

Volume 6, Number 1
Tishrei 5770

Olam Tikvateinu



A place to share Torah

Olam Tikvateinu

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Olam Tikvateinu

ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויגדיר

For the sake of God's righteousness,

God desires that Torah grow and be glorified.—Isaiah 42:21

As we enter 5770, the words of our High Holy Day liturgy and the experiences around our festival tables focus us in two ways. First, God asks us to look deep within ourselves, to identify our strengths and weaknesses so that we may conserve what we do well and improve upon that which is lacking. At the same time, we are commanded to look outwards, to better understand and assist those around us.

In this issue of *Olam Tikvateinu*, several profound approaches are offered to the question of our various relationships to our community. Rochelle Goldberg reflects on her deeper appreciation of the Olam Tikvah community when she found herself in a family health crisis. Gail Wolf's short poem draws on the sweet memories of the most intimate community, the family. Lisa Friedman reminds us that a community must be willing to share ideas, even when they are in conflict, in order to maintain both respect and meaning. Brittanie Zelkind Werbel's thoughts focus us on the wide range of supports and rewards, as well as the multitude of entry points available to us, when we choose to join in Olam Tikvah's activities. Ken Heitner addresses the Jewish commitment to caring for the vulnerable and reminds us of our continuing responsibilities. Finally, Cary Schwartzbach guides us in an exploration of how we communally speak with God.

The call of the shofar reminds us of opportunities to strengthen our sacred relationships and simultaneously to create vital new ones. We hope the articles in *Olam Tikvateinu* will encourage you to consider your own relationship with the OT and the greater Jewish communities. May this journal push us forward as a k'hilah k'doshah.

Please Join the Conversation

Since *Olam Tikvateinu* began in September 2003, more than 30 OT members have been inspired to develop and share their Torah. They have written a range of Jewish historical and philosophical inquiries, text interpretations and accounts of personal experience.

Please contact me or Rabbi Shalva about the idea you would like to develop and share. For your reference, all published issues appear on our web site at www.olamtikvah.org.

Shanah Tovah um'tukah—a good, sweet, happy, healthy
and peaceful new year.

Rabbi David Kalender

A Shabbat Community

By

Rochelle Goldberg

My grandfather (z"l) always said that even when you move away from a town, you never leave a shul. He continued to pay dues as a member of every shul he ever belonged to. I don't know if he got that idea from Hillel's maxim, "Do not separate from the community," or if it was his own philosophy, but his multiple shul memberships when he passed away made an impression on me. I never thought too deeply about his sentiment, other than to assume that, as a German immigrant who lost family, friends and the life he knew during the Holocaust, it was his way of keeping *any* Jewish community strong. It was also his way of giving both money and time. I never considered what he received by continuing his relationship with those various communities—not until I became a member of the Olam Tikvah community, and it became a part of me.

I recently had occasion to spend some time in a hospital in Philadelphia with my family. My father had emergency bypass surgery. It was an unexpected trip, and one that brought the family together quickly. It was important to be there, to support each other and to know firsthand what was happening. However, after 24 hours in the hospital and with Shabbat quickly approaching, I found myself torn. Should I stay in Philadelphia for Shabbat and spend it in the hospital with my family, in a way that was different from my usual, comfortable Shabbat?

Shabbat in Philadelphia could possibly seem lonely and cold. I would be in the hospital chapel or a hotel room, by myself. Although I was there with family, I would have been a congregation of one, as Shabbat services would likely not have been a priority for my siblings. My other option was to go home to Virginia, to pray with my Olam Tikvah community, with a different part of my immediate family and with my friends. I weighed the decision and realized that my father was in good hands in Philadelphia. He had great doctors and the love and support of four family members. In that moment, I needed to be at home, in the place where I knew I could pray wholeheartedly for his r'fuah sh'laymah, surrounded by the ruach of an Olam Tikvah Shabbat, the warmth and company of friends who had been concerned, and who had planned to feed my family in my absence. I needed to be in *my* community.

I recognized that celebrating Shabbat in Philadelphia would not be as spiritually strengthening as spending it at home. Being distanced from

Olam Tikvah increased my awareness of what I gain from celebrating Shabbat in our sanctuary. When you look around the sanctuary on any given Shabbat, it is clear that there is love and camaraderie. When I walk into Olam Tikvah, I know that I will see friends, participate in Shabbat services and enjoy learning. I will leave feeling rejuvenated and refreshed.

To decide that I needed to be in my community really drove home for me the essence of community itself. I am part of many groups: the Jewish community—locally and worldwide, a family community, a business community and a community of friends. However, in that 24-hour period, when I was away, calling home, sending and receiving e-mail updates from the hospital and praying by myself, I realized that the Olam Tikvah community is one of the most important places in my life.

Since David and I joined Olam Tikvah in 2000, we have supported the synagogue in the ways my grandfather would expect—financially, socially and with attendance at services. We started attending Shabbat and holiday services and adult education programs, and I got involved with Sisterhood events. We made friends, sent our children to preschool here and became part of a *chavurah*. Our involvement at Olam Tikvah has also pushed us to take on new challenges and to change our lives. We have incorporated traditions into our home life, learned Hebrew, studied Torah and even learned to read Torah on behalf of the community. Finally, we have celebrated and mourned with *our community*. We have given to and received from Olam Tikvah.

