

» Torah portion



From Sacrifice To Synagogue

Parshat Vayikra: *Leviticus* 1:1-5:26;
Isaiah 43:21-44:23.

This week's portion, Vayikra, opens the Book of *Leviticus* and consists of five chapters of intricate and detailed instructions for the performance of animal sacrifices. Lacking the vibrant narrative of some Torah portions, few people count Vayikra as a favorite. Animal sacrifices are not really that interesting anymore.

When I was a Hillel rabbi, I often led Reform or Conservative services for the holidays. Every year, our best-attended service was on Yom Kippur when sacrifices are described in the Torah reading, and the liturgy features a lengthy and elaborate narration of the holiday's ancient sacrificial service. Each year, I heard the same question from my intellectu-



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ally curious college students: "What was the deal with all of those sacrifices?"

In ancient times, the sacrifices were pretty much the entire deal on Yom Kippur and, in many ways, throughout the year. This shouldn't surprise us. Israelites were not the only people performing animal sacrifices. They were ubiquitous in the worship of surrounding cultures, so Israelite sacrifices fit quite nicely with what the neighbors were doing.

Yet, while they were popular, they were also the subject of bitter critiques, especially from the prophets. Isaiah asked on God's behalf, "What need have I of all your sacrifices?" continuing with a demand to "cease doing evil; learn to do good; devote yourself to justice." (*Isaiah* 1:11, 16-17). Hosea shared this understanding when he spoke for God, saying, "I desire lovingkindness, not sacrifice" (*Hosea* 6:6). Amos taught that God rejected Israel's sacrifices, insisting rather that they "let justice well up like water, righ-

teousness like an unfailing stream" (*Amos* 5:24). Likewise Micah, who warned that sacrifices were nothing compared to the precept "to do justice and to love goodness" (*Micah* 6:8).

In the course of time, sacrifices began to disappear throughout the world.

Though the Jerusalem Temple's destruction was the proximate cause for the end of Jewish sacrificial worship, most scholars agree that it would have soon disappeared in any case. By the time of the Temple's fall, the synagogue and house of study were already moving to center stage.

Those institutions were dominated by the rabbis, who were also counted among the Temple leadership's fiercest critics. They alone would now lead the Jewish community. Still, the swiftness of the Temple's collapse posed a challenge for them. After all, the Torah never commanded Jews to pray. The Torah commanded them to make sacrifices, especially when atoning for sin. The rabbis rose to the occasion.

A famous midrash relates the story of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Joshua who were walking near the ruins of the Temple. Joshua was overcome by grief. "Alas for us!" he exclaimed. "The place that atoned for the sins of the people Israel lies in ruins!" Yohanan comforted him with the words of Hosea that I quoted above: "I desire lovingkindness, not sacrifice" (*Avot D'Rabbi Natan* 4:5).

Their successful transition from sacrifices to synagogues reminds us that when existing Jewish practice no longer meets the needs of the Jewish people, we can seek — and find — new paradigms. □

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Conversations

- Why do you think that animal sacrifices were so important to ancient religion? Who really benefitted from them?
- Even before its destruction, the Temple was becoming an archaic institution, overshadowed by the synagogue and house of study. What advantages did they offer that the Temple could not?
- What lessons for the Jewish community and for your own life might you learn from the successful transition from the institution of the Temple to synagogues and houses of study?



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