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PARSHAT VAYIKRA

SUMMER CHAPLAINCY AS MODERN PRIESTHOOD: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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The, words of Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, an intellectual mentor of mine, rang in my ears as I began my intensive summer unit of Clinical Pastoral Education[1] at the New York-Presbyterian Allen Hospital: "Judaism is fundamentally about the triumph of life."[2] I reflected on these words during our group's orientation, and on the immense holiness Rabbi Yitz sees in contemporary hospital care as an "ultimate fulfillment of the Jewish dream ... of the human being becoming more and more like God" (insofar as modern medicine creates miracles of sorts). Thus, when the time arrived to visit patients and provide spiritual care, I entered with the meditation that each hospital room is a sacred space, and that I myself am charged with the sacred responsibility of increasing life.

In classical biblical thought, God's presence is most acutely felt in the Temple, which provides protection to the encircling camp and staves off calamity (Lev. 26:14). As I started to serve as a chaplain, I began to conceptualize the hospital as sharing a similar goal and function with our description of the Temple—both are institutions standing at society's core, ensuring our well-being and preservation. Moreover, on an experiential level, both the hospital and Temple are physical sites where individuals search for meaning in their suffering (and occasional joys), and where the precarious balance between life and death is keenly felt. As patients commenced viewing me as a religious guide in this Temple-like context, it made sense to turn towards the Torah's description of the priest in search of universal truths underlying spiritual care.

Before one enters the priesthood, much like in chaplaincy training, several rounds of initiation are in order, as the former is described in Leviticus chapters 8-10: Both chaplain and priest are adorned with special clothing before beginning (8:7), and learn to scrupulously cleanse themselves before and after entering sensitive areas, adding additional layers of protective clothing when necessary (8:6; 16:24). In their everyday service, both are asked to pray with patients, channeling the divine presence that dwells where patients heal (9:23; *Shabbat* 12b), and to answer religious questions (Ezekiel 44:23)[3]. The first time I entered a patient room at the wrong time, I was struck by the force of an invisible energy indicating I was unwelcome—perhaps a shadow of the Temple's own strict and zealously-guarded boundaries (10:1-2).

The heart and soul of my chaplain visits was to "reflectively listen" to my patients' stories and to experience life, to the degree possible, through their eyes. Listening with compassion and mirroring my patients' emotions—verbally and nonverbally—built trust and allowed for a deeper connection.

Once I connected with a patient, I assessed which religious or spiritual needs I might be able to fulfill. Often, my patients carried many unresolved doubts about their lives and turned to me for support, guidance, and assurance. I imagine a similar role being played by priests, such as listening to worshippers' anxiety regarding their worthiness, as described in Psalm 15 (believed by some scholars to be an "entrance liturgy" before approaching the Temple[4]): "Who may sojourn in Your tent, who may dwell on Your holy mountain?" Finally, above and beyond their routine sacrificial tasks, priests (like chaplains) channel empathy and care to Israelites, particularly in the healing process of the *metzora* (skin-afflicted individual) as described in Leviticus chapters 13-14.

Without question, my greatest challenge as a chaplain this summer was providing support to critically ill and actively-dying patients, along with their loved ones. There is something about the sounds, sights and smell of the Intensive Care Unit and Emergency Department that stirs my pre-existing anxieties regarding the finality and cruelty of death. In reflecting on these moments, and the notion of death as the archenemy of the Temple (causing, after all, the most severe kind of impurity), I keep returning to Aaron's ambiguous response, while serving as High Priest, upon learning of the death of his two sons (due to a Temple transgression): "*va-yiddom Aharon*" (Leviticus 10:3). While this verse is conventionally translated as, "and Aaron was silent," I wonder if he was silent out of obedience (Rashi), or was he *silenced* out of shock from standing before a God who is "wholly Other" (Rudolf Otto)? And if Aaron had no verbal explanation for God's taking of his sons, what can I offer the sisters, brothers, and even parents of recently deceased loved ones?

There is a final element to Aaron's story worth telling: In verse 19, Aaron corrects Moses' religious instruction, based on his actual experience as a mourner. Moses, to his credit, concedes to Aaron's view: "It (the correction) was pleasing in his eyes." In my brief summer as a chaplain, I encountered many patients experiencing suffering similar to that of Aaron, yet they had no Moses to listen, respond, and adjust their care accordingly. All too often, patients reported being treated as a "medical record number," as opposed to a full human being with a unique story.[5] I felt worst about this dehumanizing tendency particularly with my patients who had undergone so much suffering in their lives (such as enduring the Holocaust), and who simply deserved better care in the final stages of their lives. Much as we pray for a restored Temple, I wish we could appreciate and care for the "Temples" in our midst.