Hillel was absolutely correct, “Do not separate from the community.” In a time of need and uncertainty, I realized I had become part of a loving, caring and supportive group. Community is the people who encourage you to be your best, who catch you when you fall, who celebrate the good times and who, of course, cook for you in times of need.

Rochelle Goldberg and her family have been members of Olam Tikvah since 2000. They enjoy participating in a variety of Olam Tikvah activities.

A Memory

By
Gail Wolf

Gathered 'round the table
The Shabbos evening meal.
Platters of abundance,
Starched white linen,
Crystal and silver reflecting the chandelier's glow.
Faces expectant,
Mama lights the candles,
Hands canopied over the flames.
Papa blesses wine and bread.
Ancient melodies,
Songs that bind,
And Mama blows us each a kiss.

Gail Wolf is a relatively new member of OT. She is an English teacher whose favorite literature unit has always been poetry.

Walk With Me:

The Pirke Avot and Our Community of Discourse

By

Lisa Friedman

I remember...how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped
for her,

And she balanced in the delight of her thought,

A wren, happy, tail into the wind,

Her song trembling the twigs and small branches.

Theodore Roethke, *Elegy for Jane*

I. Turn it, and turn it again—for everything is in it. (PA 5:22)

Over the last 10 years at Olam Tikvah, we have created for ourselves a community of discourse, in which the members unite through a common interest and delight in pursuing ideas. In many ways, we have built our community according to the precepts set forth in the *Pirke Avot* (*Ethics/Sayings of the Ancestors*).¹ In that book, the ideas we pursue are called “Torah”—meaning not only the written, but also the oral law. The pursuit is called, alternately, “study,” “learning” and “teaching,” and the pleasure is known as “the service of Heaven.”

On its face, the *Pirke Avot* is a collection of seemingly random sayings and fragments of rabbinic conversations. It stands alone in the *Mishnah* (the Oral Law, composed by the early rabbis between 300 BCE and 200 CE and recorded by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi between 200 and 220CE): the only non-halachic tractate, its content is entirely aggadah—stories that do not have the force of law. At some earlier time, it is thought to have been the concluding tractate, recapitulating the basic principles of the entire text.

Assuming that *Avot* in fact does function as a closing tractate, we may discover its basic principles—and perhaps, by extension, those of the entire *Mishnah*—by taking a step back from traditional, content-oriented views of the text and treating it as if it were an extended poem that presents, interweaves and develops distinct images and themes. We emerge with a picture of both the ways in which the Sages envisioned the Jewish community organizing itself after the destruction of the Temple, and the ways in which we ourselves, centuries later, are constructing our own community of discourse. Every aspect of life is built around revering, studying, working to understand and applying principles of Torah, understood in the broadest possible sense.

II. Walk With Me

As the speakers change and centuries pass, the *Avot's* images and themes expand and refine. The notion of choosing to walk along a [correct] path is first articulated in the opening mishnah of the second chapter: *Which is straight path that a man should choose for himself?* (2:1), but language suggesting paths, walking and choosing is implicit from 1:4 forward. In order to live correctly, one must choose study of [being yoked to] Torah and building a fence [around the Torah]. The individual must understand himself as being subordinate to (sometimes phrased as being employed by) God, and must live, work and interact within the context of the community. The other major life activity one chooses is learning and teaching.

A movement from learning to teaching occurs in the course of the *Pirke Avot*. Early on we are instructed:

Let your house be a meetinghouse for the sages, and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst. (1:4)

The initial emphasis is on studying with a master, one greater than oneself, and remaining mostly voiceless—not engaging in idle chatter, listening a lot. But as the chapters continue, these early images of awestruck silence give way to other early formulations:

Provide yourself with a teacher; acquire a companion; and judge every person in the scale of merit. (1:6)

Gradually we learn that we are supposed to study with our acquired companion, who is our equal. Our ideal attitude needs to be:

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from every man, as it is said, “From all who taught me I have gained understanding.” (4:1)

In the final chapter we are admonished:

[Learning of Torah is also acquired by one] whose mind is settled in his study; who asks and answers, hearkens and adds; who learns in order to teach, and learns in order to practice, who enlightens his teacher; who notes with precision his lesson, and conveys a thing in the name of its author. (6:6)

An overall progression takes place, from passive learning from a master to active learning with an associate, from listening, absorbing and holding one’s tongue to asking and answering (having discussions), passing on the teachings one’s own students. The Sages instruct us with pictures of ourselves, walking together through our lives, choosing a path determined

and delimited by Torah—paying attention, learning, probing, questioning, teaching and even, perhaps, disagreeing.

III. For the Sake of Heaven

I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

William Butler Yeats, *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*

At Olam Tikvah we enjoy a well-developed tradition of sitting thirstily at the feet of teachers: we present ourselves in ever-increasing numbers for abundant and varied adult education opportunities. The joyous energy of learning hums around and through us. In the area of disagreement, however, we are more tentative. People sometimes shy away from publicly taking positions that they know or fear may be unpopular or controversial. I have encouraged more than one prospective author who has ultimately abandoned an idea, saying, in effect, What would people think of me if I were to come out and say that? The expressed fear is of a negative judgment, or a rejection, by the community. Certainly the culture at large provides little positive modeling for the dispassionate exchange of controversial positions. The *Mishnah*, however, does. And *Pirke Avot* presents the rationale.

