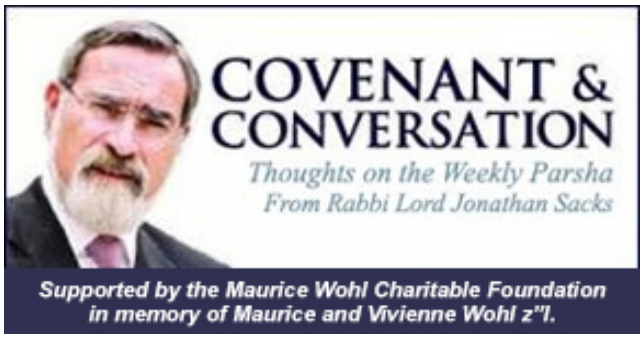
In this Issue



Violence and the Sacred

Judaism is less a philosophical system than a field of tensions - between universalism and particularism, for example, or exile and redemption, priests and prophets, cyclical and linear time and so on. Rarely is this more in evidence than in the conflicting statements within Judaism about sacrifices, and nowhere more sharply than in the juxtaposition between the Torah portion of Tzav, which contains a series of commands about sacrifice, and the passage from the book of Jeremiah that is usually (not this year) its haftorah:

> *When I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: "Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be My people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you." (Jer. 7: 22-23)*

Commentators have been puzzled by the glaring contradiction between these words and the obvious fact that God *did* command the Israelites about sacrifices after bringing them out of Egypt. Several solutions have been offered. According to Maimonides, the sacrifices were a *means*, not an end, to the service of God. Radak argues that sacrifices were not the *first* of God's commands after the exodus; instead, civil laws were. Abarbanel goes so far as to say that *initially* God had not intended to give the Israelites a code of sacrifice, and did so only after the sin of the Golden Calf. The sacrifices were an antidote to the Israelites' tendency to rebel against God.

The simplest explanation is to note that the Hebrew word *lo* does not invariably mean "not"; sometimes it means "not only" or "not just". According to this, Jeremiah is not saying that God did not command sacrifices. He did, but they were not the sole or even most important element of the religious life. The common denominator of the prophetic critique of sacrifices is not opposition to them as such, but rather an insistence that acts directed to God must never dull our sense of duty to mankind. Micah gave this idea one of its most famous expressions:

> *With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? ... Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? ... He has shown you, O man, what is good. What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God. 2 (Micah 6:6-8)*

Yet the question remains. Why sacrifices? To be sure, they have not been part of the life of Judaism since the destruction of the Second Temple, almost 2,000 years ago. But why, if they are a means to an end, did God choose this end? This is, of course, one of the deepest questions in Judaism, and there are many answers. Here I want explore just one, first given by the early fifteenth century Jewish thinker, R. Joseph Albo, in his *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*.

Albo's theory took as its starting point, not sacrifices but two other intriguing questions. The first: Why, after the flood, did God permit human beings to eat meat? (Gen. 9: 3-5). Initially, neither human beings nor animals had been meat-eaters (Gen. 1: 29-30). What caused God, as it were, to change His mind? The second: What was wrong with the first act of sacrifice -- Cain's offering of "some of the fruits of the soil" (Gen. 4:3-5). God's rejection of that offering led directly to the first murder, when Cain killed Abel. What was at stake in the difference between Cain and Abel as to how to bring a gift to God?

Albo's theory is this. Killing animals for food is inherently wrong. It involves taking the life of a sentient being to satisfy our needs. Cain knew this. He believed there was a strong kinship between man and the animals. That is why he offered, not an animal sacrifice, but a vegetable one (his error, according to Albo, is that he should have brought fruit, not vegetables - the highest, not the lowest, of non-meat produce). Abel, by contrast, believed that there was a qualitative difference between man and the animals. Had God not told the first humans: "Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves in the ground"? That is why he brought an animal sacrifice. Once Cain saw that Abel's sacrifice had been accepted while his own was not, he reasoned thus. If God (who forbids us to kill animals for food) permits and even favours killing an animal as a sacrifice, and if (as Cain believed) there is no ultimate difference between human beings and animals, then I shall offer the very highest living being as a sacrifice to God, namely my brother Abel. *Cain killed Abel not out of envy or animosity but as a human sacrifice.*

That is why God permitted meat-eating after the flood. Before the flood, the world had been "filled with violence". Perhaps violence is an inherent part of human nature. If there were to be a humanity at all, God would have to lower his demands of mankind. *Let them kill animals,* He said, *rather than kill human beings* - the one form of life that is not only God's creation but also God's image. Hence the otherwise almost unintelligible sequence of verses after Noah and his family emerge on dry land:

> *Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart, "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood ..." Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them ... "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything ... Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God, has God made man." (Gen. 8:29 - 9:6)*

According to Albo the logic of the passage is clear. Noah offers an animal sacrifice in thanksgiving for having survived the flood. God sees that human beings need this way of expressing themselves. They are genetically predisposed to violence ("every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood"). If, therefore, society is to survive, human beings need to be able to direct their violence toward non-human animals, whether as food or sacrificial offering. The crucial ethical line to be drawn is between human and non-human.

