

HAFTARAH EXHORTATIONS:

Haftarah Tzav

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Jeremiah 7:21-8:3; 9:22-23

“A Soothing Aroma”

Our Torah portion for this week, *Tzav* (Leviticus 6:1[8]-8:36), continues by giving further instructions and explanations about various sacrificial offerings that the Lord required of Ancient Israel. More elaborate details about the burnt, grain, guilt, and peace offerings are given to the immediate sons of Aaron, who were designated to function as priestly mediators before the Most High. With all of this additional instruction, there are two important aspects of sacrificial offerings that can be reflected upon. First, there is the requirement to keep the sacrificial fires burning continually:

“Fire shall be kept burning continually on the altar; it is not to go out” (Leviticus 6:13).

Secondly, we see the Lord actually enjoying what is referred to in these passages, and others, as a “soothing aroma.” This was to emanate from the smoke of the sacrifice being burned:

“He then put all *these* on the hands of Aaron and on the hands of his sons and presented them as a wave offering before the LORD. Then Moses took them from their hands and offered them up in smoke on the altar with the burnt offering. **They were an ordination offering for a soothing aroma; it was an offering by fire to the LORD.** Moses also took the breast and presented it for a wave offering before the LORD; it was Moses' portion of the ram of ordination, just as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Leviticus 8:27-29).

Long before the establishment of the Levitical priesthood, Noah offered various sacrifices to God, delivered unto Him as a burnt offering. After the waters of the great flood had subsided, the Lord is pleased with the soothing aromatic smell of the offering presented to Him, and He declares that He will never again send such devastation:

“Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. **The LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, ‘I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done.** While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Genesis 8:20-22).

Was it the soothing aroma which caused God to say that He would never send a judgment like the Flood again? If so, is it conceivable to conclude that since the Flood, some percentage of people are in some way offering up something to God that functions as a “soothing aroma”? Could this not be praise and worship offered to the Holy One as people not only recognize Him as a gracious Heavenly Father, but proclaim His mercy, compassion, and grace to the rest of humanity?

Certainly, as one reads the instruction to the Levitical priests to physically worship the Lord through the various sacrificial offerings, it is understood that these physical acts would create a soothing aroma as their smoke ascended to God. Witnesses would be able to watch the smoke arise, and perhaps even smell a pleasing scent of roasting meat, and in their mind's eye could imagine the Holy One of Israel appreciating the effort. Since part of the atonement procedure was to place one's hands on the sacrificial animal, thereby imparting whatever sin upon the substitution, these acts of obedience certainly pleased the Lord. But, when you take a look at the Haftarah passages from Jeremiah we are considering this week, there is a somewhat challenging statement made in Jeremiah 7:21-24. Here, speaking for God, it almost sounds like the Prophet Jeremiah is contradicting the commandments of Leviticus regarding the different burnt offerings:

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh. For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. **But this is what I commanded them, saying, “Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people;**

and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you.” Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in *their own* counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward” (Jeremiah 7:21-24).

The Prophet Jeremiah is not denying what *Tzav* says in Leviticus, but instead asserts that it is God’s preference for His people to obey His voice and walk in the way that is commanded. God’s principal intent for instructing His people was not to just tell them how to sacrifice, even though that is what it seems to have become. As we know from our reading of the history of Israel as seen throughout the Tanach, the people largely did not obey or incline their ears to obey God in good hearts, but rather walked in stubbornness found in evil hearts. It resulted in the great need to offer up sacrifices so that through such experience, the people would learn the lesson to listen and obey the Word of the Lord.

As you read the balance of our Haftarah reading from Jeremiah, you realize that the Ancient Israelites did not often take the instructions from the Lord. Instead, they often follow after the abominations of surrounding pagan nations that influence them. Jeremiah is commanded to point out these deviations in some dramatic ways:

“You shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you; and you shall call to them, but they will not answer you. You shall say to them, ‘This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God or accept correction; truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth. Cut off your hair and cast *it* away, and take up a lamentation on the bare heights; for the LORD has rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath” (Jeremiah 7:27-29).

