

Parashah Seventy-Nine

Leviticus 6:1–12 [5:20–6:4]; Jeremiah 7:21-28; 1Peter 2:21-25

notes by Tim Hegg

Defrauding & the Guilty Conscience

The section that comprises our text this Shabbat deals with the general issue of defrauding someone within the community, “dealing deceitfully with his fellow” (וְכַחַשׁ בְּעֵמִיתוֹ), literally “lies against his neighbor.” The word עֵמִית (‘*amit*) is based upon the word עַם (‘*am*) meaning “people,” “fellow citizen,” “a member of one’s community.” Thus, the transgression that is here described is one of inter-community relationship. Further, this sin is, by its very nature, not one which can be resolved in the normal way, by two or three witnesses, since the situation involves private interaction between individuals, and there are no witnesses. If the one decides in his heart to continue to lie, his neighbor is defrauded without recourse.

But what our text deals with is the situation where someone who has lied and therefore defrauded his neighbor is so burdened by his guilty conscience that he confesses his sin and is willing to make restitution. He is able to clear himself of the guilt by proper restitution, after which he is able to bring a guilt offering and clear his conscience before HaShem.

We should note how our section begins: “When a person sins and commits a trespass against Adonai by dealing deceitfully with his neighbor....” Here is the core issue: defrauding my neighbor is first, and perhaps foremost, a sin against God. It is easy to believe that hidden sins which cannot be exposed by anyone else, but which in fact have hurt others, can be privately repented of, and a personal resolve to reform one’s actions is sufficient. But this is not God’s perspective. When we have lied with regard to someone else, or failed to maintain our promises, or possessed something that belongs to them, or acted as a witness to something we know to be false—all of these require open confession and restitution if the matter is to be resolved as God intends it to be. What is more, in the text before us today, even private restitution to the individual is not enough. Since one presumably took an oath involving God as witness, one’s guilt before Him could only be expunged through bringing a guilt offering (אֲשָׁם, ‘*asham*) and presenting it to Adonai. Sin in this venue is both a sin against one’s neighbor and against God.

But how does this square with the Torah instructions that one who swears falsely in God’s Name would not be exonerated by God (Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11)? The Mishnah (m.*Bava Metzia* 6) explains that the forgiveness allowed in this text applied only when the offender came forward himself, on his own initiative, and confessed his sin. This is made explicit in Numbers 5:5-6. If, on the other hand, evidence appeared after the fact that proved the person guilty, but they had not come forward themselves previously, they would then face the punishment of God as well as other matters of restitution. In such cases the Torah is silent regarding a guilt offering.

Here, then, is a wonderful truth: repentance is the road to forgiveness, not only from one’s neighbor, but also from God. The unrepentant sinner cannot expect to find God’s grace, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6; 1Peter 5:5, cf. Proverbs 3:34 where the actual Hebrew yields “Though He scoffs at the scoffers, Yet He gives grace to the meek.”). In fact, lack of repentance marks unbelief. One who has the Spirit of God will eventually seek repentance, though of course we dare not put a time-frame on this. Yet, in the midst of rebellion, no one, least of all the one who refuses to turn from his sin, can be assured of God’s grace. Grace cannot be demanded—it is a gift of the Sovereign Lord. Someone who confesses to be a covenant

member and thus to have received the gracious offer of God's blessing, but continues in sin and an unrepentant heart, is taking God's grace for granted. Such a scenario calls into question whether that person has honestly understood God's grace in the first place.

But what is it that makes the difference between someone who continually tries to hide his sin (after all, in the scenarios envisioned in our text today, the sin cannot be proven by witnesses) and someone who willingly confesses and takes measures to rectify his wrong? The text simply says "when he sins and becomes guilty..." (Heb v. 23, Eng v. 4). Again, this scenario apparently does not envision additional witnesses coming after the fact, but of the guilty party confessing his own sin. Thus, the phrase "and becomes guilty" must speak of something that goes on within that individual himself—a kind of "soul" work that brings him both to the admission of his guilt and his willingness to go through the humbling process of making his guilt public through the process of restoration (including repayment of damages) to the other party. Such an inner work upon the soul is the result of God's Spirit, convicting, grieving, and urging the child of God to conform to His ways. Here again, the Torah takes the matter to the level of one's soul—to an explanation of what it means to love God with all of one's heart, soul, and might.

