

Connecting Ritual and Ethical *Mitzvot*

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What a respectful congregation! We just listened so politely to words of Torah which seem totally irrelevant. Nearly two millennia removed from animal sacrifices in the ancient Temple, and not at all eager to recommence them, why should we care how the ashes of the burnt offering were removed from the altar? Yes, tomorrow morning, we will make contemporary meaning of exactly these words. Still, we could be forgiven if we suggested skipping this section of the Torah altogether.

Our American Reform founders articulated their view of these kinds of laws in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885: “We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.”ⁱ

Pioneering Reform rabbis made clear that the dictates of this week’s Torah portion no longer do or should apply. They established a clear hierarchy of ethical *mitzvot*, religious obligations, over ritual matters, distinguishing between ceremonies that do and do not continue to move the spirit.

Our American Reform founders did not claim to be the first to prioritize ethical over ritual *mitzvot*. Instead, they based their perspective on words of the ancient prophets of Israel.

Tomorrow morning, for example, after reading the Torah’s lengthy descriptions of the rules and regulations for offering sacrifices in the ancient Temple, we will offer a Haftarah, which includes these words from Jeremiah: “[W]hen I freed your ancestors from the Land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice. But this is what I commanded them: Do my bidding, that I may be your God and you may be My people; walk only in the way that I enjoin upon you, that it may go well with you.”ⁱⁱ Jeremiah exhorts the people to comport themselves with justice and mercy, which God desires rather than sacrifices.

I marvel at the brilliance and the subtlety of the ancients who paired the Torah and Haftarah readings. For some 2000 years, we have read paired passages, one prescribing the sacrifices in excruciating detail and the other seeming to annul the sacrificial commandments altogether.

We cannot, though, really make the case that the rabbis meant to abolish sacrifice forever. Massive tractates of Talmud offer detail about Temple offerings that puts Leviticus to shame. The rabbis also ordained prayers, recited for millennia, continuing today in all but Reform congregations, calling for reestablishment of the Temple sacrifices.

We can't assume that even Jeremiah really meant that sacrifices should cease. Scholar Matt Lynch points out, "It's important to remember that the prophets were rhetoricians. They used shocking language to arrest listeners' attention...The prophet's critique doesn't reflect God's inherent displeasure with the sacrificial system as such. Instead, the prophets insisted that God hates injustice. When a worshipper robs from the poor, and then uses that lamb, goat, or ox to worship God, God is disgusted. When a worshipper beats their slave to a pulp, and then lifts their hands in prayer, [Adonai] ... will shut the show down."ⁱⁱⁱ

These days, more than a few Jews would seek to reduce Judaism to what they regard as its ethical core. They avoid rituals, even as they celebrate that they are heirs to the great moral tradition of Israel. Certainly, we would all agree that rituals are empty without ethical action. However, Jewish ceremonies can be directly connected to our obligation to serve as God's partners in bringing repair to this broken world.

We would agree with Union for Reform Judaism President Emeritus, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, who proclaimed: "We are committed to social justice as the jewel in the Reform Jewish crown. Yes, now more than ever, we embrace ritual and prayer and ceremony; but like the prophets, we never forget that God is concerned about the everyday, and that the blights of society take precedence over the mysteries of heaven. In these self-indulgent times, too many turn inward; but we know that there can be no Reform Judaism without moral indignation; and we know, too, that a Reform synagogue that does not alleviate the anguish of the suffering is a contradiction in terms."^{iv}

As we fast on Yom Kippur, we enhance that ritual with ethical action, bringing food for the hungry.

On Sukkot, as we welcome guests into the Sukkah, we are mindful of those with no secure or permanent residence, be they homeless Americans or refugees and immigrants seeking asylum here and around the globe.

As we kindle the Chanukah lights, we seek to dispel the darkness that pervades too many lives in our society, facing deprivation because of poverty, grotesque disparities in educational opportunities, continuing segregation, and mass incarceration.

As we celebrated the demise of Haman and his wicked plot on Purim just yesterday, we reminded ourselves of the deadly dangers of antisemitism and recommitted ourselves to combatting it, whatever its source, even as we remind ourselves that Jews are far from the only victims of potentially lethal bigotry. God's children continue to face discrimination or worse because of racism and Islamophobia, because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, here and worldwide.

And when we sit down to our Seder tables next month, we will open our doors, not only to Elijah, but to the promise of a future of freedom which can only be achieved through our efforts as God's hands and hearts in this world.

This week, Rabbi Ben Spratt, told this moving story of how a Purim ritual inspired transformative human interaction: "One of our first grade classes, bedecked in [Purim costumes], were parading down the [Manhattan] block, each carrying paper bags with colorful decoration. When I asked the class what they were up to, one of them called out, 'We're giving *mishloach manot* to people!' I learned that the grade was going around to different local businesses to give the workers Purim gifts. One of the children approached a nearby laundromat. The child handed the laundromat cashier her gift bag and said, 'Thank you for washing our clothes!' At that moment, a laundromat worker stumbled, and laundry fell everywhere. Immediately, the child rushed to help pick up the spilled smocks and sweaters. The small humble [ritual] act of giving a paper bag containing two hamentaschen transformed the moment. A shared act lifted up a little of the world's disarray. A child finally saw the face of a woman she had walked by hundreds of times. The beaming smile of the cashier revealed the power of this acknowledgement."^v

Our sages taught, *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, "One *mitzvah* leads to another,"^{vi} words we shall soon sing. Yes, rituals can be meaningless and irrelevant. And yet, if we will emulate those Upper West Side first graders, Jewish

rituals may lead to ethical action, as God always intended, transforming the world.

Amen.

ⁱ "Declaration of Principles," known as "The Pittsburgh Platform," Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1885.

ⁱⁱ Jeremiah 7:21-24.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matt Lynch, "The Prophetic Critique of Sacrifice," *Theological Miscellany*, August 3, 2017.

^{iv} Rabbi Eric Yoffie, speech to the UAHC (now URJ) Executive Committee, February, 1998.

^v Rabbi Ben Spratt, *D'var Torah* on *Tzav*, accessed on March 21, 2019 at <https://reformjudaism.org/print/24340>.

^{vi} Pirkei Avot 4.2.