

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

The Crowd Cheered When I Refuted the Missionary



One year, I stood in front of the Jews for Judaism booth at a Jewish community's Celebrate Israel Festival.

As I answered people's questions, I was interrupted by two missionaries who had crashed the event. They challenged my beliefs and said I was going to hell unless I accept Jesus as my savior.

"No, thank you," I told them, "I pray directly to God and don't need an intermediary." Their response did not surprise me. They repeated the familiar Christian accusation that Judaism does not provide forgiveness since we no longer have a Temple and sacrifices.

They brought support for their belief by pointing to Leviticus 17:11, which they claimed said, "*Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness [atonement] for sin.*"

By now, a crowd of thirty people had surrounded me and was pushing forward to hear my response. I emphatically declared that missionaries distorted this passage and fabricated a new quote. Although Leviticus 17:11 does state, "*Blood makes atonement,*" it does not say blood is the ONLY way to receive atonement.

This point is obvious since the Bible mentions numerous ways to achieve atonement without blood. For example, atonement could be achieved by giving charity (Exodus 30:16), by offering incense (Numbers 16:47), and by a wave-offering (Numbers 8:21).

Furthermore, even when there was a Temple, not every sin required a sacrifice. For sins committed intentionally, remorse and repentance were sufficient to achieve forgiveness. A sacrifice was only required if a person committed certain serious transgressions only if they were done unintentionally, as it says, "*The person who sins unintentionally*" (Leviticus 4:20).

I told them, "I pray directly to God and don't need an intermediary."

If intentional sins do not require a sacrifice, one might conclude that unintentional sins are, even more so, exempt from sacrifice.

However, this line of thinking is why a sacrifice was required for unintentional sins since those who sin unintentionally might mistakenly think they didn't do anything wrong because it "was only an accident." Therefore, the Torah required sacrifices for accidental sins because the process of offering a sacrifice served to arouse feelings of remorse and repentance.

I also explained to the missionaries that after the Temple was destroyed, we can offer our sincere prayers in place of sacrifices, as it says, "*Take words and return to the Lord....offer your lips in place of sacrifices*" (Hosea 14:2).

One missionary was not satisfied with my response and demanded that I provide better proof that words and prayer can achieve forgiveness.

I immediately recalled a verse in this week's Torah portion, *Shelach* (Numbers 13:1–15:41), which describes God's anger when the Jews accepted a slanderous negative report about their ability to conquer the Land of Israel. Moses prayed to God and asked for forgiveness, as it says, "*Forgive the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness*" (Numbers 14:19). In response, God relented and said, "*I have forgiven them according to your words*" (Numbers 14:20).

This passage is undeniable proof that words of prayer achieved forgiveness!

Upon hearing my response the missionary's jaw dropped.

Upon hearing my refutation the missionary's jaw dropped, and there was 30 seconds of silence. Although he was speechless, the crowd then let out a loud cheer.

Addressing the crowd, I stressed that in recognition of the power of prayer in obtaining forgiveness, Jews recite the verse, "*I have forgiven them according to your words,*" numerous times on Yom Kippur—the day of forgiveness and the holiest day of the year.

May this Shabbos provide many opportunities to turn to God with our prayers, and may they be answered with blessings of good health, spiritual growth, and success in all of our endeavors.

Shabbat Shalom,

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