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Why God Asked for Animal Sacrifices

Smoke rises from the altar in Jerusalem. A farmer stands before it, his prized bull now ascending in flames. To our modern sensibilities, this scene from the ancient Temple is jarring, even disturbing. Why would a loving God command such a barbaric practice? And with two millennia having passed since the last sacrifice, what could these laws possibly teach us today?

The answer begins with a subtle nuance in the text of this week's Torah portion. The Torah introduces the sacrifices with the words, "When a man from among you will bring a sacrifice to God…" Or, at least that's how it's commonly translated. The verse actually reads "When a man will bring **from you** a sacrifice to God…"[1] The word "*mikem*" (from you) is conspicuously out of place. From this misplaced word, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the author of the Tanya, derives a profound truth: when you bring an offering, you are meant to offer your very self - "*mikem*" (from you).

What does it mean to offer oneself? On a simple level, it means sacrificing one's physical resources. In Temple times, a cow held similar value and utility as our cars today. Imagine donating your car to a worthy cause - that's a personal sacrifice that demonstrates true devotion. On a deeper level, as the Ramban teaches, one who offers a sacrifice must feel as though they themselves are being offered on the altar.

But why would God want us to sacrifice ourselves, even metaphorically?

Elevation, Not Elimination

In the Tanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman teaches that a person is born with two aspects to their soul - the animal soul (*Nefesh HaBehamis*) and the Godly soul (*Nefesh Elokis*). Our animal soul pulls us towards physical pleasures and self-preservation, while our Godly soul yearns for spirituality and transcendence. Through sacrifice, we're taught to surrender our lower nature to reach spiritual

heights. The message seems clear: transcend the physical to connect with the divine.

If that's true, we might expect Judaism to embrace asceticism - a life of spiritual seclusion and physical denial. Yet walk into any Orthodox community and you'll discover Rabbis surrounded by large families, communities gathering for lavish festive meals, and wedding celebrations with seven days of singing and dancing.

This is the uniquely Jewish approach to spirituality - not rejecting the physical world, but sanctifying it. To understand how this works, we need to look deeper into the meaning of the Hebrew word for sacrifice - *'korbon*.' The word shares its root with *'kiruv'* (to bring close) and *'krovim'* (relatives), revealing the true purpose of sacrifice: not to destroy the physical, but to bring it closer to the divine. Through sacrifice, an animal, representing the physical world, becomes the very means by which we connect to the spiritual. We see this in the sacrifices themselves - most were partially eaten by the priests or the ones bringing the offering, transforming a physical act into a sacred connection.

An Animal's Greatest Honor

You might still be wondering about the animal's fate in all of this. Isn't it unfair, even cruel, to sacrifice an innocent creature for our spiritual elevation? To answer this question, let me present you with a choice: If you were an animal, how would you want to live your life? Consider the possibilities:

1. You could live and die in nature, sustaining the ecosystem but touching nothing beyond.
2. You could live near mankind and, on rare occasion, inspire thoughtful humans through your beauty.
3. You could become food, fueling human activities.
4. Or - in your highest form - you could directly facilitate the connection between humanity and God, i.e. become a sacrifice.

Isn’t the choice obvious? Tradition tells us that in Temple times, animals would actually line up for sacrifice. Just as a soldier willingly gives his life for a noble cause, these animals participated in something far greater than mere survival. They became living bridges between heaven and earth.

Modern Day Sacrifice

Today, we don't have a temple or an altar, but we do have lives we can dedicate to doing good and building God's world. We don't have cows, goats, and sheep, but we have time, wealth, and skills waiting to be offered to fulfill our life's mission and connect heaven and earth.

This week, examine one area of your life - perhaps your morning routine, your professional skills, or even how you spend your free time. Ask yourself: How could this resource serve something higher? Then make one concrete change to elevate that aspect of your life.

May our daily choices become worthy offerings, elevating both ourselves and the world around us.