How does this inward work of confession and repentance happen? And why would it happen in one case, and not in another? The only answer is that God sovereignly, graciously convicts the soul toward repentance on the one hand, or allows the heart to be hardened on the other. Only the grace of God can break through the stubborn wall of bitterness which unresolved sin creates. Do not the Scriptures teach us that no one seeks God, that all have turned aside, and there is no one righteous, not even one (Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-4; 5:9; 140:3, cp. Romans 3:10-18)? Then if a sinner turns from his sin and seeks forgiveness, both of God and man, the initiating force must come from God. This highlights the fact that repentance is a gift of God's grace, not something that the individual manufactures. The Apostles speak of repentance as "granted" (given) by God:

He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. (Acts 5:31)

with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, (2Tim. 2:25)

Sin and rebellion are not matters to be trifled. One should not presume on God's goodness. His grace cannot be demanded, else it ceases being grace.

How exactly are the sins categorized in our Shabbat passage? The over arching sin is that of "deceit": "...a trespass against the Lord by dealing deceitfully with his neighbor...." How is "deceit" (כִּחְשׁ) defined? Note that it is paralleled by lying (שָׁקַר) and swearing falsely (גִּשְׁבַּע עַל-שָׁקַר). Deceit in this context is either hiding the truth when required by the judges or community to speak it for the sake of justice, or speaking a falsehood by which a person is defrauded. Thus, deceit can be a matter of silence when one's words would bring justice, and/or a matter of speaking falsehood that causes one's neighbor to sustain a material loss.

Our text gives us examples or categories in which this sin is most likely to occur. The first is a matter of a deposit or pledge. This is a situation where someone gave another person something for safe keeping, or an article of value (including money) is given as pledge for future payment but when payment is made that pledge is denied (meaning it is not reckoned or returned). Modern examples would be deceitful landlords who refuse to return cleaning deposits on rentals when, in

fact, the rental contract has been fulfilled (i.e., the rental was left clean according to contract). The second matter listed is “robbery,” by which we should most likely understand (because of the context) not a breaking and entering to steal, but a conscious attempt to take something from someone else with intent to keep it for oneself. (This differentiates it from the scenario listed below of finding something that belongs to someone else and then claiming ownership of the item). A modern day scenario would be false or deceitful advertising, such as an offer to sell goods or services for a certain amount, but when the transaction is completed, there are “hidden fees.” The third item listed is defrauding one’s neighbor, by which is meant the conscious refusal to pay to someone what one knows he owes. This can occur when buyer and seller agree on a price, but later the seller feels the item was overpriced and therefore withholds part of the agreed upon amount. The fourth item listed involves failure to return something that one knows belongs to someone else, which he has found or in some other way has obtained through means other than overt theft. Rather than returning it to its rightful owner, he lies about the object and claims that it is actually his. In each of these, the sin of covetousness is the root, which leads to swearing falsely by God’s Name before the judges. Once again, the sin of covetousness may be seen as the bitter fountain from which springs many more sins. In a parallel thought, Paul teaches us that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10) and the author of Hebrews writes: “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you” (Heb. 13:5, quoting either Deut. 31:6, 8 or Josh 1:5). The point of the quote is that God’s abiding presence affirms His covenant faithfulness, and if God remains faithful to His covenant word, then those within the covenant are likewise assured of His care and blessings.

