

Parashah Seventy-Eight

Lev 5:1-19; Zech 5:3-6:15; James 5:16-20; Matt 18:15-17

notes by Tim Hegg

The Mercy of God in the Sin-Offerings

The Torah section before us this Shabbat discusses three types of transgression: 1) failure to give testimony, 2) contaminating holy things, and 3) the sin of false or unkept oaths. Unlike other sin offerings, the ones prescribed for these transgressions are variable (or as the Sages say, קָרְבָּן עוֹלָה וְיִזְרֵד, “an offering that goes up and down”). The exact sacrifice to be brought is on a “sliding scale” dependent upon what the guilty party could afford.

Right from the start we see God’s mercy in the whole matter. For His willingness to demand a sacrifice within the confines of what the guilty could afford shows His desire to restore the sinner. This emphasizes His mercy—His loving desire to have covenant friendship with His chosen ones.

But it also emphasizes another thing: it was not the ability of a guilty party to pay for his or her sin that brought about forgiveness. There was no “set price” because the emphasis was not to be upon the sinner’s ability, but on the value of the sacrifice itself. Bringing the offering, regardless of the value, showed the sinner’s willingness to accept God’s way of being forgiven.

The first category of sins—failure to give testimony—reminds us again how the Torah is very much community oriented. In our society, the “mind-your-own-business” perspective is so pervasive that the guilty go free and the innocent are condemned because no one wants to “get involved.” But HaShem knows that true community cannot function under such constraints. In the specific case mentioned in our text, the witness to an oath or a pledge is unwilling to bear testimony to what he heard, saw, or knew. Since his testimony is necessary to establish justice and proper outcome to the innocent party, his failure to engage in the proceedings brings injustice to the community, and loss to his fellow man.

What might be the scenario where this sin occurred? The Sages suggest that it is when a witness to an oath or pledge takes an oath to tell the truth and then lies. After his conscience gets the best of him, he is required to bring a guilt offering. In our times this would be called “perjury.” But of course, this is in a matter of damages of a monetary or material nature, not in issues of capital punishment.

How might this be applied today? Very simply, we cannot allow our brother or sister to sustain loss if we, through our witness, can prevent it. Even if “getting involved” means we will have to sacrifice our time and energy, we must put the needs of our brother or sister ahead of our own desires. Here the Torah teaches us the necessity of considering the other person as more important than ourselves (cp. Phil 2:3). And note well that there are no exceptions. Suppose the person sustaining the possible damages is someone who is not one of our friends, perhaps someone who actually is our enemy— we still cannot remain silent. We must come to their aid. Justice must be blind to interpersonal likes and dislikes. This is the only way community can remain strong.

The Sages liken this to a partnership with HaShem. A judge who rules correctly is God’s partner in Creation. Consequently, a witness who refuses to testify is under God’s punishment, for it is as if he had contributed to the destruction of God’s creation.

The second category of sins is one in which holy objects are contaminated and made unclean. The general rule derived by the Sages from this passage is that it is forbidden for someone who is unclean to enter the Sanctuary or to eat of the food of the offerings. But the specific case in

mind here is that “the matter is concealed from him” (וְנִגְעָלָם מִמֶּנּוּ, v. 3). If someone who knows he is unclean enters the Sanctuary or eats the food of the offering, the penalty is *karat*, he is cut off from his people. But if the matter is hidden from him, i.e., he is unaware that he is unclean and then the matter is made known to him, he must bring a guilt offering. How would this be possible? One scenario is that he came into the Sanctuary area not realizing, for instance, that his wife had become unclean, and he had contracted uncleanness from her. Having realized it after the fact, he must bring a guilt offering.