The permission to kill animals is accompanied by an absolute prohibition against killing human beings ("for in the image of God, has God made man"). It is not that God approves of killing animals, whether for sacrifice or food, but that to forbid this to human beings, given their genetic predisposition to violence, is utopian. It is not for now but for the end of days. In the meanwhile, the least bad solution is to let people kill animals rather than murder

their fellow humans. Animal sacrifices are a concession to human nature (on why God never chooses to change human nature, see Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Book III, ch. 32). *Sacrifices are a substitute for violence directed against mankind.*

The contemporary thinker who has done most to revive this understanding (without, however, referring to Albo or the Jewish tradition) is Ren? Girard, in such books as *Violence and the Sacred*, *The Scapegoat*, and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. The common denominator in sacrifices, he argues, is:

> *... internal violence - all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels within the community that the sacrifices are designed to suppress. The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else derives from that. (Violence and the Sacred, 8).*

The worst form of violence within and between societies is *vengeance*, "an interminable, infinitely repetitive process". Hillel (whom Girard also does not quote) said, on seeing a human skull floating on water, "Because you drowned others, they drowned you, and those who drowned you will in the end themselves be drowned" (Avot 2: 7). Sacrifices are one way of diverting the destructive energy of revenge. Why then do modern societies not practice sacrifice? Because, argues Girard, there is another way of displacing vengeance:

> *Vengeance is a vicious circle whose effect on primitive societies can only be surmised. For us the circle has been broken. We owe our good fortune to one of our social institutions above all: our judicial system, which serves to deflect the menace of vengeance. The system does not suppress vengeance; rather, it effectively limits itself to a single act of reprisal, enacted by a sovereign authority specializing in this particular function. The decisions of the judiciary are invariably presented as the final word on vengeance. (Ibid., 15)*

Not only does Girard's theory re-affirm the view of Albo. It also helps us understand the profound insight of the prophets and of Judaism as a whole. *Sacrifices are not ends in themselves, but part of the Torah's programme to construct a world redeemed from the otherwise interminable cycle of revenge. The other part of that programme, and God's greatest desire, is a world governed by justice.* That, we recall, was His first charge to Abraham, to "instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by *doing what is right and just*" (Gen. 18: 19).

Have we therefore moved beyond that stage in human history in which animal sacrifices have a point? Has justice become a powerful enough reality that we need no longer need religious rituals to divert the violence between human beings? Would that it were so. In his book *The Warrior's Honour* (1997), Michael Ignatieff tries to understand the wave of ethnic conflict and violence (Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Rwanda) that has scarred the face of humanity since the end of the Cold War. What happened to the liberal dream of "the end of history"? His words go the very heart of the new world disorder:

> *The chief moral obstacle in the path of reconciliation is the desire for revenge. Now, revenge is commonly regarded as a low and unworthy emotion, and because it is regarded as such, its deep moral hold on people is rarely understood. But revenge - morally considered - is a desire to keep faith with the dead, to honour their memory by taking up their cause where they*

> *left off. Revenge keeps faith between generations ...*
>
> *This cycle of intergenerational recrimination has no logical end ... But it is the very impossibility of intergenerational vengeance that locks communities into the compulsion to repeat ...*
>
> *Reconciliation has no chance against vengeance unless it respects the emotions that sustain vengeance, unless it can replace the respect entailed in vengeance with rituals in which communities once at war learn to mourn their dead together. (The Warrior's Honour, 188-190)*

Far from speaking to an age long gone and forgotten, the laws of sacrifice tell us three things as important now as then: first, violence is still part of human nature, never more dangerous than when combined with an ethic of revenge; second, rather than denying its existence, we must find ways of redirecting it so that it does not claim yet more human sacrifices; third, that the only ultimate alternative to sacrifices, animal or human, is the one first propounded millennia ago by the prophets of ancient Israel. No one put it better than Amos:

> *Even though you bring Me burnt offerings and offerings of grain, I will not accept them ... but let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream (Amos 5: 23-24).*

