

SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

An Enlightening Tale of Salt, Soldiers, and Sacrifice

With a father and two grandfathers who fought in World Wars, I understood “sacrifice” to be a willingness to put your life on the line to help others.

To this day, I adhere to this belief and salute their bravery. However, when I discuss Judaism, the word sacrifice has a different connotation, one I never thought about when I was young.

I knew Judaism rejected and prohibited human sacrifices. That was something the Aztecs and ancient Egyptians practiced. So, when I discovered that the Bible devoted many chapters to animal sacrifices, I was surprised. It also made me feel uncomfortable, especially in light of the Torah’s prohibition against cruelty to animals.

The importance of compassion for animals is poignantly stated by King Solomon, “*The righteous man cares for the needs of his animals*” (Proverbs 12:10).

More specifically, in Genesis 9:4, we are forbidden from eating flesh torn from a living animal - which is the epitome of cruelty. In addition to physical pain, we are commanded to avoid causing animals emotional distress (Deuteronomy 22:7, Leviticus 22:28). We are also commanded to care for animals. This includes resting them on the Sabbath (Exodus 23:12), not overburdening them (Deuteronomy 22:10), or preventing them from feeding when they work a field (Deuteronomy 25:4).¹

Although we do not offer animal sacrifices today, how do we reconcile animal sacrifices with compassion for animals?

This week’s Torah portion Vayikra (Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26) discusses the commandment to bring animal sacrifices and grain offerings. Sacrifices were brought for a variety of reasons, including holiday offerings, communal offerings, guilt offerings, and sin offerings.

Contrary to what Christian missionaries claim, sacrifices were not brought for all sins. Leviticus 4:2 states that sacrifices were only required for certain sins and only if they were done unintentionally. In some situations, if a person could not afford to bring an animal, the offering could be replaced with fine flour (Leviticus 5:11).

Since a person who sins unintentionally might think their transgression was not that serious “because it was only a mistake,” the sacrificial procedure served to inspire remorse and repentance. For example, bringing an animal highlighted our unrestrained animal passions, and examining the animal for blemishes provided an opportunity to contemplate our own blemishes.

Our sages explain that the verse “*The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination*” (Proverbs 15:8) confirms that repentance must precede the sacrifice. Repentance provides forgiveness [slicha - סליחה], however, sacrifices provide atonement [kaparah - כפרה], which restores the individual to their original state.²

continued on reverse

A person who sinned intentionally did not need a sacrifice to inspire repentance. Since the individual was fully aware of their transgression, they would repent wholeheartedly when they decided to return to God.

Today, without a Temple and its sacrificial system, we retain the most essential elements of coming close to God, obedience, remorse, and repentance. As it says,

“Return to Me, said the Lord, and I will return to you” (Zechariah 1:3)

“Mercy and truth atone for sin” (Proverbs 16:6)

“Offer your prayers in the place of sacrifices” (Hosea 14:2-3)

Furthermore, we are taught that God prefers proper behavior over sacrifices as it says,

“Behold, To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22)

“Righteousness and justice are more desirable to God than sacrifice” (Proverbs 21:3)

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6)

With these prophetic teachings in mind, we can appreciate why Maimonides explains in his Guide for the Perplexed 3:46, that God commanded animal sacrifices as a concession, to wean the Jewish people from human sacrifices and idolatry.

Killing animals was not the goal of sacrifices. The goal was to motivate the Jewish people to come close to God. This is alluded to in the verse, *“A person who brings an offering to God”* (Leviticus 1:2). The Hebrew for “bring” is [yakriv - יקרִיב] and also means to come close.

The eternity of the spiritual message of sacrifices is alluded to in the command to accompany sacrifices with salt (Leviticus 2:13). Salt has the unique quality of never spoiling. Therefore, the covenant of salt represents how our bond with God is eternal and will never be broken.³

This is stated beautifully as follows, *“I will not reject them or spurn them to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them”* (Leviticus 26:44).

The spiritual dimension of sacrifices reminds us of the power of repentance, prayer, and proper behavior, and our eternal covenant with God.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

© 2021 Jews for Judaism

¹ It is noteworthy that the Torah’s method of ritual slaughter minimizes pain and trauma, and animal sacrifices could only be offered in the Temple, a place of holiness. These two regulations promoted reverence for the animal’s life.

² Igeret Hateshuva, Chapters 1 and 2.

³ We also recall the covenant of salt on our dining tables [symbolizing the altar] with the custom of dipping bread [the staple of life] into salt. It is remarkable and significant that the Hebrew words for bread [lechem - לחם] and salt [melach - מלח] contain the same letters.