

## A Brief Note on Two Separate Responses

*Parsha Tzav* [1] continues the detailed instructions for the various *korbanot* mentioned in the Torah, with the emphasis on the role of the *Kohanim* in the sacrificial ritual. One important aspect of some of the sacrificial rites was the setting aside of a portion of the sacrifice for the priests, who because they were not to be allotted any land, were forced to rely on a designated portion from the various sacrifices, be it animal, grain or fruit, for their physical sustenance.

The sacrificial rite was the focus of the Israelites religious practices until 70 C.E., when the Roman army destroyed the Temple precinct. Thereafter, with a few minor exceptions, prayer and study became the only method of religious expression, and the sacrificial rite was no longer germane to the daily Jewish life. Surprisingly, this radical change seemed to have been readily accepted, owing no doubt to the large Diaspora communities which had long been removed from the daily ritual of the Temple and the ritual sacrifice.

*Sforno* suggested that the Israelites needed the physical structure of the *Mishkan* to make them comfortable when worshipping God. The notion of a sacred sanctuary and a sacred rite were common to the peoples of the ancient Near and Middle East, and would necessarily have been familiar to the Israelites, if only from their Egyptian neighbours. The *Rambam* (in his *Guide for the Perplexed*) shared a similar viewpoint. He believed that the entire sacrificial ritual was instituted solely for the purpose of diverting the Israelites from the idolatrous rituals prevalent at the time. [2]

There is an interesting story told in the *Talmud* that although probably apocryphal, sheds some light on Israel's sudden abandonment of the entire Order of ritual sacrifice. The story was told of *Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai*, one of the preeminent scholars of his age and one of the age's most dominating personalities. He had himself smuggled out of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. at the height of the Roman siege. Then, he had occasion to meet with the Roman commander, *Vespasian*. Briefly, the Rabbi was able to amaze the Roman commander with his clairvoyance and nimble tongue and was rewarded him with an intriguing proposal from *Vespasian*: "ask me now for something I can give you". *Rabban Yochanan* responded, with probably the most famous and enduring epithet of Jewish history: "give me the town of *Yavneh* and its scholars". He also asked *Vespasian* for the family of *Rabban Gamliel*, a descendant of the House of David and a doctor to treat *Rabbi Tzaddok*, the spiritual inspiration for the surviving Jewish population of Jerusalem.

The immediate question is why *Rabban Yochanan* didn't ask for the safety of Jerusalem, the preservation of the Temple and the protection of the *Kohanim*. Instead, he seemed to have preferred his personal ideology, and sought the preservation of what he felt to be the most valuable reserve for the hope of a continued Jewish experience, the Torah and Torah scholarship. *Rabban Yochanan's* actions were controversial and early scholars naturally questioned his decision not to seek peace for Jerusalem. Later commentators were more understanding, and suggested that his decision made sense - any hope to preserve Jerusalem had long ago evaporated, so there was no use asking for that which could no longer be given.

At its core, *Rabban Yochanan's* decision represented a conscious decision to discard the remaining framework of the Israelite ritual, and focus on living the daily life of a Jew, beholden to the values and principles of the Torah. It was not an expedient determination; rather it demonstrated an awareness of the challenges then being faced by the descendants of the Children of Israel; not one of idols or alien practices, but rather the challenges presented by new ideas and rapidly expanding knowledge.

*Rabban Yochanan* is an example of an inspired leader who did not hesitate to make a decision that he thought necessary to ensure the survival of his people. With the benefit of hindsight, this decision stands at the vanguard of events that have contributed to Jewish continuity, against all odds.

### ***Parsha Tzav, Shabbath April 8, 2006***

1. literally, *command*
2. The *Ramban* sharply criticized and denounced the *Rambam's* approach. He maintained that the institution of *korbanot* was meant to impress upon a person the gravity of his sins; that he deserved to be sacrificed upon an altar to God in place of this animal. It had nothing to do with the corresponding practices of the idolatrous peoples that lived at that time.
3. Tractate *Gittin* 56a