Holy Vessels

Parashat Tzav includes very detailed instructions for the sacrificial rites of various types of offerings (*korbanot*). At a certain point in the text, as the intricacies of the sin offering are enumerated, the text veers slightly off center, and makes some comments regarding "housekeeping:"

> *Any clay pot in which [the sin offering] is cooked must be broken. However, if [the offering] is cooked in a copper pot, [the pot] may be purged and then rinsed with water. (Vayikra 6:21)*

The sages explain that this law is concerned with the transfer of holiness from the offering itself to the vessel in which it is prepared. Like almost all offerings (with the exception of the *olah*, the burnt offering), the sin offering is eaten; unlike other offerings, the sin offering is enjoyed by the priests who serve in the Temple (the *kohanim*), but not by the person who offers the sacrifice as a means of atoning for a sin. There are other important limitations on the consumption of this sin offering, most notably its "expiration date:" Sin offerings may be consumed only within a limited period of time. Clearly, then, the taste of the offering is part and parcel of its holiness, and any residue must be expelled from the utensil before the time limit expires. Earthenware, which is a porous material, absorbs tastes and can never be completely purged of residue; therefore, earthenware utensils used for preparation of the sin offering must be destroyed after use.

Metal vessels, on the other hand, are not absorbent and may be completely purged of residual flavor - and holiness.

In his commentary *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619) offers a homiletic reading of this passage, drawing spiritual instruction for our own experience of sin and atonement. The residual taste in the utensil is analogous to the residual stain that sin leaves on our hearts. Sometimes, to remove the stain, a thorough wash is sufficient; other times, complete immersion is required. In some instances, when the stain of sin is so profound that it has been absorbed into our very being, becoming a part of who we are, we must break our hearts in order to purge the sin.

Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik made a similar observation in a *shiur* I attended: The Talmud recounts the execution of Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion, and the precise method of torture to which he was subjected. The Romans wrapped him in a Torah scroll and set it aflame - but that was not sufficiently cruel for them. To prolong the agony, his chest was swathed in damp wool to make his death slower and more painful:

> *... they found Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion sitting and occupying himself with the Torah, publicly gathering assemblies [of students], with a Torah scroll in his lap. [The Romans] took hold of him, wrapped him in a Torah scroll, placed bundles of branches round him and set them on fire. They then brought tufts of wool, which they had soaked in water, and placed them over his heart, so that he should not expire quickly. His daughter exclaimed, 'Father, must I see you like this!' He replied, 'If it were I alone being burned, then it would have been difficult for me; but now that I am burning together with a Torah scroll, He who will take vengeance for the insult of the Torah will also take retribution for what they have done to me.' His disciples called out, 'Rabbi, what do you see?' He answered them, 'The parchment is being burnt but the letters are soaring up [to Heaven].' 'Open your mouth so that the fire will enter [and your suffering will be shortened].' He replied, 'Let Him who gave me my soul take it away; no one is permitted to injure himself.' The Executioner then said to him, 'Rabbi, if I raise the flame and take away the tufts of wool from over your heart, will you see to it that I enter into the World to Come?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'Then swear to me'. He swore to him. He thereupon raised the flame and removed the tufts of wool from over his heart, and his soul departed speedily. The Executioner then leaped and threw himself into the fire, and a bat kol (heavenly voice) exclaimed: Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion and the Executioner have been assigned to the World to Come. When Rabbi (Yehudah Hanasi) heard it, he wept and said: 'One man may acquire eternal life in a single hour, another after many years.' (Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 18a)*

The executioner had a sudden epiphany that seems to have been at odds with the entire trajectory of his life up to that point. This man was a seasoned, veteran killer; he should have been impervious to the suffering of one more Jewish martyr - but something dramatic happened. The killer became compassionate. Rather than focusing on his professional skills as a cruel assassin, he became concerned with euthanasia, with easing the suffering of his victim, and his spiritual fate was completely altered as a result.

Under normal circumstances, converts to Judaism must immerse in a mikvah, a ritual bath, symbolizing their spiritual rebirth. In a very real sense, we might say that this

executioner underwent a spiritual conversion, but rather than immersing in cleansing waters, he was immersed in flames. Apparently, his sin was so profound that a thorough wash was insufficient to cleanse his soul; immersion in water was also not enough. The stain of sin had become his entire personality, his entire life, Rabbi Soloveitchik taught. This man had so much Jewish blood on his hands, only fire could expunge the evil. Once the vessel that held his newly-repentant soul was destroyed, the stain of sin purged, he was welcomed into the World to Come.