Shabbat Shalom,
Avraham

Featured Image: by Alex Levin

1. Leviticus 1:2 - אָדָם כִּי־יַקְרִיב מִכֶּם קָרְבָּן לַה' מִן־הַבְּהֵמָה מִן־הַבָּקָר וּמִן־הַצֹּאן תַּקְרִיבוּ אֶת־קָרְבַּנְכֶם

Shaken From the Dream

One of the offerings mentioned in this week's portion is the *chatat*, which is brought when a person inadvertently commits a transgression worthy of the death penalty. For example, a man accidentally sleeps with his sister.

The obvious question one must ask, as with all cases of *chatat*, is how could one possibly do this by accident? Well, he could forget that something like this is not allowed. Or he could think that he is actually sleeping with someone else. But whatever way you cut it, the bottom line is that this represents an incredible level of negligence over here. In order to do something like this by accident, a person must be living in some kind of amoral dream world.

So the Torah gives something to bang him over the head and wake him up. He takes a cow to the Temple in Jerusalem. He watches as it is killed, chopped up, and burnt to ashes on the altar. He sees very bluntly and vividly just how fragile life is. And hopefully the experience will shake him out of his moral apathy. Hopefully he will take to heart that the day is short, there is much to accomplish in this world, and he can't afford to dream his way through life.

As with any Jewish ritual, it only works as well as the person experiencing it allows it. If he sleeps through his chatat, as he is doing through the rest of his life, it will have no effect on him whatsoever. Torah is not a magic formula - i.e. do the ritual and it has the spiritual effect. Torah merely puts a person in an environment in which he can wake up to the value of life should he choose to do so. But the choice always remains his.

As a final point, I've heard it said that the concept of offerings is a tad barbaric, maybe. But by the same token, slaughtering an animal and stuffing its meat down one's throat sounds no less barbaric. Why is it okay to kill an animal in order to walk on its hide, but not okay to kill an animal in order to wake oneself up to the meaning of life? I know which one seems more civilized to me.

aish

Humility of Moses

A wonderful passage in the Talmud describes the greatness of Sages of previous generations. In poetic prose, the Talmud states: "The death of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa saw the end of men of action. The death of Rebbe Yossi Katanta saw the end to righteousness. When Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai passed away, the glory of wisdom was no more. When Rebbe [Judah the Prince] died, humility and the fear of sin ceased."

The Talmud continues with a surprising comment by Rabbi Yosef. He challenged the statement that humility had disappeared, saying: **"But I am still here!"**

This comment is difficult to understand. How can Rabbi Yosef claim to be humble - while at the same time proclaim his own humility?!

At first glance, while Rabbi Yosef's statement might appear as the opposite of humility, this is not the case. Because "humility" is not defined as a poor self-image. Judaism says that humility is a **clear, objective understanding of exactly who you are.** The truly humble person recognizes his strengths and weaknesses relative to himself, to others, and to G-d. He entertains no false notions about his place in the scheme of things.

Seeing oneself in an unfairly low light is a problem of **"false humility."** One popular story tells of a yeshiva dean who reprimanded a student for walking around with an air of humility. "You're not so big that you can act so small," the rabbi told him.

Beyond this, false humility can even be dangerous. If one views himself unfavorably, he **might fail to take necessary action** when it is called for. Rebbe Nachman of Breslav, a great Chassidic rebbe, used to say that the mistake of the righteous is that they see themselves in too small a light - and thus fail to do all they otherwise could to bring about the redemption.

What is the Torah's primary description of Moses, the greatest prophet of all time? He was **"the most humble of all people."** (see Numbers 12:3)

It is precisely due to this quality that Moses was chosen as the transmitter of G-d's Torah.As someone **dedicated to truth and untouched by the self-delusions** that blind others, Moses knew his place - and as such rightfully deserved to deliver G-d's truth to the world.