It is not unusual in the *Mishnah* to hear disagreements. They resonate through the centuries, at times glaring, yet rarely commented upon. *Mishnah Brachot* is particularly full of them. Here is one of many examples:

These are the points [of difference] between Hillel and Shammai in regard to a meal. Bet Shammai says: First he blesses over the day and then over the wine. Bet Hillel says: first he blesses over the wine and then over the day. (*Brachot* 8:1)

Divergent opinions are simply and starkly presented, with no preference indicated between them. Implicit here is the *Avot's* notion of choice:

He used to say: Don't judge alone, for only the One may do so.
Don't say, "Accept my view," for it is up to them [to make that decision], and not up to you. (4:8)

Each of us has a responsibility to discriminate, to maintain criteria and to make up his or her own mind.

Multiple other *Avot* themes and images are also in play as we read such passages. While respect for each individual's self-determination is clear, there is a coexisting notion that because both people and things are God's creations, we must honor them, and not dismiss them, treat them lightly or judge [condemn] them.

He used to say: Do not despise any man, and do not dismiss anything; for there is not a man who has not his hour; and there is not a thing that has not its place. (4:3)

Because we are all created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God, we must treat each other with respect. At the same time that we exist in God's image, however, none of us *is* God, and God alone has the right to ultimately judge human beings. Thus the repeated notion, judge every person in the scale of merit (1:6) It means, simply, in evaluating other people's behaviors, give every individual the benefit of the doubt.

Another criterion underlying the Mishnaic approach to discussion and disputation is the intent of the dispute. We learn in the *Avot* that some disputes take place "for the sake of Heaven."

Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven, shall in the end be of lasting worth. But that which is not for the sake of Heaven shall not in the end be of lasting worth. Which dispute was for the sake of Heaven? That of Hillel and Shammai. (5:17)

Kehati's note specifies that in disputes for the sake of Heaven, "participants are motivated by an honest search for truth, and do not merely plead for the sake of argument and provocation" (175).

These discussions produce insights and suggest positive solutions to problems, unlike deliberations motivated by "the achievement of power, or mere obstinate self-assertion." A further note details the negative motivations of self-aggrandizing disputes: pride, contempt, jealousy and hatred (176).

This is no leisurely stroll in the park. Rather, it is a momentous journey, charged with solemn responsibility. Each of us must struggle to maintain an attitude of fairness, welcoming others regardless of whatever caution our previous life experiences have taught us to take. As Shammai tells us, we must "receive every person with a cheerful countenance" (1:15).

At this point, the correct path seems to me to grow a little darker and even somewhat precarious. Are we safe to voice our opinions, without being condemned? Can we disagree without rejecting each other? Can we journey on together in trust, sharing our thoughts and allowing each other's viewpoints to influence our own? I see the Sages walking in the distance, discussing, disagreeing, listening for our voices and our footsteps on our difficult, shared path. I will strive to follow them.²

Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua said: let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own, and the honor of your colleague as the reverence for your teacher, and the reverence for your teacher as the reverence of Heaven. (4:11)

Notes

¹ Quotes are from Kehati, Rabbi Pinhas, ed. and trans. *The Mishnah*. Vol. 4, *Seder Nizikin, Pirke Avot*. Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 1964. Also useful were Kravitz, Leonard and Kerry Olitsky, ed. and trans. *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics*. New York: UAHC Press, 1993, and Goldin, Judah. "Introduction to Pirke Avot." In Hammer, Reuven. *Or Hadasb*. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2003. xxx-xxxiii.

² My teachers and companions on the walk that was writing this paper have been: Rabbi David Kalender, who teaches the Mishnah class where I first encountered the *Pirke Avot* in 2004; Ira Ungar, whose Biblical/Prayerbook Hebrew class continues to open my eyes; Rabbi Benjamin Shalva, who helped me struggle with a relevant Talmud passage while preparing my argument and Peter Brooke Mosley, my study partner for years of challenging psychological and spiritual inquiry.

Lisa Friedman is a psychotherapist in private practice. She edits the Olam Tikvah *Contemporary* and assists with other publications projects.

A Sacred Community

By

Brittanie Zelkind Werbel

What Makes a K'hilah K'doshah

At Olam Tikvah, we work continuously to build a *k'hilah k'doshah* (sacred community) that guides our lives as members of both a congregation and a community. It has several component parts:

T'filah (prayer)

We pray together.

Although any person can pray alone, we need a minyan (10 adult Jews) to recite the *Mourner's Kaddish*. In this way, we ensure that anyone remembering a loved one receives the community's support and reassurance. We also need a minyan to recite the *Kedushah* section of the *Amidah*, for example, and we can only read Torah in the presence of a minyan. By joining one another in prayer on a daily basis, we reaffirm our role as important individuals within a congregation and a community.

Education

We study together.

As with prayer, any Jew can study alone. Traditionally, however, Torah study is done in pairs or groups, so that several different voices can contribute ideas, make connections and add to the discussion. By coming together in this way, we learn not only from our teachers (both rabbis and members of the OT community regularly lead classes on a variety of subjects), but also from each other.

Tzedakah

We give money to sustain others and our synagogue.

