

ARZA's Torah commentary explores connections in the weekly Torah portion to the Land of Israel through the lens of tradition and in our own day.

Readers are absolutely encouraged to share this material for weekly Torah classes, conversations, and the Shabbat table, remembering, of course, that "Whoever conveys a teaching in the name of the person who said it brings redemption to the world" (Pirkei Avot 6:6).

## Vayikra: Restoring the Fires of Israel

(Parashat Vayikra, Leviticus 1:1-5:26, is read during the week that ends on Shabbat, March 19, 2016.)

עֹלָה הִוא אִשָּׁה רֵיחַ נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה:

*It is a burnt offering, an offering by fire, of pleasing odor to God...*

The early chapters of Leviticus have been the bane of bar/bat mitzvah students for centuries: What are we to do with chapter upon chapter devoted to the sacrifices that the ancient priests offered as Israel's worship of God?

*Vayikra* describes several kinds of sacrificial offerings: the *olah* (burnt offering, whose smoke "went up" to God), the *mincha* (grain offering), the *zevach shelamim* ("sacrifice of well-being," although many prefer the old translation "peace offering"), the *hata'at* (sin offering) and the *asham* (guilt offering). In these ways, ancient Israel drew near to God and sought atonement for their sins.

The sacrificial system was designed for the *mishkan*, the portable wilderness sanctuary described in Exodus, and subsequently for the Temples that stood in Jerusalem for the better part of one thousand years. Therefore, Leviticus is a spiritual link to the Land of Israel and Jerusalem, even if that bond exists only in the memory of the Jewish people.

By the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, the Sages elevated prayer to the status of sacrifice. The literal offerings of Leviticus were no longer necessary, they explained, because each person could draw near to God through prayer, which the Talmud called *הַעֲבוּדָה שֶׁבְּלֵב* "the sacrifice that is in the heart" (Talmud, *Ta'anit* 2a).

As the Jewish prayer service took shape in the first two centuries CE, the *Amidah* service was designed to correspond to the sacrifices that were offered in the Temple. For that reason, the Talmud ruled that the *Amidah* should be recited facing Jerusalem (and, if in Jerusalem, toward the Holy of Holies), with one's heart inclined towards God (Talmud, *Berachot* 30a).

To this day there remain echoes of the ancient sacrifices in Jewish prayer. However, to be honest, in Reform services one has to listen for these echoes a little more carefully. After all, the editors of early Reform prayerbooks strived to remove the vestiges of the Temple sacrifices from their liturgy.

One interesting illustration of this is found in the "Avodah" prayer – sometimes known as "R'tzeh," from its first Hebrew word. The "R'tzeh" is the first of three concluding blessings that are recited in every *Amidah* (and thus in every service, whether it's a weekday, Shabbat, or a holiday).

The “R’tzeh,” in its traditional form, poignantly longs for the Shekhinah (God’s intimate – and feminine – Presence) to return home to Jerusalem... and, more provocatively, it years for the Jews to resume the levitical sacrifices! In the traditional siddur, this is the “R’tzeh”:

רָצָה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, בְּעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבִתְפִלָּתָם, וְהָשִׁב אֶת הָעֲבוֹדָה לְדָבִיר  
בֵּיתְךָ, וְאֲשִׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּתְפִלָּתָם בְּאַהֲבָה תִקְבֹּל בְּרָצוֹן, וּתְהִי לְרָצוֹן תָּמִיד  
עֲבוֹדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ. וְתַחֲזִינָה עֵינֵינוּ בְּשׁוּבָךְ לְצִיּוֹן בְּרַחֲמִים. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה  
יי, הַמַּחְזִיר שְׂכִינְתּוֹ לְצִיּוֹן.

Find favor, Adonai our God, in your People Israel and in their prayer **and return the sacrifice to the Holy of Holies. In favor accept the fire-offerings of Israel** and their prayers in love. And may the service of Israel your People always be favorable.

May our eyes behold your return to Zion in mercy. Blessed are You, Adonai, who restores the divine Presence to Zion.<sup>1</sup>

The early Reform editors of their prayerbook were uncomfortable, to say the least, with these passages about “returning the sacrifice” and “the fire-offerings of Israel.” Like most Jews, their vision of a perfected world did not include restoring the rites of sacrifice in a Temple in Jerusalem as described in Leviticus. In fact, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman has written that “Early Reform Jews took exception to the idea of God’s returning to Zion on the grounds that it was too Zionist...”<sup>2</sup> So they removed these references.

