

## Speaking with God<sup>1</sup>

Following the descriptions of the offerings (sacrifices) commanded of Israel by God in *Parashat Vayikra*, God gives additional commandments for those same offerings in *Parashat Tzav*. After summarizing the *parashah*, I present a commentary on interacting with God followed by a discussion that will consider the *parashah* and my commentary.

### Summary of *Parashat Tzav*

*Parashat Tzav* begins with additional prescriptions for the offerings described by the previous *parashah* (*Vayikra*) including the following:

- ***Olah*** – the burnt offering - The priests must add wood to the altar fire every morning to keep it perpetually lit. The priests must dress in linen raiment while performing the burnt offering. When disposing of the ashes from the burnt offering, the priest must place them next to the altar, change into clean clothes, and then dispose of them in clean place.
- ***Minchah*** – the meal offering - The meal offering is to be eaten only by male members of the priesthood and only within the sacred precinct of the sanctuary. The priests' portion must be prepared without leaven. Anything that comes into contact with the meal offering will become holy.
- ***Chatat*** – the sin offering - The priest who performs the sin offering is to eat it within the sacred precinct.<sup>2</sup> Anything that comes into contact with the sin offering will become holy. Any garment splattered with blood from the sin offering must be washed in a prescribed manner. Only male members of the priesthood may eat the sin offering.
- ***Asham*** – the guilt offering - The guilt offering is to be eaten only by male members of the priesthood and only within the sacred precinct of the sanctuary. Depending on how the guilt offering is prepared, the priest who offers it may eat it, or only the High Priest and his sons may eat it.
- ***Zevach Shelamim*** – the sacrifice of well-being – The entire sacrifice of well-being is to be eaten in one day if it is a thanksgiving offering. It may be eaten in two days if it is a freewill offering made in fulfillment of a vow. The meal from the sacrifice of well-being is given to the priest who performs the offering. The person who makes a sacrifice of well-being must present the offering in person. The breast is to go to Aaron and his sons, and the right thigh must be presented as a gift to the priest who performs the sacrifice.

Along with the above sacrificial offerings, *Parashat Tzav* also prescribes a special invocation offering for the occasion of the anointing of the priests.

Following the offering descriptions, *Parashat Tzav* describes the actual anointing of Aaron and his sons by Moses before the whole community. Moses dressed Aaron in the High Priest garments and accouterments and then anointed him. He then dressed Aaron's sons in priestly garments and made the prescribed offerings. Lastly, Moses charged Aaron and his sons (on pain of death) to remain constantly at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting for seven days.

~ + ~ + ~ + ~

<sup>1</sup> I presented this *parashah* in 2014. The summary is taken from the 2014 presentation. The commentary is new. I retained but revised the first discussion topic. The others are new.

<sup>2</sup> This appears to contradict *Parashat Vayikra* which says that the parts of a *Chatat* bull not turned into smoke on the altar are to be burned outside the camp.

## Parashat Tzav: Speaking with God

I added my 2014 commentary following the discussion section. There I note that the descriptions of the sacrifices in *Parashat Tzav* appear to be a repetition of *Parashat Vayikra*. I argue, however, that the second presentation emphasizes the importance of the priests by giving them their own instructions. This current commentary looks at interacting with God.

*Torah* speaks of God the creator of the world (אלהיני) and God the ruler of the world (יהוה). The *Shema* proclaims that God the creator and God the ruler are the same being, but that isn't revealed until 40 years after *Parashat Tzav*.<sup>3</sup> It can nevertheless be useful to think of Creator and Ruler as aspects of God when considering *Parashat Tzav*. The offerings concerned with the Law (Sin and Guilt) are intended for God's ruler aspect. The Meal and Well Being offerings are intended for God's creator aspect in gratitude for gifts of nature. The Burnt offering can be for either aspect.

The Levitical priests spoke to both aspects of God on behalf of the people. They would ask the Creator for protection from natural events and the Ruler for forgiveness for transgressions against the Law. (Neither aspect of God spoke to the priests). The Ruler spoke to the prophets. God warned them of transgressions and in some cases, gave clarifications of the Law. The majesty of God's creation spoke to everybody – priests, prophets and the people.

But what about the people? How did they communicate with God?

Liturgical prayer in synagogues became the Jewish replacement for offerings at the Jerusalem Temple after its destruction in 70 CE. Early synagogue assemblies recited the *Shema* and the *Amidah*, and they read from *Torah*. Like the Temple priests, people in synagogues used prescribed rituals to speak to God. Similarly, there is little or no evidence that God spoke to them.

There was no place in the Creator/Ruler framework for the people to interact with God. A broader framework was needed; one that (possibly among other aspects) included God the Counselor, God the Consoler, God the Rescuer and God the Savior. We want to ask God for guidance; we hope for God to console us; we seek divine help in dire circumstances; and we want continued existence after our corporal lives end.

