

Torah Table Talk

What God Requires of Us: Sacrifices or Compassion?

Parshat Balak

Numbers 22:2 – 25:9 / Micah 5:6 – 6:8



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf
"He was the perfect child"*

Sometime in the eighth century Micah began to prophesy to the Jewish community in Judah. He spoke of the coming destruction of Jerusalem if the people did not reject idolatry and social injustice. In the chapter from his book which we read this Shabbat, Micah puts the people on trial and, speaking on behalf of God, asks the nation what God has done to deserve such a failure of faith. He reminds them of God's past kindnesses: "Remember what Balak, King of Moab, plotted against you and how Balaam, son of Beor, responded to him..." When the nation reacts with regret and asks what they can do to 'approach God,' Micah's answer defines one of the basic themes expressed in the books of prophecy: It is not sacrifice but morality which God asks of us.

The most obvious reason that this passage was chosen as the Haftorah for Parshat Balak is the reference to Balaam and Balak in this Torah portion. But there are more subtle reasons for reading this chapter as well. God calls for the destruction of sorcery and soothsayers in the type of renewal He expects of the people. Michael Fishbane in his commentary points to the parallel in the use of language between Balaam and the prophet: *Mah tov*, "how good are your tents O Israel" and *Mah tov*, "what is good and what does the Lord require of you." The goodness of Israel begins in the goodness of the heart.

Micah 6:6 – 8

With what shall I approach the Lord, do homage to God on high? Shall I approach Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Would the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriads of streams of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for my sins? He has told you, O mortal, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk modestly with your God.

Samuel 15:22 - 23

And Samuel said: Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams for rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is like idolatry and terafim...

Hosea 6:6

I desire kindness rather than sacrifices and knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

Babylonian Talmud Makkot 23b-24a

This statement is part of a longer passage in which each of the prophets further encapsulates the Torah into few and fewer principles. When Micah came, he summed up the six hundred and thirteen commandments in three principles, for he said, "It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: [1] only to do justly, and [2] to love kindness, and [3] to walk modestly with thy God" (Micah 6:8). "To do justly" refers to the maintaining of justice; "to love mercy" refers to the doing of deeds of mercy; and "to walk modestly with thy God" applies even to dowering a bride or providing shrouds for the dead. Now, if in commandments that are customarily not done in private [and thus do not require modesty], the [Torah](#) commands, "Walk modestly with thy God," how much more strongly does this precept apply to commandments that have to be done in private.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, Weekly Commentary

In a deeper vein, he (Micah) espouses the primacy of ethics over ritual. The goal of genuine religion is not to mollify God with escalating numbers of sacrifices culminating in the offering of one's own first-born child. On the contrary, what God has long demanded is "only to do justice and to love kindness and to walk modestly with your God" (6:8). Again, the thrust runs diametrically counter to our penchant for self-absorption. The best way to infuse the world with holiness is by

harnessing the self. As long as ritual is tethered to that aspiration, it can provide us with the discipline to move beyond ourselves.

Rashi Hosea 6:8

To walk modestly with the Lord: The Aramaic translation of Hosea (*Targum Yonatan*) says, “Walk humbly in fear of God.”
Another interpretation: The qualities of human beings are not like those of God. When a person embarrasses another, and then comes to him for forgiveness, the victim will say, “I cannot forgive you until you placate me before such and such a person before whom you humiliated me. God merely requires that we return to Him – (repentance) is between the repent person and God (and no one else).”

Questions to Ponder

1. Why do Micah and the other prophets dismiss the importance of the sacrifices and the other cultic offerings? How do you think the prophets related to the priests in the Temple? Do you think they were antagonistic to one another?
2. Micah speaks about a variety of different types of sacrifices beginning with burnt offerings and concluding with the “fruit of my body.” What point is he trying to make? If God does not desire these offerings why do we bother offering them and why are they included in the Torah?
3. The Talmud says that Micah ‘summed up’ the Torah in three succinct commandments: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with the Lord. If someone claims to follow these three fundamental rules is he/she a good Jew? What about the other 610 commandments in the Torah? What do you think the Talmud means by ‘summed up’?
4. Does ritual observance cause people to become ‘self absorbed’ as Rabbi Ismar Schorsch suggests? If so what is the antidote to this problem?
5. It is easy for us to understand the importance of justice and kindness in the passage from Micah. But what is the significance of the expression “to walk modestly (or humbly) before the Lord? How do Rashi, the Targum, and the Talmud each understand this expression? What is the connection between walking modestly and caring for the bride or making shrouds for the dead?
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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***