The contemporary American Reform siddur, *Mishkan Tefillah* (2007), has restored the centrality of Israel to the spiritual longing of the prayer, but still omits the explicit references to sacrifices. In fact, most Reform *siddurim* add a line that emphasizes the universal aspect of prayer, that God can draw close to every open heart:

רָצָה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, בְּעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּבִתְפִלָּתָם בְּאַהֲבָה תִקְבֹּל, וּתְהִי לְרָצוֹן  
תָּמִיד עֲבוֹדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ. אֶל קְרוֹב לְכָל קְרָאֵנוּ, פְּנֵה אֶל עַבְדֶּיךָ וְחַנּוּנוּ,  
שְׁפֹךְ רוּחְךָ עָלֵינוּ. וְתַחֲזִינָה עֵינֵינוּ בְּשׁוּבָךְ לְצִיּוֹן בְּרַחֲמִים. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי,  
הַמַּחְזִיר שְׂכִינְתּוֹ לְצִיּוֹן.

Find favor, Adonai, our God, with Your people Israel and accept their prayer in love. May the worship of Your people Israel always be acceptable. **God is near to all who call, turn lovingly to Your servants. Pour out Your spirit upon us.**

Let our eyes behold Your loving return to Zion. Blessed are You, Adonai, whose Presence returns to Zion.

Most provocative is the form of this prayer in the Israeli Reform siddur, *HaAvodah SheBalev* (1991). The Israeli Reform movement retains the Reform objection to language about sacrifices, but (naturally enough) asserts the centrality of Israel and Jerusalem. And it adds

1. Translation is by Joel Hoffman in *My People’s Prayer Book Volume 2 - The Amidah*, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1998, pp.149-150.

2. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, *My People’s Prayer Book Volume 2 - The Amidah*, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1998, p.162.

one word – a Zionist word – to the final line. It’s not just the Shekhinah (God’s intimate – and feminine – Presence) that is returning home to Israel; it’s also the Jewish people:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, הַמְחַיֵּיר שְׂכִינְתוֹ וְעַמּוֹ לְצִיּוֹן.

Blessed are You, Adonai, whose Presence *and whose people* return to Zion.

What do we make of all this? The “R’tzeh” was once, in its earliest form, a prayer to God to lovingly accept the sacrifices of Israel, and, in the years after the Temple’s destruction, it was a prayer that those sacrifices soon would resume. Does this have any relevance for a contemporary Jew?

I believe it does. The blessing for “returning God’s Presence to Zion” could be a hallmark of a contemporary Reform Zionist: While Israel is foremost in our prayer, we know its sense of imminent Godliness is still far from complete. For that to happen, we need to build a State of Israel that is shaped by justice and peace. As poet Marcia Falk has written, “Asking that the Shekhinah be restored to the Jewish homeland can be a way of seeking at least two distinct but related aims: that Israel be a place in which we live with reverence for all life, and that the sense of the divine as immanent (and the valuing of women’s experience as part of the divine immanence) be honored in Israel and wherever else we make our homes.”<sup>3</sup>

We can even discover poetic meaning in that old traditional phrase – the one the editors removed, “**In favor accept the fire-offerings of Israel.**” After all: the fires of the Jewish soul don’t need to be literal. Keeping lamps of the spirit trimmed and burning – fighting boredom, complacency, and the status quo – is a perpetual religious quest. What does it take to rekindle the spiritual flames in today’s lovers of Israel? How do we keep that passion burning in our hearts and in our communities? And in what ways does Israel flame the passions of the Jewish soul, even if that soul is far away?

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3. Marcia Falk, in Rabbi Jules Harlow, et al, *Pray Tell: A Hadassah Guide to Jewish Prayer*, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003, p.100.

## Sources

(1)

דתניא (דברים יא, יג) "לאהבה את ה' אלהיכם ולעבדו בכל לבבכם." איזו היא עבודה שהיא בלב? הוי אומר זו תפלה.

"To love Adonai your God and to serve God with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 11:13).  
What is the sacrificial service that is in the heart? One must say: Prayer.

Talmud, Ta'anit 2a

(2)

היה עומד בח"ל יכוין את לבו כנגד ארץ ישראל שנא' (מלכים א ה, מח) והתפללו אליך דרך ארצם היה עומד בארץ ישראל יכוין את לבו כנגד ירושלים שנאמר (מלכים א ה, מד) והתפללו אל ה' דרך העיר אשר בחרת היה עומד בירושלים יכוין את לבו כנגד בית המקדש שנאמר (דברי הימים ב ו, לב) והתפללו אל הבית הזה היה עומד בבית המקדש יכוין את לבו כנגד בית קדשי הקדשים שנאמר (מלכים א ח, לה) והתפללו אל המקום הזה

היה עומד בבית קדשי הקדשים יכוין את לבו כנגד בית הכפורת

היה עומד אחורי בית הכפורת יראה עצמו כאילו לפני הכפורת

נמצא עומד במזרח מחזיר פניו למערב במערב מחזיר פניו למזרח בדרום מחזיר פניו לצפון בצפון מחזיר פניו לדרום נמצאו כל ישראל מכוונים את לבם למקום אחד א"ר אבין ואיתימא ר' אבינא מאי קראה (שיר השירים ד, ד) כמגדל דויד צוארך בנוי לתלפיות תל שכל פיות פונים בו:

If one is standing outside the Land [and praying the Amidah], he should direct his heart toward the Land of Israel, as it is written, *And they pray to you in the direction of their land* (I Kings 8:48).

