

Parashat Tzav

Rabbi Harvey Fields

During the period when thousands of people journeyed to Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices, the Torah's instructions on how the priests were to prepare and receive these sacrifices was extremely important. If they were not prepared correctly or offered properly, they were not acceptable. Therefore, knowing and following the directions of the Torah concerning sacrifices was a high priority for both the people and the priests. Studying the details for the presentation of each sacrifice had great importance. After the destruction of the Temple in 70, the people most certainly asked the question: do these descriptions and commandments concerning the offering of sacrifices still have any meaning for us? Are they now obsolete?

Rabbi Levi

Notice the word "olah," which means burnt offering, can also be read and translated as "alah," meaning to "behave boastfully." Therefore, the Torah's statements, "This is the law concerning the olah. It shall go up upon its burning place on the altar..." can be understood to mean, "This is the law concerning the alah, the boastful person. He shall be destroyed by fire."

Rashi

Rabbi Levi is correct. Notice Noah's generation suffered the flood; for their injustice and selfishness, however, they were also punished by fire. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah suffered destruction by fire for their cruel treatment of strangers and their snobbish and arrogant behavior toward one another. Pharaoh was punished by fire because he boastfully questioned God's power, saying, "Who is the God that I should heed and let Israel go from Egypt?"

Maimonides

By reading "olah" as "alah," Rabbi Levi avoids dealing with the discussion of the burnt offering and focuses instead upon the dangers of acting in a boastful, self-centered and prideful way. The haughty person will ultimately end up as a burnt sacrifice on his own altar.

Rebbe Menachem Schneerson

The sanctuary built by the Jewish people in the desert symbolizes the sanctuary that is inside every Jew. Just as the sanctuary has an inner and outer altar, so each Jew possesses a surface personality and an essential core. When the Torah says, "The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out..." it is referring not only to the duty of the priest to keep the altar of the sanctuary burning but also to the way in which one practices Jewish tradition. It is not a private possession to be cherished subconsciously. It must show in the face a person sets towards the world. The Jew must be involved, bringing life and fire to the three aspects of Jewish existence: to the learning of Torah, to prayer, and to the practice of charity. Words of Torah should be spoken with fire. They should penetrate every facet of a person's being. Learning must not be a dull exercise but a way of filling each person with a desire to

practice the wisdom, ethics, and traditions of Torah. One's prayer must be done not as a routine but as an expression of love for God and appreciation of the world created by God. In practicing the mitzvah of tzedakah, it is not enough to provide money and services for the poor and the sick. One must do it with an inner warmth that manifests itself outwardly, providing an example for others. In all these ways, the fire on the altar will be kept burning.

Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi

The Torah commands that the "olah" and the "chatat" (sin offering) be sacrificed on the same altar. Why are these two sacrifices to be made at the same place? Because the Torah teaches us not to embarrass people. The "burnt offering" is brought by one who is guilty of sinful thoughts. Perhaps that person coveted something belonging to someone else or thought about cheating or stealing from another person. A "sin offering" is a sacrifice brought by someone who has actually committed a wrong. The Torah commands that both should offer their sacrifices in the same place so no one will know the difference between the person who has sinned in thought and the person who has sinned in deed. In this way, embarrassment is avoided. No one can point an accusing finger and say, "There is a thief!" This allows us to highlight a significant ethical lesson: it is forbidden to humiliate or shame another person.

Rabbi Meir

These are the rituals of the burnt offering, the meal offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the offering of ordination, and the peace offering. The peace offering is mentioned last on purpose. By mentioning it last, the Torah teaches us the importance of peace. Great is peace for the sake of peace a person may suffer humiliation.

Rav Ashi

The story is told of a woman who was fond of listening to Rabbi Meir teach his students. Once, when the rabbi's lesson lasted a long time, she was late in returning to her home. Angrily, her husband asked, "Where have you been?" When she told him that she had been listening to Rabbi Meir's lesson, he refused to believe her, saying, "I will not allow you into this house until you have spit in Rabbi Meir's face." Friends of the couple counseled her to speak with Rabbi Meir. When he heard what had happened, Rabbi Meir said to the wife, "I have a favor to ask. Since the time you left my lesson, I have developed a serious eye infection that can be cured only with the spital of your mouth. Therefore, would you please spit in my seven times?" After the woman had done as Rabbi Meir suggested, he told her, "Now go and be reconciled with your husband."

Dr. S. David Sperling

How do the rabbis of old find meaning or relevant meaning or messages in obsolete rituals? With creative imagination and innovation.