Reaching out to those in need is a central tenet of Judaism; in fact, we are commanded to give at least ten percent of our income to charity. Tzedakah boxes to collect coins for those in need are found in central places in Jewish homes. Many tzedakah boxes are as beautiful as the sentiment behind them, and a decorated tzedakah box is a common Jewish gift, particularly to a child or a new b'nai mitzvah.

Olam Tikvah congregants give generously to sustain our synagogue and a myriad of other causes. Individually, as well as through our Men's Club and Sisterhood, we support our Religious School, programs to enhance holidays and life cycles, and various funds, including one for assistance to families in need. We will continue to support the Capital

Campaign as a new Social Hall, Education Wing, and other improvements emerge before our eyes. We also support other causes, such as Federation's Super Sunday, Jewish Meals on Wheels, Help Prevent Hypothermia, Israel, the Abayudaya and Jewish causes around Northern Virginia and throughout the world.

Emotional Support

We reach out to each other.

This final component is the most difficult to define, but it both stands on its own and encompasses the other three. It is the way we attend shiva minyanim in people's homes, bring meals to mourners, and otherwise support congregants who suffer a loss. It is the way we reach out to families recovering from an illness or injury, or those celebrating the birth of a new baby. It is the way we give couples married at OT a free one-year membership, as well as a copy of the Sisterhood cookbook, *With Love and Best Dishes*. It is the way our Chevra Kaddisha ensures that when our loved ones die, they are prepared for a Jewish burial with the utmost respect, dignity and caring. It is the way we invite visitors and members new and old to share "a bissel" at Kiddush Club on Shabbat mornings. It is the way we celebrate together, in one Shabbat service, the 10th, 20th, 40th and 70th anniversaries of different congregants' b'nai mitzvah. In short, it is the sense of unity engendered and epitomized by Congregation Olam Tikvah.

Why Build a K'hilah K'dosha?

But why do we choose this community, when we have such a wide array of secular American culture around us? After all, it is a lot of work to live in a k'hilah k'doshah. There are all those minyanim and classes to attend, all those meals to prepare and deliver, all those checks to write and all those other obligations that take us away from our own families and our own work and home responsibilities. Wouldn't it be easier to just curl up and watch *American Idol* instead?

As part of the community, we are able give back the kindnesses we have received. Anyone who has benefited from the benevolence and generosity of this congregation feels compelled to respond in kind. My family received an outpouring of love and support during my father-in-law's (z"l) fight with cancer and after his death. A few years later, we experienced other outpourings of joy, assistance and, yes, food, when first Jonah and then Brandon were born. The Werbels know firsthand the beauty of receiving kind words, a phone call or a card from a friend or acquaintance, and how much a visit or a meal helps make a difficult day

easier. Naturally, we want others to know that we share in their sorrows and happiness.

But this community's commitment to offer congratulations or encouragement, to welcome and engage, to bring others into Olam Tikvah goes deeper. Our k'hilah k'doshah is not just what we have created or where we live; it is who and what we are. We share in each other's joys and losses because they are *our* joys and losses. We support and aid each other, not just because we hope that we will be supported and aided, but because we care about the community itself as much as we care about each other as individuals. A true k'hilah k'doshah sustains us not only when we take from it, but also when we give to it.

Every time an individual reaches out, we all reap the rewards. These rewards include the privilege of living in a community where people are truly connected. Their support is manifested in meals, gifts and hospital visits, as well as in support for the institution itself. As our community continues to grow stronger, our synagogue itself is growing larger and more beautiful. This is due to hundreds of donations to the Capital Campaign and the synagogue, and also to an emotion, a sensation you feel when you walk into Olam Tikvah. This k'hilah k'doshah cares for you as much as you care for it. Precisely because we support one another during difficult times and are there to share a laugh or a l'chaim during good times, the community itself lives, grows and thrives. And you really can't get that from *American Idol*.

Brittanie Zelkind Werbel joined Olam Tikvah 10 years ago, when she and Dan were married in the sanctuary. Her sons attend OT Preschool and OT Religious School, she chairs the Membership Committee, and she sometimes spends more time at OT than at home.

The Jewish Community of Caring

By
Ken Heitner

A Caring Community: A Historical Perspective

Judaism has always taught the importance of caring for others. The Torah is specific about the obligations of both individuals and communities in this regard. It identifies widows, orphans and the stranger among you as the key recipients of such assistance (*Exodus* 22: 21-22). In the initial, tribal society, these were the persons who were at the greatest social disadvantage.

The Torah's rules reflect a primarily agricultural society. The specific rules about allowing for gleaning and for not cutting the corners of one's field make sense. They provide a limited food supply for those who had no other source of food. Specific Torah provisions also deal with clothing the needy. And God makes clear that God will curse a nation that does not embrace its elderly (*Deuteronomy* 28:50).

The Mishnah and Talmud reinforce and amplify the Torah's provisions on these points. Even after the Jews were exiled from their homeland, they continued their tradition of caring for each other. For example, in *Masechet Gittin* (52a), widows and orphans, because they are so vulnerable, are legally entitled to preferential treatment.

