

Ethics and Ritual  
Commentary on Leviticus 16:1-34  
Yom Kippur  
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Temple B'nai Shalom  
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On Rosh Hashanah our stories from the Torah told us about Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael and Isaac. We learned about family relationships and loyalties and problematic relationships between people.

Those tales resemble legends and epics. They are grand stories that depict human conflict and convey truths about human behavior.

Our Torah reading today differs from those tales in both tone and content. Today we read about the instructions for the service of atonement performed by the High Priest in the Tabernacle on Yom Kippur.

The Tabernacle, also known as the Mishkan, was the temporary structure erected in the desert that accompanied the Israelites in the forty years of their circuitous journey to the promised land. The Tabernacle was the predecessor to the Temple in Jerusalem.

The service described in our reading, describe as being carried out in the Mishkan, continued to be performed in the successor to that structure, the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple had become the focus of Jewish worship. That ceremony was performed there until the year 70, when the Romans destroyed the Temple.

Our focus today, on Yom Kippur, in this recitation of ritual observance, reflects one of the themes of Yom Kippur, namely, the relationship between ethics and ritual. Starting on Rosh Hashanah and continuing until today, our tradition calls upon us to make amends and repair our relationships in order to start the new year with a clean slate, so to speak. The rituals of Yom Kippur remind us that something more than these changes might be required. Today we not only speak certain words but also engage in ritual acts that do not differ entirely from those of our ancestors, except of course today we no longer perform animal sacrifice.

But our observance today does involve other sacrifices. These also appear in our Torah reading, and were interpreted by the rabbis of the Talmud. In verse 29 God instructs the Israelites to “practice self-denial. You shall do no manner of work.”

So what does it mean to “practice self-denial?” This is the kind of question that the Talmud rabbis love to address. They ruled that followers of rabbinic Judaism are required to sacrifice certain comforts and pleasures. We don’t eat. We don’t drink. We limit the amount to which we bathe because the Talmud prohibits “anointing” ourselves. Men are not supposed to shave today. We are supposed to refrain from sexual intimacy and we are not supposed to wear solid leather shoes.

The Torah reading describes an ancient ritual that did not involve action by the people who gathered to observe it. Rather it was a kind of religious play acted out for them by the High Priest.

Our Haftarah today addresses the issue of ethics and ritual more directly. In the Haftarah, the prophet Isaiah urges us to recognize the needs of the society in which we live. His words are as timely today as when he first spoke. They speak directly to us.

This is the fast that I desire:  
To unlock fetters of wickedness,  
And untie the cords of the yoke  
To let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke.  
It is to share your bread with the hungry,  
And to take the wretched poor into your home;  
When you see the naked, to clothe them.  
If you banish the yoke from your midst,  
The menacing hand, and evil speech,  
And you offer your compassion to the hungry  
And satisfy the famished creature –  
Then shall your light shine in darkness,  
And your gloom shall be like noonday.

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These admonitions to the people of Isaiah’s time and place speak to all of us in this time and place.

This year we have heard the cries of “Black Lives Matter” as police who were violating their oaths of office shot or even strangled innocent people.

This year we have seen and continue to see hundreds of thousands of people escaping as best they can from murderous battlefields and knocking at the doors of Europe, begging for sanctuary.

This year we have heard intolerance and hate-filled speech from the mouths of politicians and some of their supporters.

This year we are finally seeing the beginning of some recognition that we imprison far too many people for far too long for minor offenses and keep people in jail who have not yet had a trial for the sole reason that they cannot pay bail.

We saw again just this week in our newspapers that there are still 115 men we are holding in prison at Guantanamo, our national shame, including 52 who have been cleared for release but not yet released.

This is the year for us to stand up, answer Isaiah's call, and respond to the needs all around us with more than fasting and prayer. This is the year for our action, for Tikkun Olam, for helping to repair a broken world.

May our Torah and Haftarah readings today inspire us to take action.

The Torah reading begins on page 488.