

Torah Table Talk
Are Words Enough?
Prayer and Sacrifice in Jewish Life
 Parshat Vayetze
 Genesis 28:10-32:3 / Hosea 12:13 – 14:10



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

The prophet Hosea lived in the middle of the eighth century BCE; he prophesized to the northern kingdom of Israel which he referred as Ephraim. The prophet offers a scathing critique of the northern kingdom for its lack of faith in God. Israel is guilty of worshipping false gods who do not protect the nation from disaster. Having chastised the nation, Hosea calls on the people to return to God. If they are sincere in their repentance God will renew the nation and Israel will not be forced to depend on the political forces of its day for salvation.

In the opening verse of this passage the prophet speaks about Jacob's flight to Aram and the years he served his father in law in order to marry the woman he loved. Michael Fishbane points out that the language of the Parshah recurs throughout the Haftorah: Jacob "served" Laban and "guarded" his sheep – so too must the people of Israel serve God who guarded them during their years in the wilderness.

Hosea 14:2 - 3

Return O Israel to the Lord your God for you have fallen because of your sin. Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him, 'Forgive all guilt and accept what is good; Instead of bulls we will pay (the offerings of) our lips.'

Michael Fishbane

Instead of bulls we will pay: The Hebrew is obscure. Many moderns read: "We will pay the fruit of our lips (i.e.; confess) – understanding parim (bulls) as peri (fruit of) + mem*. The Septuagint (Greek translation of Bible) also reads "fruit" (karpon). Thus prayer substitutes for sacrifice, confession being an offering of contrition. *the Mem is an enclitic particle added to nouns for metrical or other reasons. Without the Mem the word becomes peri which means fruit.

Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86b

R. Isaac said: In the west [the Land of Israel], the sages said in the name of Rabbah bar Mari: Come and see that the conduct of flesh and blood is not at all like the conduct of the Holy One. The conduct of flesh and blood: when a man angers his friend with words, it is questionable whether or not the friend will agree to be pacified by him. And even if you suppose the friend is willing to be pacified, it is questionable whether he will be pacified by mere words or will have to be pacified by compensation. But with the Holy One, there is no question. When a man commits a sin in secret, He is pacified with mere words, as is said, "Take with you words, and return unto the Lord" (Hosea 14:3). More: He even accounts it to him as a good deed, as is said, "And accept that which is good" (Hosea 14:3). Still more: Scripture accounts it for him as though he had offered up bulls, as is said, "So will we render bulls with offerings of our lips" (Hosea 14:3). Lest you suppose that Scripture refers here to obligatory bulls, it is said, "I will love the voluntary offerings [of bulls]" (Hosea 14:5).

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, Shuvah, 19

Who will pay the offering of bulls which we used to sacrifice before you? 'Our lips' (Hosea 14:3) are the prayer that we offer before You.

Tur, Orekh Chaim 98

One should pray one's prayers with the sincerity of a poor person begging. They should be recited slowly so as not to seem like a burden that you want to finish quickly. For if you have prayed properly, it is certain that your prayer will be accepted, for prayer has taken the place of sacrifices, as it is written: Instead of bulls, "we give the offerings of our lips," (Hosea 14) and it is written: "and serve Him with all your heart." (Deuteronomy) Is there such a thing as service of the heart? What is the service of the heart? It is prayer which should be done with the utmost sincerity like offerings in the Temple since improper thoughts render a sacrifice invalid.

Questions for discussion

1. The verse quoted above is the introductory verse of another important Haftorah during the year. Do you know which one it is? Hint – the opening word Return, in Hebrew is *Shuvah*. What connection might there be between reading an important passage that deals with repentance and the story of Jacob in today's Torah portion?
2. When the prophet says "Say to Him" he appears to be telling the people to make a statement to God. What are the people asking God to do? What are the three elements of their request in this statement? What connection might these three requests have to the High Holy Day prayer the Unetneh Tokef: "Repentance, prayer, and good deeds can avert the severity of the decree?"
3. The Midrash suggests that when we transgress against God, God is willing to accept our words as an offering of forgiveness. This is unlike another person who would likely demand some type of recompense. Why is God will to accept our words as an offering of forgiveness? What is the difference between obligatory offerings vs free will offerings according to this passage?
4. In what way are our lips or our words an offering to God?
5. Rabbi Asher in the Tur, one of the most important codes of law, talks about sincere and heartfelt prayer. How do you know when your prayers are really sincere and effective? What does it mean to say that a prayer is "affective?" Is it possible to have affective prayer which is not answered? When do you find it easiest to offer such heartfelt prayers? Do you find it difficult or easy to pray when you attend services in synagogue? How can we create an atmosphere in synagogue which will foster and nurture sincere and heart felt prayer?

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*