

4. All For the Sake of Heaven

Leviticus 1 & 2 and Commentaries



Synagogue2000

Private Prayer in the Talmud

The theme of Tractate *Berakhot* in the Talmud is prayer. In addition to its instructions for the statutory prayers, the Talmud also records a variety of private prayers, each attributed to a different rabbi. The rabbis encouraged individuals to always conclude the *Amidah* with their own personal prayers, and these texts provide several examples. Our study passage is located at the end of this section of the Talmud, but it is not personal prayer of an individual rabbi.

Our selection is not so much a meditation or prayer as it is a motto or proverb. It is attributed to “the Rabbis of Yavneh.” After the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E., Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai established his academy in Yavneh.

The rabbis of Yavneh established the foundations of rabbinic Judaism; their decisions have shaped Jewish practice ever since. For the Rabbis of Yavneh, the study of Torah was paramount—such that Yochanan ben Zakkai traded the safety of the *yeshiva* and its leadership for the preservation of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, in this passage, the Rabbis offer us an expansive, inclusive view of what it means to serve God.

Finding Meaning in the Sacrifices

Many modern Jews are deeply challenged to find spiritual meaning in the Torah’s detailed descriptions of the sacrifices. The Rabbis, convinced that every word and verse of Torah was of sacred importance, read the Bible very carefully, in an effort to discern what it had to teach. While they usually were quick to notice any differences between two apparently similar passages, they noticed the same language repeated several times when they read the first chapter of Leviticus.

The opening chapter of Leviticus describes the procedures for bringing a voluntary offering. Whether the person brings a very costly offering, such as a bull, or a much more modest offering of grain, the Torah characterizes it using the same terms. The Rabbis learn from this the value that each person’s sincere offering, regardless of size or cost, is of equal worth. The *Mishnah* passage quotes verses from Leviticus, chapters 1 and 2. The *Mishnah*’s intent is more explicit in the Talmud’s restatement; the Talmud’s paragraph closes with the identical words as the *Mishnah*.

MISHNAH, MENACHOT 13:11

נֹאמֵר בְּעוֹלַת הַבְּהֵמָה אִשָּׁה רִיחַ נִיחוּחַ,
 וּבְעוֹלַת הָעוֹף אִשָּׁה רִיחַ נִיחוּחַ,
 וּבִמְנַחָה אִשָּׁה רִיחַ נִיחוּחַ,
 לְלַמֵּד, שְׂאֵחָד הַמְרֻבָּה וְאֵחָד הַמְמַעֵיט,
 וּבִלְבָד שְׂיִכּוֹן אָדָם אֶת דַּעְתּוֹ לַשָּׁמַיִם:

Lev 1:9 , Lev 1:17

Lev 2:3

It is said of the burnt-offerings of cattle, “an offering made by fire of a sweet savour;” and of the burnt-offerings of birds, “an offering made by fire of a sweet savour;” and of the meal-offering, “an offering made by fire of a sweet savour:” to teach you that it is the same whether a person offers much or little, so long as one directs one’s heart to heaven.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, MENACHOT 110A

אָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן עֲזַאי
 בּוֹא וּרְאֵה מָה כְּתוּב בְּפָרֶשֶׁת קְרִבְנוֹת
 שְׁלֹא נֹאמַר בְּהֵן לֹא אֵל וְלֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶלָּא ה'
 שְׁלֹא לִיתֵן פְּתוּחוֹן פֶּה לְבַעַל דִּין לְחֻלּוֹק
 וְנֹאמַר בְּשׁוֹר הִגִּס אִשָּׁה רִיחַ נִיחוּחַ
 וּבְעוֹף הַדֶּק אִשָּׁה רִיחַ נִיחוּחַ
 וּבִמְנַחָה אִשָּׁה רִיחַ נִיחוּחַ
 לְוַמַּר לָךְ אֶחָד הַמְרֻבָּה וְאֶחָד הַמְמַעֵיט
 וּבִלְבָד שְׂיִכּוֹן אֶת לְבוֹ לַשָּׁמַיִם.

Lev 1:9 , Lev 1:17

Lev 2:3

It was taught: Rabbi Shimon ben Azzai said: Come and see what is written in the chapter of the sacrifices....It is said of a large ox, “An offering made by fire of a sweet savour”; of a small bird, “An offering made by fire of a sweet savour;” and of a meal-offering, “An offering made by fire of a sweet savour.” This is to teach you that it is the same whether a person does [i.e. brings] more or does less, so long as one directs one’s heart to heaven.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, BERAKHOT 17A

מְרַגְלָא בְּפוּמֵייהוּ דְּרַבָּנָן דִּיבְנָה: אֲנִי בְּרִיָּה וְחֵבְרִי בְּרִיָּה,
 אֲנִי מְלַאכְתִּי בְּעִיר וְהוּא מְלַאכְתּוֹ בְּשָׂדֵה,
 אֲנִי מִשְׁכִּים לְמַלְאכְתִּי וְהוּא מִשְׁכִּים לְמַלְאכְתּוֹ,
 כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהוּא אֵינוֹ מְתַגְדֵּר בְּמַלְאכְתִּי
 כִּף אֲנִי אֵינוֹ מְתַגְדֵּר בְּמַלְאכְתּוֹ,
 וְשָׂמָא תְּנַאמֵר: אֲנִי מְרַבָּה וְהוּא מְמַעִיט,
 שְׁנִינּוּ; אֶחָד הַמְרַבָּה וְאֶחָד הַמְמַעִיט
 וּבְלִבָּד שִׁיכוּיָן לְבוֹ לְשָׁמַיִם.

The rabbis of Yavneh were wont to say: I am a creature [of God], and my fellow is a creature [of God]. As for me, my work is in the city, and his work is in the field. I rise early to do my work, and he rises early to do his work. Just as I do not restrict him in his endeavors, so he does not set boundaries for me in mine. Perhaps you suppose that I do more and he does less, we have [been] taught: "It is the same whether one does more or does less, it matters not, so long as he directs his heart to heaven."

Were wont . . .
 Literally: A pearl in
 the mouth of the rabbis
 at Yavneh.



Probing the Text

1. What is the difference between the offering of an ox, a bird and grain in the Torah? What might one think when seeing one person bringing an ox and another a handful of grain? What does this *mishnah* and its interpretation tell us?
2. How do the rabbis of Yavneh apply the *mishnah*? Are the two situations comparable?
3. What did “city” and “field” signify for the Rabbis?
4. What is the significance of not stepping over boundaries (“restricting one another”) in doing one’s work?

Ourselves and Our Congregations

1. In your congregation, who “works in the city” and who “works in the field”? Make a list of activities and tasks that are done in and on behalf of the congregation. Which tasks are “city” and which are “field”?
2. Examine your list. Are there gender differences? Are there age differences? Are there differences between what is paid work and what is unpaid? What are the implications for the relationships among people in the congregation according to this list?
3. In the rabbis’ statement, is there any interdependence between the two groups? Why is doing a deed “for the sake of heaven” the only important factor?
4. In a congregation in which there are many “programs,” there is always a need for more “volunteers” to carry the burden of the work. Inevitably, some do more and some do less. Can you say, happily and with a full heart, “it matters not, so long as it is done for the sake of heaven”? If not, what is your relationship to those who do less than you? More than you? How does this affect the cohesiveness and wholeness of the congregation?
5. The implication of the concluding phrase—“Perhaps you suppose that I do more and she does less”—is that everything being done, whether in the city/synagogue or in the fields/secular world, is ultimately the study of Torah. How is dutiful work, done “for the sake of heaven,” the same as the study of Torah? How is it like and unlike other central observances of Judaism?

