**PINCHAS (3RD SECTION)**

B’midbar 28:16 – 30:1

Eitz Hayim 931-936; Hertz yy; Plaut 1211-1215

The material in the third portion of Parashat Pinchas, which we read in the third year of the triennial cycle, is almost entirely about the definition of holy days in the Jewish calendar, about eating restrictions for those days, and about the specific sacrifices that are to be brought on each day of the holy day. That is why these same sections are also read from the second scroll that is brought out on the festivals.

The festivals and their meanings do interest me, as do the strictures as to what one can and cannot do, and can or cannot eat, on festival days. However, the sacrifices interest me not one tiny bit, and therefore I have no interest in commenting on how many bulls, how many rams, how many yearling lambs, as well as meal offerings and libations, are to be brought to the Temple.

For a few moments after reading this parashah, I thought about telephoning Susan Kriger to say that I expected to be sick on 27 July. However, I quickly decided that the better option is to talk about sacrifices in general, and how they were viewed at different times and by different rabbis over several millennia of Jewish history. Nothing will change my view about animal sacrifices, but an aspect of Jewish theology that takes up so much space in the Torah cannot just be ignored.

All of my material will come from various siddurim and chumashim, and various Jewish websites, which provide plenty of information at a general leve. Further, in order to keep the text short enough to fit within the 18 minute time allowed at Adath Shalom, I will jump right over the Biblical period and divide my talk into two parts: Prophetic Concerns, and Modern Times. However, before doing so, I want to be sure that everyone recognizes that, as *Eitz Hayim* (1450) notes, early in the Biblical era, Israelite religion explicitly rejected the idea that G/d requires food as do human beings, or that G/d likes the odor of burning animals. To the contrary, it is a fundamental principle of Jewish theology that G/d has no human characteristics at all.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Prophetic ¨Concerns

For almost everybody, animal sacrifice as a Jewish practice ended with destruction of the Second Temple. A few groups tried to re-establish it, but without any significant success. Perhaps the most widely cited quotation from the Prophetic period is the following (from Plaut Chumash page 754):

Shortly after the Temple was destroyed, the aged Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai visited its ruins with his pupils. One of them bewailed the cessation of the rites that provided atonement for sin. The old sage replied. “Do not grieve, my son. We have a means for atonement that is equal to sacrifice—the doing of kind deeds. For it is said. “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” (Hos. 6:6)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Well before this time, Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah had all spoken forcefully against the role of sacrifices, but almost all commentators agree that they were not against sacrifices *per se* but against their use in place of morality, or, even worse, as a way to induce some desired action from G/d.

But what about Maimonides and his effort to put animal sacrifice on a rational basis? Again citing text from the Plaut Chumash (754-55):

That famous thinker held that the sacrificial legislation was a concession to human frailty. In ancient times, sacrifice was the universal practice; the Hebrews who left Egypt could not imagine a religion without it. Had they not been permitted to bring offerings to the true God, they would inevitably have sacrificed to other deities. Biblical sacrifice was the means by which they were weaned away from heathenism and instructed in true beliefs.

However, just as with the Biblical prophets, one should not assume that Maimonides was against sacrificial cults. His *Mishneh Torah* treats animal sacrifices with full seriousness as if in expectation of rebuilding of the Temple.

As one further indication of how animal sacrifice continued to be viewed as a legitimate if future part not just of Jewish theology but also of Jewish practice, the Spanish poet Judah Halevi, who wrote so much romantic poetry also wrote that, “Temple and sacrifice are indispensable for the re-establishment of a perfect relationship between God and Israel—and through Israel, between God and mankind.” (*Ibid.*)[[3]](#footnote-3)

I suppose, but certainly that is not my reaction. Let’s move to modern times.

Modern Times

By “modern” I mean Judaism after the advent of a significant Reform movement in the middle of the 19th Century. The one thing that did not change in modern days was Orthodoxy, which continued to argue that at some time in the future the Temple would be rebuilt, and the priesthood would be re-established, and they would re-institute animal sacrifices, but probably only at the one temple in Jerusalem. Therefore, it was important for Orthodox rabbis to know a lot about sacrifices, and for lay members of Orthodox congregations to continue to read about them.

As a sort of justification for this Orthodox position, according to *Leviticus Rabah* 7:3, which is very early post-Biblical commentary, G/d told Abraham that, when the Temple no longer existed, study of the sacrifices would be equivalent to their performance.

Turning to the Reform movement, from the very first inklings of its principles, anything that had to do with animal sacrifices was either excised from their siddurim and or de-emphasized when they could not, as with the today’s parashah. Later Reform texts began to accept that animal sacrifices were, after all, a major part of early Jewish practice, and that there was some pertinent commentary from the prophets about why they may have once played a useful role, but were certainly not needed any longer.

With its this-worldly perspective, Reconstructionist Judaism never had to reject formally animal sacrifice; it just had no role as Mordechai Kaplan conceived of its principles. And, once it accepted a full role for lay participation in decision-making, neither was there any space for a new priesthood.

That gets us to Conservative Judaism. As usual, Conservatism splits between what it says about theology and what it advises for practice. The theological position is encapsulated in a quotation from *My Jewish Learning*, which is a website maintained by the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, which ordains Conservative rabbis at the [American Jewish University](http://www.ajula.edu/).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Our ancestors turned to animal sacrifice because they saw in it a way to express deep rage, feelings of inadequacy, and guilt. They could use the rite of sacrifice as a means of facing their terror of death and the unknown. They could, through sacrifice of animals, see their own frailty, their own mortality, and their own bloodiness.

In our age, a period of sanitized religion and everyday violence, escalating drug abuse and rising poverty, the practice of our ancestors has something yet to teach. And so we read Sefer Vayikra, and learn to see our fears in the eyes of an animal going to the slaughter, in the cries of the victims of sacrifice.

Turning to Conservative practice, I found nothing so philosophical. It is explicit that it has no interest in the resumption of animal sacrifices, and for that reason has adjusted text in recent siddurim to delete most material about animal sacrifices and especially about their restoration. Where it cannot do this, it changes tenses in key sentences from future to past. (Remember that the siddur was never canonized, so it can be changed without stepping on too many theological toes.) Conservative Judaism does seem to retain some hope in a Third Temple in Jerusalem with some form of priestly (or perhaps rabbinic) leadership that serves as a barrier to idolatry.

As for my own view, I suggest that a Jewish religious movement that allows for the admission of non-Jews to membership, as the Conservative Movement now does—though not, I hasten to say, at Adath Shalom--is very likely to stand very close to Reform and Reconstructionist congregations so far as animal sacrifice is concerned and equally with respect to re-establishment of the priesthood. However, it will likely describe that position in such a way as to leave open future options so as to stay within the bounds of halakhah. And with that assertion I shall end my d’var.

Shabbat shalom!

1. Eitz Hayim (1450) offers the following sources for this rejection: Isa. 40:15-17, 66:1-4; Ps. 50: 7-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The original is found in *Avot de-R. Nathan* 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The original is in *Kuzari*, Part II, par. 25 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-value-of-animal-sacrifices/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)