained within these rituals. Jacob Milgrom writes marvelously about these rituals in his commentary to Leviticus in the Anchor Bible series. He alerts us to several key elements of the sacrificial system.

First, Torah repeatedly puts these expectations on each person, using the Hebrew word Adam. Adam, Milgrom demonstrates, means both man and woman as opposed to the more gender specific word, ish. Therefore, Torah is placing religious responsibility on every household and every person. The experience of God is indeed direct and unmediated.

Second, the sacrifices themselves respond to the lived experience of people. I bring a sacrifice as an answer, as a response, to my own experience. Sometimes that means a sin offering when I perceive myself to have failed. Other times I might bring an offering of thanksgiving because of something good that has happened.

Most frequently, I bring a shlamim offering. Shlamim comes from the word Shalom and means complete. Yet as Milgrom notes, the shlamim offering is anything but complete. Only a small portion is offered while the rest is eaten by the householder. In other words, the meal itself becomes sanctified. It is the person's experience of having a family meal that creates the sense of completeness referred to by the offering.

All these rituals offer us a behavior in response to our own experiences, fears, hopes and dreams. The observer of these laws had a way to lay down their burdens, to work through the complex tangle of emotions that result from failures and successes, fears and hopes. Torah calls for a response to the challenging moment of transition and celebration in our lives.

Living three thousand years after these laws were given, I'm still subject to the vagaries of life. As a result, I sometimes carry around anger longer than I want. I sometimes worry over unresolved issues. Even joyous moments create their own stress for me as I struggle to understand their significance. I too need ritual to lay these burdens down and then to rest in the presence of God.

Even though we no longer offer sacrifices, Torah continues to offer me rituals through which I can lay down my burdens and baggage. As one example, Shabbat is a time to lay down my burdens. I do nothing financial over Shabbat, so all my worries about bills and investments, paying for my children's education, etc, etc, are put aside.

When I eat dinner Friday night, I use two challot and salt to remind me of the Shlamim offering. God becomes a part of my meal as I allow myself the room to get in touch with myself as a spiritual being. Is it any wonder Friday is always my best night's sleep? Prayer is a time to lay aside my anger and frustration that I find so tiring. It provides me a time to lay down the anger, lay down the depression, and reach out to God.

While we no longer sacrifice animals, we still carry around the same emotional and spiritual burdens that our ancestors experienced. We too need rituals to stand before God in those moments. So that we can indeed lay those burdens down and experience the true joy of living a redeemed existence.

Shabbat Shalom,

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