

Transforming a Text: Comments on Tzav

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is given each year in memory of Baruch Bokser, z"l.*

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The Problem

In his book, *The Origins of the Seder*,¹ Baruch Bokser presents his understanding of the historical process by which cultic practices centered on the Temple in Jerusalem were transformed into the ritual of a Seder celebrated in each family's home. An article published a few years earlier on the blessings over food is also concerned with, in the phrasing of the subtitle, "Rabbinic transformation of cultic terminology and alternative modes of piety."²

In both cases, the transformations of cultic rituals were completed by the early rabbis. We have inherited cultic rituals, transformed—in both language and meaning—into acts that are suited to a world without the Temple, to our own circumstances. For these rituals, our sages did everything for us; we have to do no work of transformation ourselves.

In the Torah portion of *Tzav* (Leviticus 6:1-8:36), however, the transformation is only partial. The cultic acts of slaughter, the struggles and cries of the terrified animals, the blood and stench have been transformed into texts to be read rather than acts to be performed. But we still read of

¹ Baruch M. Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

² Baruch M. Bokser, "Ma'al and Blessings Over Food: Rabbinic Transformation of Cultic Terminology and Alternative Forms of Piety," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 100/4 (1981), pp. 557-574.

killing animals and splashing their blood on the altar. The rabbinic tradition does not assign these texts any transformed meaning suited to our “alternative mode of piety,” nor has it developed any ritual for home or synagogue that makes symbolic use of a transfigured act of sacrifice, such as the Mass in Christianity.

Every year, then, we are confronted with seemingly endless descriptions of cultic practices that for most of us are at worst abhorrent and at best—such as the presentation of bread and cake to God—absurd. We are then left on our own to make Torah, a meaning, out of them.

Let me try to put the problem as starkly as possible. Leviticus is the third and therefore the central book of the Torah. Our tradition insists, and we accept in our practice, that the Torah is perfect, that every phrase, every word, every detail of semantic construction is to be regarded as capable of teaching us lessons of direct applicability to our lives. If we are to be at all consistent, then we must expect to find in the cultic descriptions of Leviticus, the central book of the Torah, a message of fundamental importance, the central message of the Torah.

Furthermore, if the Torah is a living text for us, then the message of the sacrificial cult must be a contemporary one, and one that we can accept as consistent with rabbinic Judaism as it has developed in the two thousand years since the Temple cult ceased. It should also be a message that does not clash with contemporary science and scholarship and morality; it must be a message we can, with free will, with no compromise, use to guide our lives.

The Nature of the Solution

I will attempt to deal with this problem by applying to the texts in Leviticus the method that the early rabbis used in transforming cultic rituals into the Seder and the blessings over food. As characterized by Baruch Bokser in a wonderful formulation, this method was an “anachronistic process which aims at continuity and cannot acknowledge the existence of change but which is at the same time motivated by a desire to express new meaning” (Origins 92).

In order to examine the formulation more closely I will use the midrashic technique familiar to us from the Haggadah, and break up the Bokser sentence into its components. So, our aim is to propose a transformation of the cultic descriptions in Leviticus which is:

- *an anachronistic process*: That is, not a scholarly exposition of the sacrificial cult, and not even an exposition at all but a process of transformation. The elaborate expositions of the Bronze Age sacrificial cult found in contemporary biblical commentaries, complete with diagrams and even photos of carcasses, are utterly irrelevant to our problem. Such descriptive analysis may be of great interest as historical scholarship, and may give us a deeper sense of the past and so a deeper sense of our tradition. But no speculative understanding of what the slaughter of animals may or may not have meant emotionally and theologically to our ancestors can help us if our desire is for these texts to live in our lives as Torah.
- *which aims at continuity*: The anachronism must produce a sense that we have continued and are still continuing the religious tradition of the sacrificial cult; an anachronism is needed to do this because there is no way a sense of continuity can be created by a vivid and accurate portrayal of the actual scene of slaughter or the mentality that found the slaughter of animals to be an uplifting religious experience.
- *and cannot acknowledge the existence of change*: We must be able to assert that the transformation does not alter anything essential.
- *but which is, in the last of Baruch Bokser’s necessary, and delightfully contradictory, conditions, at the same time motivated by a desire to express new meaning*: We have to find some way of transforming the text in front of us so that it yields an alternative meaning consistent with rabbinic Judaism and contemporary morality. And this transformation must show us why this text is part of the central book of the Torah. The message of the alternative meaning must be more fundamental and more central than any message of Genesis or Exodus.

We must end up with a transformed text that contains the message we are after. And of course the transformation must be done in accordance with rabbinic principles. Finally, the transformed text should help us

understand (by anachronistic reasoning, if necessary) why these texts were left untransformed.

The Solution

I will derive the principles of transformation from two proof-texts. The first comes from the *haftarah* for *Tzav*, which is the prophetic text our tradition pairs with *Tzav* for the purpose of guiding our understanding of it. In the beginning of the *haftarah* (Jeremiah 7:21-8:3 and 9:22-23), Jeremiah says:

Thus said the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: ...I spoke not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices.

The second proof-text is the one commentators assume Jeremiah is referring to—Exodus 19:5—in which, on Mount Sinai, God says to the Children of Israel through Moses:

You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

From these proof-texts and some literary license, I deduce two editorial principles of transformation to be applied to the text: first, we must delete all references to animals and sacrifices and altars, since they were never commanded in the first place. Second, every time the word “priest” occurs we must substitute the word “you” or some equivalent since all of us are to be priests, and so all of us are being addressed.

