

Commentary on R'eih and Pinhas

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Our Torah portions today specify details of the observance of Pesach. These include, in the Maftir portion in the book of Numbers, particular animal sacrifices to be offered as burnt offerings during the days of Pesach.

I know it is hard to appreciate religious or spiritual meaning in animal sacrifices. So I turned to an expert for guidance. He is William K. Gilders, Associate Professor in the Religion Department of Emory University. His biography states that he teaches "Hebrew Bible, with special emphases on ritual and sacrifice in ancient Israel." In 2004 he wrote a book called *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power*. Here is some of the wisdom of Dr. Gilders on this topic:

In our world, people commonly understand "sacrifice" to involve some kind of loss, usually for the sake of a greater good. A person may be said to sacrifice time, pleasure, or happiness; the death of a soldier in war is often referred to as a sacrifice. Sacrifice, in this understanding, involves giving up something.

But the ancient Israelite practices we call "sacrifices" are better understood as giving over rather than giving up.

The word "sacrifice" comes from the Latin, *sacrificare*, "to make sacred," that is, to permanently transfer something from the human (common) realm to the divine/supernatural (sacred) realm.

This basic meaning is appropriate for the sacrifices described in the Torah. They involve the transfer of offerings from the common to the sacred, from human beings to God.

In the Torah, the primary Hebrew term for a sacrifice is *qorbān* (something brought forward or brought near). This term indicates the basic ancient Israelite understanding of this activity.

One helpful way to think about sacrifices is as "gifts" given over to God. We can understand this type of gift-giving by thinking about gift-giving in our own lives, especially that of young children to parents. Parents really don't need the gifts their children give them (a tie given to a father, a bottle of perfume to a mother) and the money a young child uses to purchase a gift may even come from the parents themselves. The giving and receiving of such gifts is

important, nevertheless, because this practice expresses a relationship of commitment, care, and love.

When they performed sacrifices, ancient Israelites gave over to God some of what they believed God had given them, expressing their close relationship with God, and seeking to deepen that bond.

In some passages the sacrificial offerings are called “food.” Referring to a sacrificial offering as food makes sense in a culture in which the sharing of meals is an important means and marker of trust, intimacy, and connectedness. Sharing food with God, even though God doesn't need food, marks and sustains the relationship.

Sacrifices in the Torah always involve transformation. By killing and burning the animal and thus destroying it, the Israelite removes the animal from the ordinary realm to a transcendent one. Biblical texts tell us that what God received from a sacrifice was the smoke of the burning, as a “pleasing aroma.” By receiving the smoke, the transformed sacrifice, God enjoyed a fellowship meal with human beings.

In ancient Israelite sacrifice, death is not the primary focus. The killing of the animals is a means to an end. Killing the animal makes its flesh and blood available for special use. In our own society, those who have hunted or who have raised livestock for meat are probably in the best position to understand this point. Killing an animal is simply how it is made available for food.

All of the sacrificial offerings described in the Torah share one crucial element: the burning of some portion in the altar fire. This burning transformed the offering into smoke, which produced the “pleasing aroma.”

A final point is the crucial role assigned to priests in the sacrificial instructions. Sacrifice is not a do-it-yourself activity. Rather, specially designated and set-apart mediators are required to bring about the transformation and transfer of the offering. For a special act, special agents are required. These agents are not only expert in the proper procedures; they also bear the risk of moving into God's special presence.

Sacrifice was “mainstream” religion in the ancient world. It may be difficult for us as modern people to understand the religious significance of killing and cutting up animals and burning them in an altar fire. However, we can bridge this cultural gap if we understand that sacrifice was fundamentally about transforming and sharing of food to express, build, and reinforce the relationship between God and human beings.

I found this explanation by Dr. Gilders helpful. I hope you did as well.