"Healthy" Guilt: Thoughts for Parashat Tsav

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Tsav

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Although the Torah devotes much space to the sacrificial system, a fascinating statement is recorded in the Midrash (Vayikra Rabba 9:7). “Rabbi Pinhas and Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Menahem of Galiya: In the future, all the sacrifices will be canceled, but the thanksgiving sacrifice will not be canceled. All the prayers will be canceled, but the thanksgiving prayer will not be canceled.”

This statement is generally understood as a striking way of expressing the importance of thanksgiving. There will never be a time when thanksgiving is out of date. Thoughtful people will always be grateful for the blessings they enjoy and will want to praise the Almighty’s benevolence.

While this is a fine message, it leads to a question: what about sin offerings? Even in Messianic times people will inevitably sin, so why will sin offerings be canceled? Apparently, these offerings and prayers will be unnecessary because the root motivation for them will have fallen away.

Generally, sin offerings and prayers stem from feelings of guilt. We have sinned and feel that we need atonement in the eyes of God. Even if the trespass was unintended, we feel that it has blemished our soul in some way. Sacrifices and prayers are not needed by the Almighty—but are needed by those who feel contrition for their sins.

Guilt is “healthy” when it is a result of our self-awareness that we’ve done something wrong. It is an impetus for us to mend our ways, to improve ourselves in the future. But guilt can also be—and often is—“unhealthy.” It can sap self-respect. It can make us feel as though we deserve punishment. A guilt-ridden person suffers from feelings of alienation from God; this can lead to attempts to “pacify” God through sacrifices or prayers.

In Messianic times, though, humanity will have matured to the level where the sense of guilt is “healthy,” motivating self-improvement. People will realize that sins are not God’s problem—but their own problem. They will understand that religion that stresses guilt and fear is negative. Religion should be—and ultimately will be—a life adventure based on self-respect and love of God.

According to the Midrash, only thanksgiving offerings will apply in the future. Thanksgiving is a positive virtue that never becomes obsolete. But sin offerings will be canceled. People will still sin—but will have the inner wisdom and strength to improve themselves without need of sin offerings or prayers. It is Messianic to imagine that humanity can live up to this ideal.