[1] CPE is an ecumenical training program for chaplains, and is a required element for many clergy students. My CPE unit at the Allen Hospital combined three hundred clinical hours rotating in the hospital's Spine Unit, Intensive Care Unit, and Emergency Department with one hundred hours of education and group processing. My group consisted of three other seminary students from a variety of religious backgrounds, and was supervised by CPE Supervisor Rev. Joseph M. Collazo of the Presbyterian Church.

[2] Yitz Greenberg, *The Triumph of Life* (unpublished).

[3] While my present reflection is on the similarities between chaplains and priests, this source in Ezekiel undoubtedly calls to mind the overlapping goals between priests and rabbis. For more on this comparison, see Isaac Sasson, *Destination Torah* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 2001), p. 292.

[4] See Craig Broyles, "Psalms Concerning the Liturgies of Temple Entry," in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 248-287, for a full discussion of Temple "entrance liturgies."

[5] See Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014) for a thorough discussion of contemporary intensive and palliative care treatment centers and possible alternatives.

The Sacrifice of Obedience

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Many associate the *Haftarah* of *Shabbat Zakhor*, and its attendant obligation of *mehiyyat Amalek*, with the tension between ethics and divine command. Both the very obligation of wiping out Amalek, and the *Haftarah* involving Shaul's failure to do so, relate to this dichotomy. However, the *Haftarah* also raises another dichotomy, one between sacrifice and obedience. The essential argument of the *Haftarah*, as it has reverberated throughout Jewish history, is worthy of attention, rather than being overshadowed by other topics *du jour*.

The story presented in I Samuel 15 opens with Shaul receiving a divine command to fully wipe out the Amalekite army (vv. 2-3). But, after successfully defeating the army, Shaul defies the divine command, saving not only King Agag but also the animals and spoils (vv. 8-9). As R. Aharon Lichtenstein has noted, all indications point to Shaul acting for selfish reasons, as he defied the divine command out of a wish to amass more material possessions, rather than an ethical basis. He spared Agag his royal peer, but not the other Amalekite citizens, again out of personal interest. Once Shaul is acting independent of divine sanction, he becomes responsible for all the acts of killing, unable to assert that he was merely following divine orders.

God, aware of Shaul's failure, dispatches the prophet Shmuel to confront him (v. 12). Shaul then presents a series of evasive maneuvers. He first asserts, "I have fulfilled the divine word" (v. 13). When Shmuel confronts him about the animals, he switches tactics and blames the failure to heed the divine word on the people rather than his own decision (compare vv. 9, 15). After Shmuel dismantles his arguments, noting first that Shaul is no less than the king and is therefore responsible for the people's decisions, and noting again that no animals were to be taken (vv. 17-19), Shaul doubles down. He repeats that he *did* follow God's word, and that the *people* took the animals, and adds the qualification that the animals were meant for sacrifices (vv. 20-21). As God did not request any such sacrifices, this line might best be read as Shaul's attempt at bribing God, of making a "deal." Utilizing a transactional logic, he effectively suggests, "Okay, I made a mistake, God, but surely you'll be happy if I give you these offerings, right? I'll give you a cut of the spoils!" Thus, not only in not following the divine command properly, but even in responding to this critique, Shaul consistently disregards God's will, doing the minimum and then trying to pay off God instead of coming to terms with his failure.

In an important line we will return to below, Shmuel retorts that God desires not sacrifices but heeding the divine word; one can affect God neither with magic nor with bribes (vv. 22-23). The story repeats itself several more times, with Shaul asking for an opportunity to pray to God, or at least to save face before the elders (v. 30), but it is too late. Shmuel informs Shaul that God has "torn the kingship of Israel from [him] and given it to [his] superior peer" (v. 28).