In the Common Era, Jewish communities continued to flourish in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. By the second millennium, Jews began to migrate from Western Europe to Poland. Over the next 900 years, the Jewish community in Poland grew to be the largest in the world. With the autonomy granted it, *Kehila* (the representative Jewish body serving the religious, social and cultural needs of the Jewish inhabitants) provided for the organization of charitable institutions. That included the forerunner of group homes for the wayward. Food and clothing were also provided, as conditions allowed.

In the late 18th century, Poland was partitioned between Austria, Prussia and Russia. Poland's central government ceased to exist. The Jewish community continued to function, however, at a local level, in towns and villages. A hallmark of these communities was their commitment to provide internally for the needy.

My Experiences in the Community of Caring

My paternal grandmother and maternal grandfather were the key persons involved with caring for others. My paternal grandmother took in other members of her family who needed food, clothing and shelter. She always made what she had go around, to cover anyone who was in need. Her demeanor was welcoming and flexible.

Successful in his clothing business, my maternal grandfather was comparatively well off after World War I. He used his money and knowledge to bring his younger brother and at least two first cousins to the United States from Europe. Although restrictive immigration laws made it difficult to enter the United States at that time, his success enabled him to save part of his family from the eventual fate of so many Central European Jews.

The real test of family and community support came when I was eight years old. My mother was very sick for several months. My grandparents and aunts saw that my brother and I had a place to live. They took complete care of us. What could have been a disastrous, traumatic event was not. At the time I appreciated this as the family's value system, rather than as a part of Jewish community values.

When I was a child, almost everyone in the family lived in New York City. By the 1980s, however, the family was spread out from Maine to Florida, and at least as far west as Chicago, if not California. Maintaining social contact was difficult, and caring for one another became more complex and challenging. The structure of an extended family with mutual responsibilities broke down entirely.

Then my parents declared that they could no longer take care of themselves. Since they lived in New Jersey, it was clear that they would have to be cared for either here or somewhere close to my brother in Connecticut. We opted to bring them to this area. At first it was difficult. Things only became stable when they moved to the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington in Rockville, Maryland. This remarkable Jewish community institution provided what they needed. My father lived there for five years and my mother for fourteen years. The quality of their lives was greatly enhanced, as they now lived in a deeply Jewish and compassionate community of friends and caregivers.

More recently, my mother-in-law fell and after her recovery realized she needed a more sheltered environment. Again, the Hebrew Home, and then Ring House, provided the needed care and the support. The greater Jewish community was there to help once more.

Throughout history, the Jewish community has responded to the Torah's directive to create institutions to support those who need community assistance. Someday, here in Northern Virginia, we will be the people needing care. We have to think about our responsibilities, and in the future create the institutions needed to carry them out. As a community, we must look toward solutions, like creating branches of the Hebrew Home, and Revitz, Ring and Landow Houses in Northern Virginia. In that way we could carry forth the Jewish responsibility, as defined by the Torah and our history, to truly care for those who need us most.

Ken Heitner has been an Olam Tikvah member since 1982. His two grown sons both attended OT as children. Ken is retired and has three grandchildren. He lives with his wife, Rhoda, in Arlington, Virginia.

Asu V'bigrivu: "Do I eat the flesh of bulls?"¹

By

Cary Schwartzbach

Return of Sacrifices?

There is little discernible difference between the standard Conservative and modern Orthodox Shabbat or Yom Tov liturgies, until we get to the Musaf *Amidah*, when we petition God to return us to Zion after mentioning the prescription for the special sacrifice of the day. In the traditional version, we cite the sanctuary as the place where we will (once again) offer up those sacrifices (*v'sham na'aseh/ na'aseh v'naqriv*). In *Sim Shalom*, the tense has been subtly altered to cite the Temple as the place where our forefathers (once) offered sacrifices (*sbe'sham asu/ asu v'bigrivu*).

The traditional version looks forward to the return of sacrifice; *Sim Shalom* is neutral on the question. We may therefore wonder whether we, as Conservative Jews, (should) want to return to sacrifice days, or even whether God wants sacrifices. In the words of a theologian, the question would become: did God command sacrifice, or did He merely tolerate it?

Critical vs. Traditional Views

From our modern perspective, it is difficult to understand why an incorporeal deity should care about the "sweet smell of sacrifices." While that reasoning may not have resonated with a First Commonwealth thinker, we can imagine how God might be offended by attempts to propitiate Him with gifts, when all He desires is obedience to His ways.

A critical view would note the words of Psalm 50, quoted above, as evidence that the Hebrew divinity is not primarily interested in offerings and libations. He never commanded sacrifice, "For I spoke not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning sacrifices."² God is only interested in obedience to his commandments (*op cit*). In prophetic sources, He actually declares His abhorrence of the cultic worship. "He that kills an ox is as if he slew a man; He that sacrificed a lamb as if he broke a dog's neck."³ Other prophets, including Hosea (8:13), Amos (5:22) and Micah (6:7), offer abundant proof that the God of Israel at best tolerated the sacrificial cult and indeed may well have wished it gone.

A traditional approach to the inquiry would point out that the prophets do not protest the institution or principle of sacrifice so much as the corrupt method in which it was too often implemented. This is Samuel's opinion when he chastises Saul for disobeying God's command (to destroy

all of Amaleq). Despite being commanded to destroy even the cattle of Amaleq, Saul saves the best sheep and oxen to be used as offerings. Samuel rebukes Saul, not for the act of sacrifice, but for the disobedient manner in which he obtained the offering: “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifice as in hearkening to the voice of the Lord?”⁴ Thus the prophet does not seek to abolish the sacrificial cult.