Our text goes on to prescribe the necessary actions for moving from the status of “guilty” to that of “innocent.” This process involves restitution to the one who has been defrauded, and a guilt offering as an act of contrition toward HaShem. The result as noted in our text is wonderful! “and he shall be forgiven for whatever he may have done to draw blame by it” (6:7, [H 5:26]). Though at first the requirements seem so humbling (admitting I lied, admitting I stole, admitting I succumbed to covetousness, seeking forgiveness of my neighbor, making public confession to the community through offering a sacrifice) and therefore so difficult, the results are surely worth the effort: to be forgiven, to be restored, to be given a clear conscience, to be made whole again.

The order of the restoration of the guilty is instructive: first he must make restitution to the person who has been defrauded, and only then is he allowed to bring his guilt offering in order to be restored to God. Words are cheap without concomitant actions. It is hypocritical to seek forgiveness from God before one has proven repentance by making restitution to his neighbor. Yeshua teaches this same principle:

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Matt 5:23–24)

The words “has something against you” surely refer to the scenario suggested in our Torah text: someone has a rightful claim against you that you are unwilling to acknowledge but you know to be true. Thus we learn that restitution of the guilty is a two-sided event: not only must the guilty be willing to make restitution to the one who has been defrauded, but the one who has been defrauded

must also be willing to receive the restitution and consider the matter cleared. Both are required for there to be a healing of the breach which a defrauding act creates.

The words of Yeshua show us why the order of these paragraphs in Leviticus 6 is important. First comes the instructions for seeking forgiveness and restoration of the guilty (vv. 1–7), and then the instructions for the whole burnt offering (vv. 8–12). The whole burnt offering is given solely as worship to HaShem—it is not for expiation of sin, nor for cleansing of guilt. It is purely and wholly an expression of praise to the Almighty. The lesson we may derive from the order of our *parashah* is that genuine worship to God requires a cleansed heart. This is the symbolic significance of hand washing. Pouring water over the hands is only a symbolic reminder that if we desire to offer genuine praise and worship to God, we must first have our own hearts purified by His forgiveness. When Paul wrote that he desired men everywhere to raise “holy hands” (1Tim 3:8), he has this same idea in mind. “Holy hands” are a metaphor of a life that is cleansed and made fit for entrance into the *sanctum* of worship.

The scenario spoken of by Yeshua in Matthew 5 envisions someone coming to present his offering, terminology which suggests a freewill offering, not a required sacrifice. These freewill offerings were given as expressions of praise and gratitude to God for His gracious provision in one’s life. But according to Yeshua, it is hypocritical to pretend to praise God for His grace while retaining an unwillingness to reconcile with a brother who has a legitimate claim against you. If we are unwilling to offer grace to our brother, we are hypocritical to seek God’s favor: “... forgive us our sins even as (in the same way that) we forgive those who sin against us” (Matt 6:12). When we give public expressions of how much we appreciate God’s grace, we are acting hypocritically if we have failed to demonstrate grace toward our brother: “leave the offering, go, be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your offering.”

As our *parashah* moves to describe the whole burnt offering (הֹלֶֿחַ, *olah*), it is important for us to see the primary purpose of this offering. The whole burnt offering expresses a complete and full praise to God. It is a symbolic demonstration of loving God with one’s entire heart, soul, and might. Thus, the sacrifice is burnt up in its entirety. It is left on the altar over night to assure that it is entirely consumed. The fire is to be kept burning continually to assure the full consumption of the sacrifice. The priest dresses in his linen clothes to symbolize the necessity of purity in connection with the offering of praise. Even the ashes, the remains of the whole burnt offering, must be dealt with carefully, and with utmost sanctity. They are to be gathered and taken to a clean place outside of the camp. In every way, every aspect of the whole burnt offering is given to God and to God alone. Here we discover another important aspect of worship. While our relationship with one another impacts our ability to worship, in the final analysis worship is focused entirely upon God. We do not engage in acts of worship so that others will see. Or to put it another way: our entire focus in worship is God alone. Our concern is His approval, not the applause of men. It was this very issue that Yeshua confronted when He rebuked some of the religious leaders of His day. When they wore *tzitzit* and *tefillin*, or when they prayed or engaged in doing other *mitzvot*, they did so in order that they might be seen by men (Matt 6:5; 23:5ff). They had forgotten the primary lesson of the *olah*. Worship is for God, not for the praise of men.