At the same time, Moses was keenly aware that despite one's position, a person must be cautious in dealing with others. Over and over again - despite an awareness of his own relative greatness - Moses shows himself to be of **lowly spirit when interacting with others.**

A beautiful example is found in this week's Torah portion, which begins by describing G-d's call to Moses from within the Tabernacle Sanctuary. As Rashi explains, the word used to describe G-d's calling out to Moses - **"vayikra"** - attests to a

very intimate contact. For while G-d openly "speaks" to very few, those He "calls out" to is even rarer.

Curiously, the word "vayikra" is written in Torah scrolls with a small letter Aleph. If we would disregard the small Aleph, the word would read **"vayikar"** - a word associated with a **"chance encounter"** - i.e. a much lower level of intimacy. The Midrash says this small Aleph was due to a scribal modification by Moses. Uncomfortable with the word "vayikra" - a statement which proclaimed his preciousness in G-d's eyes, Moses sought to downplay this in a way that did not compromise the meaning of the original text, yet made clear to others that he was still a man of lowly spirit.

Moses epitomized the heights of humility - because while fully aware of his own greatness, he was **careful not to flaunt it** in the face of others.

Mistakes Were Made

In their book *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*, Drs. Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson explain the psychology behind why many of us have difficulty admitting mistakes. They describe the various tricks our brains use to defend our egos from noticing our shortcomings, including cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, naïve-realism, and memory distortions. The basic gist behind all of these tricks is that our mind “yearns for consonance and rejects information that questions our beliefs, decisions, or preferences.”

Yet, the thrust of Tavris and Aronsons’s argument is that we could go a long way to compensate for these cognitive errors by just being aware that they exist and are in danger of deluding reality.

The Torah describes four different inadvertent sins that require different sacrificial atonements, depending on who sinned: the High Priest, the court, the leader, or a regular individual. While for the High Priest, the court, and the individual, the Torah frames the sacrifices based on the condition of “if” they sin (“*im*”), when it comes to the leader, the verse uses the word “*asher*” – “*when* the leader sins.” Commentators are bothered by the assumption. Why do we assume the inevitably of the leader’s sin?

Ibn Ezra circumvents the problem by arguing that the word “*asher*” is synonymous with the word “*im*” and also means “if,” not “when.” Others take the change in wording more seriously and suggest that there is a fundamental difference between a leader and the other three groups. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quotes three different explanations including that a leader is more prone to arrogance (Sforno), is more involved in secular pursuits (Rabbi Eliyahu Munk) and can be easily strayed by popular opinion (Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk). Rabbi Sacks suggests a fourth answer

which stresses the inherent difficulty and uncertainty in making political decisions.

Rashi, quoting the *midrash*, takes the discussion in another direction by focusing on a different function of the word "*asher*," as it also doubles as an allusion to the word "*ashrei*," meaning happy, praiseworthy, or fortunate. "Fortunate is the generation," he writes, "whose leader sets his heart to bring an atonement sacrifice even for an inadvertent sin; how much more certain is it that he will repent for his willful sins." It isn't easy for any of us to admit our mistakes. We have so many cognitive distortions that conceal our mistakes from our awareness. It is even more common for leaders to not see their mistakes because the stakes are higher. It is indeed worthy of pausing and celebrating such leaders who are willing to admit their mistakes and are able to model proper behavior for others.

How do we overcome all the obstacles that prevent us from seeing our mistakes? I believe the answer lies within a careful reading of Rashi's commentary. If we pay close attention, we will notice that Rashi formulates the idea slightly differently than the sources he is quoting from. The *Tosefta*, the *Talmud Bavli*, the *Sifra*, and the *Yalkut Shimoni* all write "fortunate is the generation whose leader offers a sacrifice for his unintentional sins." Rashi adds the words "*notein leiv*" – "sets his heart." "Fortunate is the generation whose leader is "*notein leiv*" sets his heart to offer a sacrifice for his unintentional sins. The path to be able to admit mistakes is to pay attention – to be "*notein leiv*." As Drs. Tavris and Aronson argued, the way to overcome our biases is to be aware that we have them in the first place.

If we are become aware of the tricks our minds play on us to protect our egos and become mindful and pay attention, we have a chance at being able to recognize and admit when we make mistakes.