

On Sacrifice



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ligious crisis turned into a moment of opportunity. The rabbis devised alternatives to the sacrificial functions in ways that struggle and deal with the fears and stress inherent in sacrifice. Here, I wish to highlight three alternate elements—charity, suffering, and prayer.

Charity

The following story is recounted in rabbinic literature (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version 1, chapter 4):

Once Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai was exiting Jerusalem and Rabbi Yehoshua was following him. He saw the Temple destroyed. Rabbi Yehoshua said woe to us that the temple is destroyed—a place that the sins of Israel were atoned. He told him: my son, don't be in sorrow, we have one atonement equal to it. It is charity, since it said: "I desired charity not sacrifice." (*Hosea 6:6*)

It is not by chance that this statement is attributed to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai, considered the main figure responsible for shaping Jewish life after the crisis of the destruction. The atoning power of charity can be understood in a simple manner. Giving to the poor and needy appeases God no less than does sacrifice; charity is therefore an act that atones.

In another rabbinic text (*Babylonian Talmud*, *Baba Batra 10a*), the nature of charity as an alternative sacrifice gains a deeper meaning:

R. Dusthai b. Yannai taught: Come and see how the manner of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not as the manner of human beings. When a human being brings a present to the king, there is a doubt whether it will be accepted or not; and if it be accepted, whether he will see the king. But the Holy One, blessed be He, is not so; if a man gives a coin to a poor man, he is rewarded and experiences the appearance of the Shekhinah; as it is written [*Ps. 17:15*]: "As for me, in *zedek* (charity) shall I behold thy face." R. Elazar used to give a coin to a poor man before praying, quoting the above verse. (*ibid.*)

The Talmudic statement sets charity within the problematic character of an offering. The acceptance of a gift presented to a king is never secure. If the gift is received and accepted, this is not necessarily a sign of the king embracing the one who brought it; it might be strictly exploitative. The giver of charity, on the other hand, is immune from the possibility of rejection; God will reveal himself to him.

In the next statement, the Talmud provides a bold reason for why charity secures this closing of the gap established by the gesture of the offering. This teaching is introduced by a rare formula: "Were it not written in Scripture one would not dare to say it." The phrase expresses the idea that the statement about to come is so daring that if it wasn't explicitly written in scripture, the interpreter would have not dared to say it:

R. Johanan said: What is the meaning of the verse, "he that has pity on the poor lends to God"? Were it not written in Scripture, one would not dare to say it: as it were, the borrower is a slave to the lender."

The logic of this reading works as follows: God is actually the one who is obligated to provide for the poor. The destitute are his creatures, whom he brought into the world. When a person provides charity to the poor, he is in fact paying God's debt. Charity is, therefore, like lending to God. The charity giver, by paying God's debt, transforms his relationship to God from a debtor to a lender. In that act of giving, the giver reverses the relationship of dependence between himself and God, since the one who owes is considered a slave to the lender. Charity is thus described as enslaving God, shifting his position from a creditor to a debtor.³⁴

This reversal relates to the trauma of sacrifice in a complex fashion. As was explained above, sacrifice—*korban*—assumes that a person offers up a gift that might be rejected. It maintains an essential, hierarchical gap between giving and receiving. But in giving to the poor, no such gap exists. The poor person stretching forth his hand is not typically in a position to exercise his power of refusal; he must keep his hand outstretched to accept the offer of assistance. Since God is the one who has to feed the poor, however, the hand

ated through the hand of the desperate. A person binds God—his superior—to the gift cycle precisely by giving to a dependent—the poor.

This Talmudic position doesn't aim at providing an incentive for charity; if this were the case, the poor might become a mere instrument in "forcing" God into a debtor status. The statement rather provides a description of what actually happens in giving; it doesn't prescribe the aim of giving or the motivation for it. When someone gives out of compassion for the plight of the poor, he is entering a gift cycle that reverses the structure of the offering. *Charity is preferred over sacrifice because it erases the abyss between giving and receiving without recourse to ritual, which minimizes individuation. What is more, this way of giving reverses the hierarchical order implied in the offering of a sacrifice; charity reverses God's position from a lender to a borrower.*

Suffering

The Midrash, quoting a second-century source, designates affliction as a preferable alternative to sacrifice:

R. Nehemiah says: precious are chastisements. For just as sacrifices are the means of atonement, so also chastisements. What does it say about sacrifices? "And it shall be accepted for him to make atonement" [Lev. 1:4]. And what does it say in connection with chastisements?