In the days leading up to Pesach, we go to great lengths to insure that our utensils are washed, purged, and kosher for Pesach. Perhaps we should take some time to consider our souls as well, and to cleanse ourselves in preparation for the holiday that sets us free.

For more essays and lectures on Parashat Tzav: http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2018/03/audio-and-essays-parashat-tzav.html

Clean-up Work

`Every morning, the Kohein comes into the *Beis Hamikdash*, puts on the splendid priestly garb and prepares for a day of sacred service. What is the first task he is assigned? The removal of the ashes accumulated on the top of the Altar from all the sacrifices consumed by the fires on the Altar throughout the long night.

The *Chovos Halevavos* explains that this is deliberate. The Torah did not want the *Kohein's* high station to go to his head. Walking into the *Beis Hamikdash* as a member of the select priestly caste, the *Kohein* could easily turn to arrogance. He could begin to think that he is somehow better than other people are. Therefore, the first duty he is assigned humbles him. Don't think you're so great and so haughty. Take out the ashes!

Just as the Torah is concerned that the *Kohein's* ego should not become too inflated, it is also concerned that the poor man's ego should not become too deflated. The Talmud tells us (*Bava Kama* 92a) that when the people brought the *bikurim,* the first fruits, to the *Beis Hamikdash*, the rich would bring them in baskets of gold and silver, while the poor would bring them in baskets of woven reeds. When the rich stepped forward, the *Kohein* would take the fruits from their baskets and return the baskets to them. When the poor stepped forward, the *Kohein* would take the fruits along with the baskets. "The poor get poorer," the Talmud observes ruefully.

Granted that circumstances somehow construe that the poor get poorer, but why indeed did the *Kohein* differentiate between the rich and the poor donors?

Rav Aharon Bakst explains that it was done for the protection of the poor. The rich had fine orchards that produced bounteous fruits, and their *bikurim* offerings were lavish. When the *Kohein* took their succulent and luscious fruits, their skins bursting with juice, out of the baskets and laid them in front of him, they were a sight to behold. But the poor had perhaps a few scraggly trees that produced, just barely, a few meager fruits. Had the *Kohein* taken the poor man's fruits out of the basket, he would have caused him embarrassment. Therefore, he kept the basket along with the fruits, and the poor man retained his dignity.

Some time ago, there was a *hachnasas* campaign in Baltimore. A well-known and respected family was marrying off a child, and they had no money to cover their expenses. A committee was formed to raise the money.

A question arose. Should the identity of the family be revealed to potential donors? This would probably generate much more money, since the people in the community really liked and respected this family. On the other hand, should their identity perhaps be kept secret to avoid embarrassment?

The question reached my *Rosh Yeshivah*, Rav Ruderman, and he immediately said, "The identity of the family should not be revealed. A family's honor is worth a great deal."

Inside a Thank You

Just about every Jewish child knows how to say thank you in Hebrew: *todah*. There is also a sacrifice called the *korban todah*, the thanksgiving offering. The Midrash states that in the future all the sacrifices will be discontinued, except for the thanksgiving offering. There will always be a need to say thank you to Hashem.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner observes that the Hebrew word for thanksgiving is *hodaah*, and the exact same word also means an admission. This is no coincidence, explains Rav Hutner. In order to give proper thanks, a person has to admit that he needed help, that he is not all powerful and that the one you are thanking did something important for you. Admission is an integral part of thanksgiving, and therefore, the same word is used for both.

How can we tell, concludes Rav Hutner, if the word *hodaah* is being used to indicate thanksgiving or a different kind of admission, such as an admission of guilt? By looking at the part of speech that follows it. If the preposition *al*, for, follows, it means "thanksgiving for." If the particle *she*, that, follows, it means "admission that."

In the seventeenth blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, we say, "*Modim anachnu lach she . . .*" *Modim* is the present plural form of the word *hodaah*. It is generally understood to be the thanksgiving blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, which indeed it is. And yet, it is followed by the particle *she*. Clearly, the thanksgiving blessing is incomplete unless it begins with an admission, acknowledging all the wondrous things Hashem does for us day in and day out.

When the *shaliach tzibbur*, the representative of the congregation who repeats the *Shemoneh Esrei* aloud, gets to the *Modim* blessing, the congregation says its own version called the *Modim d'Rabbanan*. Why is this necessary? Why can't the *shaliach tzibbur* represent the congregation in this blessing as he does in all the others?

The Avudraham explains that you can appoint a *shaliach*, a surrogate, for everything: to pray for healing, for a livelihood and so forth. But you cannot appoint a *shaliach* to say thank you. You have to say it yourself.