The first six verses of *Tzav* (Leviticus 6:1-6) concern the burnt-offering, and form a literary unit, as we can see by noting that there is a refrain at the beginning, middle, and end of the unit. Applying these editorial principles to the six verses, we are led to edit, for example, the sentence, “This is the law of the burnt-offering” to read, “This is the law.” And we edit the sentence, “And the priest shall take up the ashes” to read, “You shall take up.” Here are the original six verses of *Tzav*:

- 1 *And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying:*
- 2 *Command Aaron and his sons, saying: This is the law of the burnt offering: it is that which goeth up on its firewood upon the altar all night unto the morning; and the fire shall be kept burning thereby.*
- 3 *And the priest shall put on his linen garment, and his linen breeches shall he put upon his flesh; and he shall take up the ashes whereto the fire hath consumed the burnt offering on the altar, and he shall put them beside the altar.*

- 4 *And he shall put off his garments, and put on other garments, and carry forth the ashes without the camp unto a clean place.*
- 5 *And the fire upon the altar shall be kept burning thereby; it shall not go out; and the priest shall kindle wood on it every morning; and he shall lay the burnt-offering in order upon it, and shall make smoke thereon the fat of the peace-offerings.*
- 6 *Fire shall be kept burning upon the altar continually; it shall not go out.*

And here is the result of the transformation of the same six verses:

- 1 And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying:
- 2 Command all the Children of Israel and their descendants, saying:
This is the law;
and the fire shall be kept burning thereby.
- 3 And you shall put on your garments;
you shall put them on your flesh;
and you shall take up [raise]
and you shall put down [lower].
- 4 And you shall take off your garments
and put on other garments,
and [you shall] carry forth.
- 5 And the fire shall be kept burning thereby;
it shall not go out;
and you shall lay [an object] down,
and you shall make [form; create].
- 6 Fire shall be kept burning continually;
it shall not go out.

The Meaning of the Solution

That’s the transformed text. How are we to understand it? Leave the refrain aside for a moment and consider the rest of the text. It is stripped to its essentials, which turn out to be: putting on clothes and taking them off, and picking up an object and putting it down, and moving an object from one place to another, and making or forming something.

The preoccupation is with basic human actions, and the attitude that we understand from the context is that they are to be regarded as part of

a sacred ritual by which God is worshipped. It is these acts that are the law in this passage, and therefore it is these acts that keep "the fire"—whatever it is—burning.

Furthermore, if we are willing to be willfully anachronistic in order to create a sense of continuity and new meaning while at the same time denying the existence of change, we can assert that, since these were the actions everyone saw the priests performing, they were regarded at that time too as the essence of the Temple ritual.

What is the symbolic significance of "the fire" in the essence of the central book of the Torah? Clearly fire in many passages of the Torah indicates the presence of the divine. But it could also represent the sense of tradition that must burn within us if it is to continue. And since the stress here is on our priestly obligation to keep the fire burning, it is probably better to understand the symbol as primarily having this latter meaning.

And so the transformed message of the central book of the Torah, repeated over and over with slight variations in relation to sacrifices and offerings of one sort or another, is that, if we are to regard ourselves as a nation of priests, as the inheritors of the Priestly tradition, as the inheritors of the sacrificial cult of the Temple, then we must consider the rudimentary human actions specified in descriptions of the Temple cult as part of a sacred ritual.

How are we to reconcile this requirement with rabbinic Judaism? One possibility is to understand it in light of Genesis 1:1:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth...

That is, the basic actions of daily life—lifting an object, lowering an object, putting on clothes, taking off clothes, moving objects from one place to another—are to be considered sacred because they are conducted in a sacred place, namely, the created world.

Another interpretation: The message is to be understood in the light of Genesis 5:1:

*When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God;
male and female He created them, and blessed them...*

Thus, the basic human actions are sacred because they are performed by a person created in the Image, and blessed.

In its anachronistic essence, then, the message of Leviticus is that human action, not thought, is the central category of the Biblical religious

conception. Basic everyday human action, not the grand sweep of our story of origins, is the essential thing. Not the Creation, or the Exodus, not even the story of the revelation on Sinai, but human action is to be the center of our religious concerns.

And isn't this, after all, the content of rabbinic Judaism? The mitzvot and the issues of the Talmud can be seen, perhaps with the assistance of a little willfulness, as a vast elaboration of this fundamental religious conception. That is why Leviticus is the central book in the Torah, and why the stories in Genesis and Exodus are to be regarded as a prelude to it.

Why did the early rabbis leave the descriptions of the sacrificial cult untransformed? Perhaps in order to force us all, in our own ways, every year of our lives, to come to terms with our origins through, in Baruch Bokser's words, an "anachronistic process which aims at continuity but which is at the same time motivated by a desire to express new meaning." Freud himself would have been proud to have come up with that formulation.

And if you were to point out to me that I'd dropped from this quotation the element of refusing to acknowledge the existence of change, I would say: if that's what it takes, then go ahead and deny change to your heart's content. After all, the important thing is that we have a living tradition which continues to give birth to people who transmit it and add to it and keep it alive.

And all those who have taught us something important, something we retain, live in ourselves as an active presence, a personality, a spirit, even if we have never met them, just as I have never met or studied with Baruch Bokser, but have come to know him through his writings. As it is said, and repeated three times, at the beginning of *Tzav*:

the fire on the altar shall be kept burning thereby; it shall not go out.

David Curzon is an Australian living in New York. His most recent publications are *The View from Jacob's Ladder: One Hundred Midrashim* (*The Jewish Publication Society*), a book of poems, *Dovchik* (*Penguin Books, Australia*) and a translation (with Katharine Washburn) of Euripides' play, *The Madness of Heracles*, in Euripides IV (*University of Pennsylvania Press*).