

Evolution of Ethics

“Creating gods who can see everything, and who hate cheaters and oath-breakers, turns out to be a good way to reduce cheating and oath-breaking”

Jonathan Haidt, The Righteous Mind, p. 297

The first chapters of Leviticus, though at first sight seem to suggest no more than a catalog list of sacrifices, are actually a guide to life and to the intention of the Giver of the Law. We have to zoom out of the detailed list of the different categories, the animals or substances used for the sacrifices and in what occasions they are brought, and consider the structure of the list as a key for understanding the purpose of sacrifices.

The sacrifices can be divided into two clearly distinct groups: those brought from a positive state of mind and those brought because of a negative situation.

Positive Sacrifices

The first category of sacrifices introduced is the burnt-offering or ascent-offering. This is a sacrifice brought by someone of a very high spiritual level. That person is at one with God or with the universe; he has witnessed the beauty of creation and was moved to tears or had a deep religious experience which touched the hidden strings of his very soul. What this person wants to express with his sacrifice is that he is willing to let go of what is important to him in order to show that it is insignificant in comparison with his love and devotion for God. The devotional sacrifice symbolizes his own ascent, as if it were, getting closer to God, doing everything he can do while still alive. There is no sin or transgression, no thanksgiving or personal celebration, just recognition of the burning desire to be close to the Creator.

The second category is the thanksgiving sacrifice. It is a sacrifice offered in gratitude by the recipient of a Divine favor. Whether he was saved from a great disaster, completed a dangerous journey, or is enjoying blessing and prosperity, one wants to acknowledge that he might not have deserved it and that God has showered him with favors. To be grateful is not easy, especially for men, because it means admitting that one is in a weakness position and on the receiving end, and that is why the verbs confess (התודה) and thank (הודיה) in Hebrew are derived from the same

root (תדה), because saying thank you is in a way a confession, but even with that hint of reluctance, this sacrifice is brought when one is in a positive mood.

The third category of the Positive Sacrifices is the peace-offering sacrifices, whose name in Hebrew - שלמים, also connotes wholesomeness and completion. These are sacrifices which are brought as a sign of celebration, usually accompanying other, mandatory sacrifices brought during the pilgrimage holidays. The person who offers this sacrifice invites friends and relatives to partake with him, and some of the meat is shared by the priests, thus creating a celebratory atmosphere and a spirit of unity and friendship.

These sacrifices can also be seen as celebrating the future, the past and the present. The burnt-offering is brought with the desire to get closer to God in the future, the thanksgiving sacrifice is in acknowledgement of the past and the peace offering is meant to celebrate the moment.

Negative Sacrifices

The first category in this group is the sin-offering, brought for an accidental transgression of one of the Torah's commandments. There is a discussion of the anointed priest, the whole nation, and the chieftain as sinners, as if to show that all are susceptible to commit errors, and only then the sin of an individual is mentioned. Even though a sacrifice is required, since the transgression was a mistake, one is not considered guilty and the Hebrew name of the sacrifice (חטאת) is derived from the root חטא, to miss or to be off the mark.

The next category is penalty-offering, brought by a person who forgot that he is not allowed to do a certain thing or who is unsure whether he has sinned or not, for example, someone who has witnessed a crime but forgot about it at the time of the trial, resulting in not testifying and maybe altering the outcome of the trial, or someone who touched an impure object and then forgot and touched a pure one or entered the Temple in a state of impurity. In these and similar cases one is held responsible and is called guilty because he should have been more aware of his actions and whereabouts.

The third category is a penalty for misuse of the Temple's property, and this time the perpetrator must bring, in addition to the sacrifice, a fine equal to one fifth of the monetary benefit he derived from his transgression. The sin is described here as מעל בקדשי ה', a misuse of the objects dedicated to God, but the term could also be interpreted in Hebrew as referring to an act of treason - מעילה.

On the Ethical Path

It is evident that so far, the Torah has described the spiritual state of mind on a descending path, from one who brings a devotional sacrifice to show his closeness to God, through one who thanks God for His benevolence and abundance, to one who he is engaged in celebrating the

moment with family and friends. Following these three categories of “positive” sacrifices, the descent continues first by shifting into the “dark side” and discussing sacrifices brought by sinners for atonement or as a penalty. The decline here takes us from the accidental sinner through the criminally negligent to the one whose sin carries a fine besides the sacrifice he must bring.

All that culminates in the last leg of the section dealing with sacrifices (5:20-26), in which the Torah presents to us the lowliest cases necessitating a sacrifice. We are about to meet the people who are at the bottom rung of the spiritual ladder, after the devout, the grateful, the joyous, the accidental sinner, the criminally negligent, and the penalized sinner. What grave sins will this person have to atone for? For what will he be punished?

The answer, revealed in the next paragraph should not surprise anyone who is familiar with Biblical theology, and especially with the Prophets’ emphasis on social justice, but when it was presented to the Israelites in the desert it must have shocked them and reshaped their value system. According to this passage of the Torah the gravest sins, committed at one’s spiritual nadir, are the ones many do not even consider to be part of a religious life style:

“When a soul sins and misuses God; if a man denied he has received a collateral or a loan, or if he robbed or defrauded another person, or if he has found a lost object and did not return it to its rightful owner.”

Upon reading these lines we understand that each category of sacrifices mentioned in the opening chapters of Leviticus was a stepping stone, bringing us closer to the realization that sacrifices, commandments, sins and repentance are all leading to one goal. God needs neither sacrifices nor rituals performed in His honor. He does not need us to serve, praise, worship or build tabernacles, temples and synagogues for Him. He wants humans to commit to building a moral and altruistic society, to respect and treat each other with honesty and dignity.

In that vein, the monetary offender suffers most under the hand of the law: not only must he repay the victim, and not only does he have to pay the victim an additional fine of twenty percent of the damage, but God Himself is enraged with him and he must bring a penalty offering to appease God. The severity of the offense is evident by the omission of one word: whereas misusing funds or property of the temple is described by the words: מעל בקדשי ה', a misuse of God’s property, those monetary offenses against others are described as: מעל בה' – a misuse, as if it were, of God himself.

Thus the Torah delivers a very clear message which can be fully comprehended only when looking at the whole picture: the religious, devotional system the Torah presents us with is only the means for cultivating personal growth, heightened spiritual awareness and a reverence of

God, which together prepare the naturally selfish, self-absorbed human being, to be more sensitive and caring for the needs of others, even if only by avoiding the negative tendencies of harming, embezzling and defrauding others.

If I may return to the quote which opened this article, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues in *The Righteous Mind** that religion is a logical and practical evolutionary development. This is because moral principles anchored in religious beliefs are essential for a healthy society, and are especially helpful in overcoming the problem of freeloading, which can undermine the economy and stability of a state or a commune. As a believer, I am glad to embrace this statement, because it means that God has delivered to us, through the Torah, the same message He has delivered to all of humanity through the language of the genetic code.

Shabbat Shalom

*see especially the chapters: *The Hive Switch*, and *Religion is a Team Sport*, pp.256-318.