If one is standing in the Land of Israel, he should direct his heart toward Jerusalem, as it is written, *And they pray to the God in the direction of the city which You have chosen* (I Kings 8:44).

If one is standing in Jerusalem he should direct his heart towards [the site of] the Temple, as it is written, *They pray towards this House* (2 Chronicles 6:32).

If one is standing at [the site of] the Temple, he should direct his heart towards the Holy of Holies, as it is written, *...and then they pray towards this place...* (I Kings 8:35)...

Consequently, if he is in the east he should turn and face west; if one is in the west he should turn and face east; if one is in the south he should turn and face north; if one is in the north he should turn and face south.

In this way, all Israel will be directing their hearts towards a single place.

Rabbi Abin (or, some say, Rabbi Abina), said: What is the biblical prooftext for this idea? *Your neck is like the tower of David, built-up with turrets* [Heb: **talpiyot**]; that is to say, "the place where all mouths turn: *tel shekol piyot ponim bo.*" (Song of Songs 4:4)

Talmud, Berachot 30a

Versions of the "Avodah" Blessing:

Ashkenazi:

רצה, יי אלהינו, בעמך ישראל ובתפלתם, והשב את העבודה לדביר ביתך, ואשי ישראל, ותפלתם באהבה תקבל ברצון, ותהי לרצון תמיד עבודת ישראל עמך. ותחזינה עינינו בשובך לציון ברחמים. ברוך אתה יי, המחזיר שכנתו לציון.

Find favor, Adonai our God, in your People Israel and in their prayer **and return the sacrifice to the Holy of Holies. In favor accept the fire-offerings of Israel** and their prayers in love. And may the service of Israel your People always be favorable. May our eyes behold your return to Zion in mercy. Blessed are You, Adonai, who restores the divine Presence to Zion.

Sefardi:

רצה, יי אלהינו, בעמך ישראל, ולתפלתם שעה, והשב את העבודה לדביר ביתך, ואשי ישראל, ותפלתם מהרה באהבה תקבל ברצון, ותהי לרצון תמיד עבודת ישראל עמך. ותחזינה עינינו בשובך לציון ברחמים. ברוך אתה יי, המחזיר שכנתו לציון.

Find favor, Adonai our God, in your People Israel and in their prayer **and return the sacrifice to the Holy of Holies. In favor speedily accept the fire-offerings of Israel** and their prayers in love. And may the service of Israel your People always be favorable. May our eyes behold your return to Zion in mercy. Blessed are You, Adonai, who restores the divine Presence to Zion.

*Mishkan Tefillah* (North American Reform, 2007):

רצה, יי אלהינו, בעמך ישראל, ובתפלתם באהבה תקבל, ותהי לרצון תמיד עבודת ישראל עמך. אל קרוב לכל קראיו, פנה אל עבדיך וחננו, שפוך ריחך עלינו. ותחזינה עינינו בשובך לציון ברחמים. ברוך אתה יי, המחזיר שכנתו לציון.

Find favor, Adonai, our God, with Your people Israel and accept their prayer in love. May the worship of Your people Israel always be acceptable. **God is near to all who call, turn lovingly to Your servants. Pour out Your spirit upon us.** Let our eyes behold Your loving return to Zion. Blessed are You, Adonai, whose Presence returns to Zion.

*HaAvodah SheBalev* (Israeli Reform, 1991):

רצה, יי אלהינו, בעמך ישראל, ובתפלתם באהבה תקבל, ותהי לרצון תמיד עבודת ישראל עמך. ושכן בציון, ויעבדוך עבדיך בירושלים. ותחזינה עינינו בשובך לציון ברחמים. ברוך אתה יי, המחזיר שכנתו ועמו לציון.

Find favor, Adonai, our God, with Your people Israel and accept their prayer in love. May the worship of Your people Israel always be acceptable. **Dwell in Zion, so that**

**your servants many worship you in Jerusalem.**

Let our eyes behold Your loving return to Zion. Blessed are You, Adonai, whose Presence **and whose people** return to Zion.