Not only was Jeremiah to declare these statements and expect nothing in return, but he was to cut off his hair and go to mountain tops to make these proclamations. There was to be no excuse for the people, as they were to be chastised by the Lord for their disobedience. The ultimate degradation would come when those judged by the Lord will have their remains strewn out of their graves and placed before the very sun, moon, and stars that have been worshipped by them—powerless elements of the cosmos that could not help them in life, let alone death:

“‘At that time,’ declares the LORD, ‘they will bring out the bones of the kings of Judah and the bones of its princes, and the bones of the priests and the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem from their graves. **They will spread them out to the sun, the moon and to all the host of heaven, which they have loved and which they have served, and which they have gone after and which they have sought, and which they have worshiped. They will not be gathered or buried; they will be as dung on the face of the ground.** And death will be chosen rather than life by all the remnant that remains of this evil family, that remains in all the places to which I have driven them,’ declares the LORD of hosts” (Jeremiah 8:1-3).

Further insolence toward the Creator is seen when Jeremiah summarizes how the remnant of these Israelites, eventually exiled, would largely choose death over life—not learning from the lessons.

The Sages did not want to end this Haftarah reading on a negative note, and so they fast forward us to Jeremiah 9:23-24, where the emphasis is placed on understanding and knowing the Lord. God wants a people that love Him, obey Him, and walk in His ways so that there will be a perpetual soothing aroma emanating from them. This is the ultimate goal, even if down through history the steps of physical sacrifices are required to achieve it. In Jeremiah’s day, he was called to remind the people of their tendency to even wander away from the sacrificial offerings, to the abomination of pursuing other gods. These two verses summarize what the Lord requires:

“Thus says the LORD, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

God wants His people to know and understand Him. This means that they will appreciate His lovingkindness, His justice, and His righteousness on Earth. They will be a living testimony, declaring to the world about God and His ways. They will be a soothing aroma, constantly offering up praises and worship to the Most High.

The Lord is far more interested in His people understanding and knowing Him, than going through various rituals of offering burnt sacrifices. When Messiah Yeshua was asked about the greatest commandment, He gave a rather significant response:

“One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, ‘What commandment is the foremost of all?’ Yeshua answered, ‘The foremost is, “HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH” [Deuteronomy 6:4-5]. The second is this, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF” [Leviticus 19:18]. There is no other commandment greater than these.’ The scribe said to Him, ‘Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; AND TO LOVE HIM WITH ALL THE HEART AND WITH ALL THE UNDERSTANDING AND WITH ALL THE STRENGTH, AND TO LOVE ONE’S NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF [Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:5], is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ When Yeshua saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions” (Mark 12:28-34).

The scribe who questioned the Lord understood that the commandments regarding love of God and neighbor were far more important than the sacrificial system. In fact, Yeshua commended him by saying that because this was his response, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

By understanding and knowing this, and especially walking in it during one’s life on Earth, it actually gets us closer to the Kingdom of God and its power. As we seek to know Him (Philippians 3:10), we will understand more about and receive His lovingkindness, His justice, and His righteousness. Ultimately, we can each be like the Apostle Paul, giving significant thanks to God because of our relationship to Him through the shed blood of Messiah Yeshua—a thanks rooted in an experience of faith and not just a thought of faith. In so doing, we can be a soothing aroma unto the Father:

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Messiah, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Messiah to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Messiah in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 2:14-17).

We can be a fragrant aroma to those we come in contact with in the world. *But this requires us to live properly.* The fact that we know Yeshua and the power of His resurrection, what He endured for us (Philippians 3:10-11), should empower us to point people to the salvation that is available in Him. It is a blessing to know that our lives can be a soothing aroma, just as burnt sacrifices were once to be! It is our praise and intercession before Him that presently enables His mercy to be manifest toward today’s sinful world. If we can try to emit a fragrant aroma via our testimonies of faith, then others can be prompted to inquire more of God’s goodness that we are demonstrating to them. *And then they can know why we are able to emit such a soothing aroma...*

Until the restoration of all things...

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