Atheists can appreciate the majesty and awe of creation and can live ethical lives without having a relationship with God. But whom can an atheist ask for guidance when alone in a quiet place? Whom can she ask for comfort from the depths of grief or despair? Whom can he ask for rescue from a life-or-death situation? (No atheists in a foxhole!) Who can bring peace and comfort to an atheist on his or her death bed?

Did ancient Israelites not also have these needs for God? If they did, why didn't God present these aspects of Himself in *Torah*? Maybe they were revealed between the lines. Maybe God only began revealing these aspects of Himself to the latter prophets and continued to reveal them to the sages who wrote the *Mishnah* and later the *Talmud*. Reform Judaism adheres to the notion of Progressive Revelation; God's will is constantly unfolding, and each generation has to hear God's voice in its own time.

I don't pretend to know why God didn't lay it all out in *Torah*, but what works for me is that God speaks to us in terms we can understand. Imagine God describing the Big Bang to the authors of *Torah*:

God: "In the beginning was an infinitely dense point singularity that violently exploded..."

Authors (scratching their heads): "Huh???"

~ + ~ + ~ + ~

<sup>3</sup> Deut. 6:4

## Discussion

Our discussion topics are based on the *parashah* and on my commentary. We will first read and discuss each topic and then open the discussion to allow you to re-visit any of the topics.

### Discussion Topic: Sacrificial Offerings

Sacrificial offerings of food items were a common practice in early religions. These offerings were often made to a totem, which was a graven image in which the god was believed to reside. Many ancient peoples anthropomorphized their gods who would therefore have the same needs as their human worshippers. The idea behind a sacrificial offering was to curry favor from an extra-natural entity(s) who could help the worshipper get what he wanted; a successful enterprise, protection from an enemy, recovery from a disease or ailment, etc. This was frequently done by giving the anthropomorphic god something it would have needed – food.

The God of ancient Israel was not anthropomorphized. The Ten Commandments specifically prohibited the creation of graven images. God punished Israel for creating a Golden Calf, even though they might likely have believed it was an image of Him.

- If the God of *Torah* is not anthropomorphic, why does He need food offerings? He doesn't eat the food offerings; the priests do. Is the purpose of food offerings to feed the priests (who have not been granted land) or is there some other reason?
- Blood is equated with life in *Torah*. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation (atonement) for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that affects expiation."<sup>4</sup> What does this mean??? Since we have not offered blood sacrifices to God since Temple times, can we still make expiation for our lives?
- The purpose of sacrifices to other gods was to curry favor, but the sacrifices to God described in *Parashat Tzav* serve different purposes. One is to make expiation and the other is to draw closer to God. (The Hebrew word for sacrifice is *korban*, which translates as "draw near" or "approach"). Making expiation is a moral/ethical act and drawing closer to God is spiritual. Do the moral and ethical acts of offering sacrifices somehow morph into spirituality?

### Discussion Topic: Ritual and Spirituality

*Parashat Tzav* gives the priests detailed instructions for how to prepare the sacrificial offerings and then how to present them to God. One way to think of this is like giving instructions to a chef who will be preparing your meal. But God doesn't consume the offerings, so that can't be the reason. If the instructions aren't for God's benefit, whom do they benefit? The benefit from observing the instructions concerning contact with blood is obvious; Israel needs to maintain its ritual cleanliness. But do the benefits end there?

Instructions become rituals when meticulously practiced over time, and rituals have intrinsic benefits. Once mastered, a person can perform a ritual without thinking about the act they are performing. I have attended more symphonic concerts than I can recall, and only once did I see a soloist read from a score while performing. The great violinist Isaac Stern once said, "Anyone can play the notes. Music is what happens between the notes". The notes are the vehicle that allows a virtuoso performer to express his or her artistry, which happens when not concentrating on the notes. Did the performance of rituals engender spirituality in the priests, and did that spirituality pass to the people? Does ritual recitation in synagogues lead to spirituality?

---

<sup>4</sup> Lev 17:11; Notice that it says, "expiation for your lives" and not "expiation for your sins".

**Discussion Topic: Aspects of God**

My commentary speaks of aspects of God. What I called the creator aspect is how many modern religions understand their deity(s). The ruler aspect is strongly embraced by the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What about God’s counselor, consoler, rescuer and savior aspects? Are these aspects of God, or are they human needs that at some point can only be filled by God (or a God-like being)?

- All of us seek counsel at one time or another. What do we do when the advice we receive is no better than what we come up with on our own? Wouldn’t we then welcome advice from an all-knowing counselor?
- We all have times when we need consolation, and consolation from friends and loved ones has great value. But what if that just isn’t enough? Is there a consoler who can touch our souls and heal our aching hearts?
- No matter how strong we are, our strength will fail us at some point. Whom can we ask for help when that happens?
- Hamlet called death, “The undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns...” Like Hamlet, death puzzles our wills. If we want peace from this puzzlement, can we find it anywhere other than God?