In the Torah, most of *Leviticus*, as well as *Parashah Pinchas*, is dedicated to describing and prescribing the sacrificial rite; so is much of the prophetic book of Ezekiel. Critical thinkers may respond that the sacrificial cult was retroactively written into the Torah by the Priestly writers (P), pointing out that the prophets may have had enough latitude to criticize the cult, but never enough clout to campaign for its abolition.

The orthodox viewpoint, however, suggests that sacrifice was so essential to the Israelite worship that the Rabbis dedicated an order of the Talmud, Qodshim, to the Temple practice laws. This is all the more poignant when one considers that the rabbinic goal was to supplant the Temple cult. Furthermore, when Maimonides sought to compose the first comprehensive codification of Jewish law, he included the Book of Temple Services and the Book of Sacrifices among the 14 books of the *Mishneh Torah*.⁵

Sacrifice in Genesis

The first sacrifice recorded in the Torah is that of Cain and Abel.⁶ Following in his father’s occupation, Cain, the farmer, makes a voluntary offering (minchah). Abel, the innovative pastoralist, mimics his brother’s idea and brings “from the firstlings of his flock and of their ‘fat.’” God accepts Abel’s offering and ignores Cain’s, consoling him with an enigmatic warning regarding mastering “sin.” Apparently unable to rise above his envy, Cain ignores God’s advice and slays his brother.

Why was Abel’s offering accepted and not Cain’s? Traditional exegesis, stemming from the more verbose description of Abel’s offering, claims that Cain proffered only mediocre fruits, while his brother brought the best. Beyond the obvious lack of textual support for this view, it seems odd that the innovator of sacrifice, the one who felt internally compelled to give a gift of his own volition, would bring something of middling quality.⁷ In Columbia College’s *Literature Humanities*, we were taught that the rejection of Cain the farmer represented the Tanakh’s repudiation of man’s innovation. Farming was considered a “technology,” as opposed to the pastoral way of life that epitomized living in the world as it was created; thus Abel was favored. There are several problems with this approach. First and foremost, we know that primordial man was intended to be vegetar-

ian.⁸ One may argue that this condition was only in Eden, but when God curses Adam, He states, “By toil shall you eat of it (the ground)....your food shall be the grasses of the field. By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat.”⁹ Not only is man supposed to farm, but he is also expected to develop the technology to turn (cereal) grass into bread. No mention is made of the pastoral life. Thus Abel the shepherd is the innovator; brother Cain is living the “traditional” life.

I would argue that the rejection of one of the brothers’ offerings was for didactic purposes.¹⁰ The act of sacrifice as depicted in our tale is a human endeavor that must, inevitably, lead to human consequences. We see mimicry, showmanship, envy, shame, anger and the inevitable violence, followed by deceit and denial. The episode portrays for us the problems of sacrifice in its “natural” state.

Why then was Cain selected for rejection? It is my belief that God’s “intent” here was to punish Abel. Although he enacted a flawed rite, Cain at least acted out of a sense of gratitude, awe or devotion. Abel, on the other hand, seems only interested in imitating his brother (or hedging his bets). The text states that he, too (*gam hu*) brought a sacrifice. Although rejected, Cain is granted an audience with the deity, an experience never granted Abel. Perhaps in the enigmatic advice about sin, God is warning Cain (and subsequent Biblical actors) that although he may function as an agent of the divine master plan, his act of fratricide is still sinful.

Why would sacrifice, as innovated by man and in its natural state, be condemned? As Kass points out, even in its most purely grateful construct, the very notion of a gift to the divine represents an anthropomorphic rendering of the divine. This construct runs something along the lines of, “The deity cares for me, but would care even more if I could please it. I will bring a gift, because that is what would please me.” More cynically, a sacrifice can be seen as either a bribe or as holding the deity in debt to man. These concepts were unacceptable to the monotheistic Bible writers.

Noah

Grateful for surviving the ordeal of the Flood, Noah brings a voluntary offering of “clean” beasts.¹¹ Drunken revelry and sexual indiscretion soon follow: the obvious condemnation of the Bacchanalian rites that often accompanied the ancient cults cannot be missed.

The Patriarchs

The remainder of Genesis involves the narrative of the patriarchs, whose “peak moments of communicating with God are invariably by the creation of altars,” to quote Tucker from our *Etz Hayim*.¹² But, whereas Tucker adds the “offering of animal sacrifices” to the patriarchs’ ritual, a

careful review of their altar-building activities will reveal that the text almost never mentions the offering of sacrifices. I believe that the text is telling us not that the patriarchs built altars for sacrifice, but that they constructed new shrines or steles for worship of their monotheistic God, because the old sites were defiled by idolatry and needed to be “replaced.”

