



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Vayikra 5773

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March 16, 2013

This week's Dvar Tzedek was originally published in 2010.

Parashat Vayikra catalogues the slicing, pinching, quartering, flaying, scooping, sprinkling and burning that comprised ancient Israel's practice of *korbanot*—sacrifices offered in expiation, celebration or thanksgiving to God. Ritual sacrifice was a thoroughly hands-on affair, with both offeror and priest physically participating in the labor.

Such gritty involvement in the process must have channeled primal drives and instincts from which the cult drew resonance. In significant part, the sacrificial order was styled as a means of feeding God. Offerings consisted of basic foodstuffs—meats, grains, fruits, cakes, oil—that are both the staples and delights of sustenance. All sacrifices were seasoned with salt and emitted a pleasing odor as they were consumed by the sanctuary's Divine fire.

The pleasure and sustenance afforded by the *korban* surely did not accrue to God alone. Generations immemorial of mothers, proud hosts from around the globe and urban soup-kitchen ladlers could all tell it similarly: It is peculiarly gratifying to feed others. It assuages something atavistically generous within us, satiating both eater and provider. The spiritual magnetism of the sacrificial cult surely must have, in part, been wrapped up in the satisfying sense of connectedness that flows from providing for another's sustenance.

Recognizing this may help give insight into our own habits of generosity and the blind-spots that too often render them ineffective. The U.S., as the world's largest food-aid donor, provides the vast bulk of its contributions through in-kind food provision. We make our offerings with sacks of rice, vats of soy and container-loads of corn. Much of this assistance is required by law to have been sourced by U.S. growers and processors and shipped overseas using U.S.-flagged vessels.¹

Our efforts may inspire an innate satisfaction, a gratifying pride in seeing U.S.-stamped sacks distributed to the world's poorest people, but there is a growing consensus that in-kind food aid is not an effective and sustainable means of nourishing the hungry. While in-kind food aid surely is sometimes necessary—for example, in crises in which local food markets have collapsed—it is inordinately slow in arriving and typically wasteful of the money spent. For roughly each dollar spent on food aid, the U.S. spends two dollars to get it to the communities in need.²

Even more critically, in-kind food aid can undermine the neediest regions' long-term ability to grow their own food and build sustainable food economies. Such aid diverts attention and resources from investment in local agriculture and disrupts the ability of local food markets to function effectively. These pitfalls, concludes Oxfam, mean that

¹ Government Accountability Office. *International Food Assistance*, p. 36-38, May 2009. <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-570>

² Hughes, Dana. "US Food Aid Contributing to Africa's Hunger?" *ABC World News*, 29 October 2009. <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/Health/us-food-aid-contributing-africas-hunger/story?id=8939151&page=1>

“while food aid can play a crucial role in saving lives and reducing hunger, it is at best an incomplete response, and at worst can exacerbate food insecurity if it harms [local] farmers’ livelihoods.”³

For these reasons, the major food donors—with the exception of the U.S.—now provide all of their food aid through cash that can be used to purchase food on local and regional markets in areas of need. European donors have been doing so since 1996 and Canada completed its transition from in-kind to cash assistance in 2008.⁴

While the *korbanot* were an expressive site for our primal means of connection, they also reflected aspirations for a just and fair society. The sacrifices were based on each person’s means—a sliding scale from cattle to grain. The text scrupulously gave each level its due, pointedly noting that the humble grain offering was given from the offeror’s “soul,” not simply his or her person. And an exacting emphasis was placed on each *korban’s* ethical provenance—stipulating that it not be procured through theft or even unintentional misappropriation of another’s property.⁵

The *korbanot* thus trained our most basic instincts to a ritual system aspiring to a more just world. These aspirations surely demand that ritual be responsive to the realities—economic, social, political—of the society in which it is practiced. And, to the extent that the ritual becomes out of sync with the ethics of a just society, it is appropriate to interrogate its continued practice. Thus, did the prophet Isaiah famously lambast his wayward generation:

“What need have I of all your sacrifices?” Says the Lord; “I am sated with burnt-offerings of rams, and suet of fatlings, and blood of bulls; and I have no delight in lambs and he-goats.”

Isaiah admonished the people to preoccupy themselves otherwise: “Learn to do good. Devote yourself to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.”⁶

A similar admonition could be levied at our own “sacrifices.” Generous in form, our in-kind food aid imparts stopgap sustenance, but little justice. The globe’s dusty, parched corners are “sated” with these offerings, but, tragically, are still starving.

To learn more about AJWS’s current work to improve the foreign food aid system, visit <http://ajws.org/reversehunger/>.



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³ Oxfam Intl. *Causing Hunger: An Overview of the Food Crisis in Africa*, 24 July 2006. <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/publications/causing-hunger/?searchterm=None>

⁴ *International Food Assistance*, see note 2 at p. 11.

⁵ Rashi on Leviticus 1:2, 1:16, 2:1.

⁶ Isaiah 1:11, 17.

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