This fascinating story is certainly deserving of a longer, more detailed treatment than space permits. We will focus instead on what may very well be the central point of the story, God's rejection of a *quid pro quo* relationship, and his fostering of a relationship of obedience. Verse 22 contains this clear statement:

> וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל הֲחֵפֶץ לַיקֹוָק בְּעֹלוֹת וּזְבָחִים כִּשְׁמֹעַ בְּקוֹל יקוָק הִנֵּה שְׁמֹעַ מִזֶּבַח טוֹב לְהַקְשִׁיב מֵחֵלֶב אֵילִים׃
> And Shmuel said: Does the Lord wish for burnt or peace offerings, as much as He wishes for following His voice? Listening is preferable to a good offering; heeding better than the fat of rams!

Shaul's entire calculus and political praxis are predicated on a mistaken conception of his relation to God. He sees God as an obstacle to be navigated around; one can pay off God with a nice sacrifice, and do what one wants. As Shaul learned all too well, what God really expects is that His will be followed; no bribe can be efficacious and there is no divine work-around.

This point, that God prefers a sincere heeding of His word rather than external demonstration of obedience through empty sacrifices, appears in many other places in Tanakh, especially among the prophets. (Isaiah 1, Micah 6:6-8, and Hosea 6:6 are some classical examples.) Of course, as has been noted in both traditional and academic contexts, this is not to say that God rejects sacrifice; sacrifice is a central pillar of Judaism, as is clearly acknowledged by the very prophets who reject insincere sacrifice. But sacrifices don't work through magic; they work as an outgrowth of one's fealty to God, which is made manifest as one brings a sacrificial gift.

This message appears not only in Tanakh but within *Hazal* as well. In fact, one rabbinic interpretation of the importance of sacrifice parallels Shmuel's exhortation almost word for word. The paradigmatic biblical phrase that might be seen as referring to sacrifice as a physical gift is *re'ah nihoah*, "a pleasing smell" (e.g., Leviticus 1:9). Forestalling the interpretation that this means God physically enjoys the barbecue-like smell of the offering, *Hazal* offer several reinterpretations of this phrase. The most relevant for our purposes is an interpretation offered in *Sifrei Numbers* 107, 118, and 143, and cited later in multiple additional cases:

> ריח ניחוח - נחת רוח לפני שאמרתי ונעשה רצוני
> "A pleasing smell" – it pleases me that I spoke and my will was fulfilled.

This interpretation utilizes the word play between *re'ah nihoah*, a pleasing smell of a burnt offering, and *nahat ruah*, divine happiness in general, as the smell is removed and the emphasis is placed on divine happiness rather than the more mechanistic pleasing of God.

Just as Shmuel asserts that God prefers heeding His voice to offerings, the rabbis interpret an apparently physical smell of sacrificial offerings as divine happiness resulting from the heeding of God's will. Furthermore, *Hazal*'s interpretation can be read as not only channeling the concept presented in I Samuel 15:22, but of replaying the very language itself.

כִּשְׁמֹעַ בְּקוֹל יְקֹוָק		בְּעֹלוֹת וּזְבָחִים	הֲחֵפֶץ לַיקֹוָק	**I Sam. 15:22**
שאמרתי ונעשה רצוני	נחת רוח לפני	ריח ניחוח לה		***SifNum* 107**

Both formulations relate to God's happiness (החפץ לה', נחת רוח לפני), asserting that it is achieved less through physical sacrifices (בעלות וזבחים, ריח ניחוח לה') than by heeding God's voice (כשמע בקול ה', שאמרתי ונעשה רצוני). *Hazal* may very well have had the parallel verse in Shmuel in mind as they uttered this formulation. They even sharpen the point: instead of comparing sacrifices to heeding God's word, this midrashic teaching asserts that sacrifices are valuable precisely *because* they represent heeding God's word.

It is fitting that the basis for *Hazal*'s prioritization of heeding God's will rather than emphasizing following specific actions appears in the context of this *Haftarah*. Rabbi Soloveitchik famously interpreted the commandment of *mehiyyat Amalek*, re-applying it to in the modern era to "any nation or group infused with mad hatred that directs its enmity against the community of Israel" (*Kol Dodi Dofek*, ch. 11). This interpretation, too, privileges not the specific commandment in itself (which is essentially inapplicable today) but the broader idea behind it, the concept of following God's will to rid the world of baseless evil. The specific actions one takes to implement God's will might shift from one context to another; we must remain attuned to *retzon Hashem* as we determine how to act in each scenario.

Purim famously betokens the acceptance of the divine will through *kiyyemu ve-kibbelu*. It is only fitting that its associated *Haftarah* similarly emphasizes the acceptance and heeding of the divine will.

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