In the majority of the instances of new construction, the Torah uses the term *mizbayach*, or altar. The word derives from the Hebrew root *z,b(v),h*, which usually connotes a sacrificial offering, *zevab shlamim* (peace offering) for example. This terminology seems to imply that our forefathers offered sacrifices when they built these new markers. This objection may be answered in several fashions. The first would question in which direction the grammatical derivation traveled, i.e., did *mizbayab* (altar) derive from *zevab* (slaughter or sacrifice) or vice versa. Even if *mizbayab* did indeed derive from *zevab*, it may have come to have a divorced meaning in later times, analogous to the term “altar” used in a modern Catholic church. Finally, the Torah uses the term *mizbayach* without reference to animal sacrifice. The incense altar is called *mizbayach q'toreth*; clearly the term can and has been used without implying sacrifice.

The first instance of offering animal sacrifice at an altar is in the Covenant Between the Pieces,¹³ when God has Abraham halve a heifer and a ram as a symbol of the Lord's steadfastness. In this narrative, there is no sense of a sacrificial ritual, but merely an enactment of loyalty. The next exception is the denouement of the Binding of Isaac,¹⁴ where Abraham substitutes a ram for his son. This account is exceptional, and to the extent that it probably serves to disabuse us of human sacrifice, cannot be compared with other stories of sacrifice.¹⁵ Note, however, that Abraham, in contradistinction to all Genesis sacrifices, does not spontaneously make an offer; at the same time, God does not command an animal sacrifice. The next exception is at the confrontation between Jacob and Laban at Gilead (Gal-ed).¹⁶ The two commemorate their pact with a “witness mound” (gal ed in Hebrew) and celebrate with a “barbecue.” Although the term *zevah* is used, there is never a sense of this being a sacred meal—Jacob never calls “in the Lord's Name” nor does he offer gratitude. It is merely a ceremonial meal that would usually follow the signing of a pact. The final, and probably most problematic, exception is the sacrifice Jacob makes on his way down to Egypt.¹⁷ He has just found out that Joseph is still alive and seems to offer this sacrifice both out of a sense of gratitude for the good tidings and to propitiate God, especially with the arduous journey ahead. Knowing Jacob's character and history,

we shouldn't be too surprised to find him trying to "cut a deal with God." After all, he is Yisrael, one who contends with the divine. Recalling the Torah's disavowal of the sacrificial motivation (at least in its "natural state"), one can almost predict that this journey to Egypt will lead to human misery, and indeed, this trek brings the Children of Israel to their enslavement in Egypt.

The First Ordained Sacrifice: Qorban Pesach

We now leave Genesis and come to the first ordained sacrifice in the Tanakh—the Qorban Pesach.¹⁸ Ostensibly written as God commanding the sacrifice *de novo*, it is hard to shake the sense that the first readers are already familiar with a "paschal offering"¹⁹ and that the ensuing legislation seeks to codify (or even recodify) it. This is especially true in light of the reality that this section is immediately preceded by reforming the calendar, *i.e.*, there is an anticipation that this section functions for a similar purpose. Although some of the instructions in this portion sound as if they could be given to the Israelites in Egypt (*e.g.*, the blood on the doorposts), most of the directives seem more appropriate to a generation at home with the sacrificial cult. It is difficult to see slaves casually picking out a lamb and secluding it for four days prior to slaughter. The choice of the tenth of Nissan (for secluding the lamb) is puzzling in the setting of Egypt; it resonates well with those familiar with the sanctuary. The tenth of Tishrei (Yom Kippur in these days) was a day of purification of the sanctuary. Once the start of the year has been transferred from Tishrei to Nissan (by reforming the calendar), the choice makes sense. One sets aside a sacrificial animal at the same time the sanctuary is being prepared. Finally, the manner in which the sacrifice was to be eaten seems more appropriate to a later generation. Slaves about to be freed from Egypt wouldn't have to be told to dress as if they were ready to leave at any moment; they probably already were. This sounds more like a reenactment ritual. The directions to eat the sacrifice with matzoh and bitter herbs seem out of place. The story of the dough that didn't rise hasn't been told yet, and the bitter herbs also feel like a remembrance custom.

We are left with the impression that this section is an Israelite renovation of a preexisting sacrifice. It is redressed with monotheistic themes and appended to a liberation story. The text even hints at this when it states, "It is a passover offering to the Lord."²⁰ But why would the first sacrifice in the prescriptive part of the Torah be a mere reworking of a prior ritual? I believe that Maimonides's approach to the institution of sacrifice in his *Guide of the Perplexed*²¹ can help us.

Maimonides and the Transformation of Sacrifice

In Part III, chapter 32, Maimonides begins his explication of the institution of sacrifices by reminding us that just as the universe is organized by “gradations,” human existence depends on gradual transitions. An infant cannot immediately abandon placental nourishment and begin to eat solid food; it must transition to milk and baby food first. Similarly, the human mind must be weaned from primitive thought. Maimonides sees the Torah as a vehicle for taking us away from cultic paganism and towards contemplative monotheism.

Humans were accustomed to worshipping idols with animals and incense in the various shrines. Before changing the mode of worship, God first attempts to change the focus of the worship. To change everything at the same time would have been too difficult for early man to tolerate.²²

Maimonides firmly believes that sacrifices serve merely as a transition to the ultimate state of worship, which is knowledge of the deity. God furthers this transition by gradually limiting who can sacrifice (priests), where they can sacrifice (the Temple), how they can sacrifice (the various codes), etc. This control undermines the sacrificial rite’s pagan origins and places it into an acceptable framework.