This is the burden of our *haftarah* portion (Jeremiah 7:21-28). The point the prophet is making to wayward Israel is that their expressions of worship in their whole burnt offerings are not received. They should add them to their other sacrifices, the one’s of which they eat, because in reality they are bringing their whole burnt offerings with themselves in mind, not as an expression

of selfless gratitude and praise to God. They were bringing their whole burnt offerings with the attitude: “what do I get out of this?” And on what grounds can the prophet make such a claim? After all, who can judge the motives for bringing praise to God? The basis for such a judgment are the actions of the people:

Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward. (Jer 7:24)

Disobedience to God’s commands and an unwillingness to seek forgiveness betray a heart of self-centeredness and cannot be reconciled with attempts to bring Him worship and adoration. One who worships God in spirit must also worship Him in truth (John 4:24). Both elements are required for acceptable worship, and both elements are amply symbolized in the whole burnt offering.

In the end, once again our text points us to Yeshua—His life and His sacrificial death. Our Apostolic portion combines these two: His life is characterized as righteous (without sin), amplified by the phrase “nor was deceit found in His mouth” (a quote from Isaiah 53:9). This is the sin dealt with in our Torah portion: defrauding one’s neighbor through deceit. It is insightful to note the parallel use of this phrase in Isaiah. At the beginning of his prophecy, he details the vision he had when he was brought into the very presence of God, into the inner *sanctum* of the Temple (6:1–7). He sees God “high and lifted up” with the train of His robe filling the Temple. Then he sees the heavenly host praising God and proclaiming: *kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Adonai Tzevaot, m’elo kol ha’aretz chevodo*. “Holy, holy, holy is Adonai of Hosts! The whole land is filled with His glory!” The Temple shook and the smoke of the incense filled the place. But instead of rising in exalted worship at such a glorious picture, the prophet encounters death: “Woe is me, for I am ruined (literally, “destroyed”)! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.” The prophet’s own sinful condition is summed up in the phrase “a man of unclean lips.”

Like book ends that hold Isaiah’s prophecy, his description of the suffering Messiah in chapter 53 gives the opposite description:

His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth. (Is 53:9)

In utilizing the same motif, Isaiah contrasts himself (a man of unclean lips) with the spotless, sinless Messiah in whose mouth was no deceit. And this answers to the remedy for Isaiah’s condition in his vision. A Seraph takes a coal from the altar, and touches it to Isaiah’s lips. Here is the cleansing for Isaiah, and for us! Our sin is overcome by the payment of a sacrifice, through which we are made clean, the sacrifice of a Yeshua:

knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Messiah. (1Pet 1:18–19)

Once again, the Scriptures speak a unified message in regard to God’s remedy for sin. Not only does the written Torah warn us away from the sin of deceiving our neighbor, and teaches us how to make restitution when we commit this sin, but the Living Torah walks before us as an example of this teaching. In all of His dealings with others, He was truthful and honest, motivated not by self-interests nor covetousness, but by a pure heart to serve His Father. While we all fall short of

the perfect obedience demonstrated by our Messiah, it is nonetheless our goal to be like Him, and this means pursuing the high mark of righteousness exemplified in His life.

Moreover, Yeshua's death is foreshadowed by the sacrifices of the Tabernacle and Temple. He is the guilt offering, the peace offering, the thank offering, and the whole burnt offering all in one. As we focus on the whole burnt offering in our *parashah*, we should be reminded that in Yeshua's death He was in every way fully and completely given over to His Father. We must strive to do likewise in our lives of worship before Him.