Humans are practically less than insignificant in the incomprehensibly vast universe we inhabit. And yet we want to somehow matter within this vastness. God is on the scale of the universe while at the same time a tiny voice inside us. Can God give meaning to our lives?

**Discussion Topic: Prayer and Personal Relationship with God**

Genesis is about individuals. *Torah* after Genesis is mostly about nations. Let’s assume that *Torah* was written during and prior to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and jump forward to the first century CE. Nations still mattered, but individuals had become important, and some of them prayed to God. Jesus of Nazareth was a first century Jewish religious teacher. According to Christian gospels, he addressed his teachings to individuals, and he spoke about their individual souls. *Torah* makes no mention of individual souls. Whereas *Torah* provided for priests to speak to God on behalf of the Nation of Israel, Jesus instructed people to pray (speak) directly to Him. *Torah* does not mention prayer. What changed?

The short answer is that Greek Humanism had permeated Judaeon society starting with Alexander the Great’s conquest of Jerusalem in 322 BCE. The Maccabean Revolt (167 to 160 BCE) aimed to exorcise Greek influences from Jewish life. The Rabbinic Movement, which began in the first century BCE, could be seen as an attempt to reconcile *Torah* with Greek Humanism.

Were prayer and personal relationship with God unknown at the time of creation of the Hebrew scriptures? According to the Documentary Hypothesis, the Psalms were composed contemporaneously with the first 4 books of *Torah*. Some Psalms attributed to David are very personal and prayer-like. But David was a king and spoke to God not for himself but for Israel, the nation. Did the Psalms begin a trajectory toward individual prayer and personal relationship with God? If so, did the loss of kings and the mixing with a foreign philosophy accelerate the journey along that path? Would Judaism today (if it even existed) provide for individual prayer and personal relationship with God if the Kingdom of Israel had not fallen in 586 BCE and Judea had not been conquered by Greeks in 322 BCE? Was all of this part of God’s plan?

~ + ~ + ~ + ~

**Parashat Tzav and Parashat Vayikra: A Commentary on the Differences**

*Parashat Vayikra* presents instructions for preparing the sacrifices and gives reasons why they might be offered. (See summary following Discussion). *Parashat Tzav* repeats some of the preparation instructions but in less detail. It presents prescriptions not found in *Vayikra* including how and where the priests are to eat their portions of the sacrifices. It also prescribes activities surrounding the sacrifices such as tending to the fire, disposing of its ashes, and cleaning ritual garments used while performing the sacrifices.

I submit that much of the reason for two presentations of the same sacrifices is the differences between the intended audiences of the two *parashiot*. *Parashat Vayikra* begins, “God called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the Israelite people...” *Parashat Tzav* begins, “God spoke to Moses, saying: Command Aaron and his sons...” The prescriptions for the offerings in *Vayikra* are for the congregation of Israel (including the priests), but the prescriptions for the offerings in *Tzav* are only for the priests.

*Parashat Vayikra* gives instruction for rites that are to be performed in view of the congregation of Israel, but *Parashat Tzav* instructs the priests concerning sacred rites that are performed out of public view. Adding wood to the fire is to be performed in the morning, before the offering of sacrifices. Changing into clean garments prior to disposing the ashes from the altar is essential to maintaining the purity of the (unspecified) clean place where they will be dispensed.<sup>i</sup> Likewise, cleansing garments splattered with blood from sacrificed animals is required for maintaining the priests’ own ritual purity. Most important is eating food that was made holy by offering to God; anything that comes into contact with the ‘holy’ food becomes holy; the priests are given the right to eat the holy food because they will already have been made holy by their anointment.

*Parashat Tzav* says, “Those shall be the perquisites of Aaron and the perquisites of his sons from God’s offerings by fire, once they have been inducted to serve God as priests.”<sup>ii</sup> This verse immediately follows the instruction to present the breast and thigh as a gift to Aaron and his sons, but Plaut notes that all of the sacral food can be considered the perquisites of the priests.<sup>iii</sup> Because God has given the priests the right to eat the holy food as their reward for performing their sacral duties, God also instructs them on how to comport themselves in a holy manner commensurate with the sanctity of that food.

Thus the prescriptions for sacrificial offerings found in *Parashat Tzav* are not a repetition of those found in *Parashat Vayikra* but a separate set of prescriptions. Just as God has set aside the priests and made them holy (separated) by their anointment, God’s *Torah* sets aside prescriptions to instruct the priests on how to maintain their holiness in His presence.

~ + ~ + ~ + ~

---

<sup>i</sup> The clean place might otherwise be defiled by contact with blood.

<sup>ii</sup> Lev. 7:35

<sup>iii</sup> *The Torah – A Modern Commentary*; Edited by W. Gunther Plaut; Union of American Hebrew Congregations; 1981; p. 788. Although Plaut translates *mishchat* as “perquisites”, he notes that it literally means “anointment”.