I believe that Maimonides’s analysis is functionally correct, even if somewhat ahistorical. We should see *Genesis* as depicting sacrifice in its natural state—an attempt to secure one’s fate by suborning the deity, often accompanied by ritual, orgiastic conduct. The prescriptive part of the Torah attempts to wean Israel from these practices, as the first step to spiritual perfection.²³ It begins by establishing strict controls on the practice, as a way to sever connections to the ritual’s pagan roots and to refocus the offerer’s intentions and motivation away from propitiation and towards supplication. The voluminous quantity of laws dedicated to the various sacrifices signals the gravity of this effort. We also understand why, outside of *Genesis*, a sacrifice is now called a *qorban*—from the Hebrew root *q,r,b*, to draw near. The purpose of the transformed ritual is to draw the worshipper closer to God, not to persuade Him to send the rains next planting season.

The laws governing sacrifice also serve to dampen the spontaneity and ecstasy often associated with the cultic rites. By regulating the manner, times and participants, the Torah limits the chances for a Bacchanalian celebration. Perhaps now we can understand why Nadav and Avihu, Aaron’s older two sons, paid with their lives when they brought “before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them.”²⁴ The severe punishment demonstrates how resolute God is in the reformation of sacrifice, without which the potential for a second Golden Calf episode is always lurking.

Perhaps now we can understand as well why the first sacrifice mentioned in the prescriptive Torah is the Qorban Pesach, with its apparent reworking of a preexisting ritual. The Torah is telling the Israelites that they may continue the ancient practice of the paschal sacrifice,²⁵ but only after it is modified to conform to Biblical theology. It may only be brought under certain circumstances—when, by whom, how and where. Most importantly, it must now be connected to a historical theme, the liberation from Egypt. These changes conform to the biblical concept of an immanent, personal deity, who acts in real-time history to affect change. The pantomime of eating the qorban hurriedly serves to ritualistically express and commemorate that connection. By its primacy of position, the Qorban Pesach serves as a template for reforming all other sacrifices.

The Question Revisited

The Biblical theological project of transforming man's worship from pagan bacchanalian ritual into contemplative supplication²⁶ should be acknowledged and applauded in our present-day service. The liturgical formula of *asu v'hiqrivu* best accomplishes this feat. By overlooking the sacrificial rites of our past, the “vegetarian” option in *Sim Shalom* ignores this sublime makeover. Obviously uncomfortable with our “primitive” roots, this schema forgets that a substantial portion of Jewish texts glorify the theological maturation we have undergone^{27, 28}. On the other hand, expressing our desire to return to sacrifice does an equal measure of violence to this transformative process. Keeping the traditional version, *na'aseh v'naqriv*, implies that contemplative prayer was only a temporary measure, installed due to the absence of the sacrificial cult. By saying *asu v'hiqrivu*, we demonstrate that more important than God's intent with respect to sacrifice, is man's transformation of the ritual.

Notes

¹ *Psalms* 50:13. Conservative siddur quotes from *Siddur Sim Shalom*. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1998.

² *Jeremiah* 7:22. Chumash quotations from Lieber, David L., ed. *Etz Hayim*. New York: JPS, 2001.

³ *Isaiah* 66:3

⁴ *I Samuel* 15:22

⁵ The other name for the *Mishneh Torah* is the *Yad Hazaqah* (The Strong Hand), with the word *Yad* symbolizing the number 14.

⁶ The arguments developed in this pericope are based on ideas formulated in Kass, Leon. *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006, chapter 4.

⁷ Although Prometheus, the Greek innovator of sacrifice, taught man how to save the best for themselves.

⁸ *Genesis* 1:29 and 2:16

⁹ *Genesis* 3:17-19

¹⁰ Kass argues that God's rejection of Cain and His subsequent speech to him are designed to teach Cain what it is that He wants—foreshadowing the prophetic critique of sacrifice.

¹¹ One could argue that the mention of clean (vs. unclean) animals in the P version of the Flood served as a prompt for Noah to offer a sacrifice.

¹² Tucker, Gordon. "Sacrifices," in *Etz Hayim*, 1447.

¹³ *Genesis* 15

¹⁴ *Genesis* 22

¹⁵ Traditionalists will point this out as an example of God (indirectly) ordering animal sacrifice, while modernists will claim that He grudgingly accepts the ritual to "wean" man away from ritualistic homicide.

¹⁶ *Genesis* 31 (specifically v 54)

¹⁷ *Genesis* 46:1

¹⁸ *Exodus* 12:3-13

¹⁹ This idea is well reviewed in Sarna, Nahum. *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel*. Schocken Books: New York, 1986, chapter 5.

²⁰ *Exodus* 12:11

²¹ Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963.

²² Maimonides equates the question of why man wasn't endowed with the capacity to accept that much change with the theological problem of reward and punishment. He cites God's forestalling Israel's confrontation with enemies until late in the desert trek as an example of man's limited capacity.

²³ Maimonides also reasons that the mitzvot function in a similar (albeit advanced) manner.

²⁴ *Leviticus* 10:2

²⁵ It was a common pastoral custom to offer a lamb in the springtime. See Sarna, 85-89.

²⁶ As conceived by Maimonides.

²⁷ The most obvious is the Maggid section of the Passover Haggadah.

²⁸ More troubling is the proximity of this approach to that of "historical revisionism."

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