Some might consider this excessive. After all, his intentions were pure even though his ritual status was not. But this highlights a very important point: good intentions do not overcome transgression. HaShem’s holiness cannot be diminished for the sake of good intentions. Actions carry far more weight than intentions. This, of course, is “flip-flopped” in our modern era. For instance, a teacher who teaches falsehood yet with the most sincere intentions is still liable of leading others astray. Or sharing *lashon hara* (gossip) even for “good intentions” is still wrong. We may think that engaging in gossip may be necessary to help someone else, but there is always another way—in the end we can never honor God by engaging in actions He forbids. If we seek to find a way both to honor Him and help our brother or sister—this will lead to ultimate success.

The matter of oaths are attached to the same passage (vv. 4ff) because, in this specific case, it too is “concealed from him.” That is, a person takes an oath that he fully intended to fulfill, yet he subsequently finds out that he is unable to keep it. Or, he takes an oath that later he discovers is legally invalid. His oath taking flows out of ignorance of the Torah, or out of a miscalculation of his own abilities. An example might be where a person promises to support another person, but falls himself into irreversible poverty. The oath was taken, and failure to keep the oath, though not a result of intentional fraud, is still a sin. A guilt offering must be brought. An adjunct to this, where the oath actually constitutes a fraud, is given in the next section, vv. 20-26.

How might this Torah principle be applied in our situation? The principle here is that failure to keep one’s word, even when one is unable through no intentional fault, is still a matter that requires resolution. Confession of the matter is the first step: “he shall confess what he has done as a sin” (v. 5). This highlights a very important principle: oaths or promises are to be taken seriously. When we give our word and are unable to fulfill it, we must admit our failure and seek to make the matter right. Humbly admitting one’s inability to follow through on one’s oath is necessary for maintaining right relations with fellow community members. The emphasis is upon honest humility—a reckoning with the facts and admitting it to those we may have let down. Once again, a humble and contrite spirit is the “stuff” that makes community work.

Verses 14-16 speak of someone who partakes of something within the Sanctuary that he believes is proper to eat, but later finds out it is not proper for him to eat (such as the priest’s portion which he thought was set aside for himself). As a result, he must bring a guilt offering. Once again, though his intentions were pure, his actions were not. The matter is defined by his actions, not his intentions.

Verses 17-19 are added here because it is parallel in principle: a person breaks a negative commandment but does so because he is unaware of the commandment itself, “he did not know” (וְלֹא יָדָע). Once he is informed of his infraction, he must bring a guilt offering. Ignorance of the Torah does not exempt one from the guilt of breaking the Torah.

Once again, the matter that is emphasized is the need for humble submission to God’s commands. One could justifiably claim ignorance and expect an exemption. But God demands action,

nor merely intentions. Humbly submitting to Him is the answer to the dilemma. When we realize our wrong, we agree with Him about what we have done and accept His authority over us. We confess our sin and follow His way of reconciliation.

Thus, the overall message of our *parashah* is: 1) the need to put others as a priority above our own needs and desires, 2) the willingness to confess our sin and wrong even when we never intended to do what was wrong, and 3) the need for a humble heart before God and others as the necessary attitude for Godly community. What is more, we learn from this section that God not only wants a working humility between community members, He wants to be included as a member of the community as well. He willingly “grades” the value of the guilt offering to accommodate the economic position of each worshipper.

Once again, as we study Torah in its context, and with careful attention to the details contained in it, we discover that the message of love, forgiveness, humility, and God’ grace and compassion are all highlighted throughout. The charge that the “Old Testament” is harsh and concerned only about “external matters,” and not about the heart, is an accusation made by those who have not actually studied the Torah. Its beauty lies in the fact that all of these Godly character qualities are interwoven, not in a list or creed, but in the manner in which God expects us to treat one another within the context of righteous community.

Coming to realize what God expects of us as community members can also teach us what we should expect of one another. Often, when we are disappointed with our community experience, it is because we have false expectations of what community is, and how it is to work. It is instructive to note that the Torah speaks to us from the perspective of how we are to treat others, not from the viewpoint of how others are to treat us. The message we learn from this is that as we commit ourselves to do what HaShem has instructed, our perspective is focused on others, not on ourselves. When such a perspective is taken up by the whole community, everyone’s needs are met.