

The National Jewish
Post & Opinion

Volume 76, Number 13 • March 10, 2010 • 24 Adar 5770 Two Dollars
www.jewishpostopinion.com

ANIMAL SACRIFICE AND HUMAN SPIRITUALITY

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

We read in the Torah (Leviticus 9:1-2): “And it came to pass on the eighth day, Moses called to Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel. He said to Aaron: Take for yourself a young bull for a sin offering. . . .”

This verse describes part of the priestly service and animal sacrifice. The setting was the eighth and final day of the ceremony to induct the priests. The people had run amok with the incident of the golden calf—they had committed rape, incest, and murder. The building of the Mishkan (sanctuary) and the consecrated induction of the priests was the culmination of a lengthy struggle for atonement. Withal, the people were finally at one again with the will of God.

Moses commands Aaron to tell the people what offerings—animal sacrifices—they should make so “that the glory of Adonai may appear.” When the consecration was virtually complete, Moses tells Aaron, his sons, and the elders that God will appear to them that day as fire descending from heaven to consume their offerings. It is to be a day that God will appear to the whole nation as a consuming fire, a continuation of God’s revelation at Mount Sinai. The Divine Presence is not to return to heaven but to reside in the Mishkan.

Even with the heroic dimensions of this picture of God appearing as fire descending from heaven, many of us are repulsed nonetheless by the sacrificial system of ancient Israel. The sacrifice of animals strikes us as bloody and barbarous, jarring our sensibilities.

But we need to be careful to avoid making self-deluded and ill-considered judgments, because the contemporary slaughter of innocent animals continues in the billions annually; and for those of us who are meat eaters, it’s done in our name—that is, on behalf of the “consumers” to whom the meat is sold.

What’s changed is that the slaughtering is now a commercial enterprise and, in most cases, it serves no higher spiritual purpose—only to slake our appetite for meat and each proprietor’s quest for profits. While, of course, animals were also slaughtered

for food in the ancient world, the practice among the Israelites was limited to one central sanctuary, it served a spiritual purpose, and the people were to be weaned from it in time.

But how are we, as modern people, to make any sense of animal sacrifice?

The “*korban*” (literally, to bring near), unfortunately often translated as “sacrifice,” was a means to sustain a spiritual connection between the individual and God. The reason we have a problem translating *korban* into English is that our popular ideas about sacrifices and offerings are often based on pagan conceptions and practices. In pagan cultures, “sacrifice” and “offering” made sense religiously, and they are common linguistic currency in contemporary secular American culture.

The idea of “sacrifice,” as Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches, implies that one is giving up something of value so that another will benefit. Hirsch goes on to say that, obviously, from a Jewish viewpoint, God doesn’t benefit from this practice, because God has no need for anything we sacrifice. To make a sacrifice also suggests that one is to do without something of value. In point of fact, what we as Jews *gain* from the sacrifice is usually much more valuable than the sacrifice itself. And the word “offering” is also inaccurate, because it suggests appeasement of the one to whom it is given—a kind of bribery—which is entirely out of synch with the Jewish view of our relationship to God.

Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135-1204) posits that the sacrificial service was not of Jewish origin. It was the universal custom among all peoples at the time of Moses to worship by means of sacrifices. The general understanding was that, since sin for humans is “embedded in flesh and blood” (i.e., an integral part of the human makeup), the symbolism of sacrificing flesh and blood was necessary and particularly powerful. Because the Israelites were accustomed to this atmosphere, the Torah made allowances for their incremental abandonment of the practice.

The Israelite laws of sacrifice offer a beginning place to better understand its function in the life of our people: The offering had to be one's own property. Only domesticated animals, raised for the purpose of providing food, were acceptable for sacrifice. According to Philo (25 BCE-40 CE), the Hellenistic philosopher who read and understood the Hebrew Scriptures, "Only domesticated animals and the most gentle birds were suitable for sacrifice . . . and they had to be free of blemish . . . as a symbol that the offerers must also be wholesome in body and soul. The Jew had to approach the altar with his soul purged of its passions and viciousness if the sacrifice was to be acceptable." (This is comparable to the attitude necessary if prayer is to be effective.)

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, formerly Chancellor of the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary of America, has suggested that, because the sanctuary existed to make offerings in God's presence, the individual and the community had a means "to approach God in joy and contrition, in fear and gratitude." Required to lay his hands on the head of the sacrifice, the individual making the offering affirmed that the "hands" which had done wrong in the past would have the "support" of the offering to do better in the future.

The root meaning of the word "*korban*" is understood kabbalistically as "bringing together" or "uniting." All of the kabbalists interpret sacrifice as spiritual worship in which the sacrifice itself is only a symbol—it has no magical power of its own to effect God—that enables human contact with the divine.

The dean of our Biblical commentators, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105), points out that making an offering to God allows us to experience—by our own choice and action—God's love and care. The basic purpose of sacrifice was not the offering of an animal's life to appease or manipulate God—that was, as we have said, the practice of pagans—but to offer oneself up for atonement with God. The purpose was to become at one with God again after failing to follow the path of Torah.

The 19th century Chidushei HaRim (Rabbi Isaac Meir) offers an understanding of the sacrifice as a "pleasing scent" to God. Rabbi Meir explains that a "*reyach*" or scent is something that is recognized

or detected far away. Thus anything that one can sense or feel from far off is called a "*reyach*." A sacrifice must serve as a messenger of good—meaning that through the sacrifice one can immediately sense that *good deeds will be done* henceforth by the one giving the offering. This, says Rabbi Meir, is the main purpose of a sacrifice—that repentance brings the person to better actions in the future. It is the certainty of future deeds that makes a sacrifice a "pleasing scent."

Far-fetched as it may sound at first, we might imagine that many lives would have been forfeit for their sins except for the Israelites' understanding of God's willingness to receive an innocent animal as a sacrifice. By placing hands on the head of the sacrifice at the time of its death, the sinner's guilt was transferred to the animal. Without that sacrifice, the wrongdoer would be bound to carry an increasingly greater burden of spiritually dead parts of him- or her self, until hastened physical death followed inevitably from the growing weight of spiritual death.

Beyond relieving the individual of the spiritual detritus that obstructs *teshuvah* and *mitzvot* (turning one's life to keep the commandments), the sacrificial system served to reinforce day-to-day rededication to action that would ensure the entire people's continuous atonement with God.

With the destruction of the Second Temple and the end of the sacrificial system, prayer was established in place of sacrifice. Every one of us (except the angels and those who have never participated in congregational prayer) has at some time gone to services and said the words but not really gained from the experience of prayer. Yet, as with sacrifice, every prayer is an opportunity for growth, if it is preceded and followed by righteous deeds.

In our time we may choose to be united with God through our freely given *mitzvot*, our righteous deeds, and through our communal prayer that precedes and follows them. Our deeds are the offerings that create a sanctuary for God in our hearts, and our prayer is the communal means we have to review our actions, celebrate our pursuit of righteousness and justice, and recommit and recharge ourselves for the challenges to come—as sacrifice once did in Israel's past.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here](#)!