

## Sacrifice of Love

Parashat Vayikra 5780

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Dr. Judith Hauptmann teaches that if you want to understand the way the Torah moved issues forward in the world, don't compare it to what we do today, compare it to what was happening in the world just before and during the time of the Torah. Then you will understand the ways in which the Torah was radically reinventing the human understanding of our place in the world and relationship to God.

We can see that as we begin to read about sacrifice in the book of Leviticus. The Israelite form of sacrifice was meant to be a departure from the contemporaneous accepted forms.

Leviticus teaches, "Do not allow any of your offspring to be offered up to Molech, and do not profane the name of your God: I am the LORD."

What was so bad about worshipping Moelch? The 16th century commentator Seforno explains that the devotees of Molech would sacrifice human beings, especially male children to that god.

Rabbeinu Bachya, a 13th/14th century commentator adds that "one member of the family was offered as a sacrifice so the remaining members of that family would no longer be in any danger...not only that, but the surviving children would all grow up and be prosperous."

Molech was a god who demanded that the lives of the vulnerable be handed over for the prosperity of the larger community.

The Israelites sought to change the method, purpose and object of the sacrificial system in order to offer a completely different worldview.

Leviticus teaches that in the Israelite system the person bringing the sacrifice had to "place their hands on the head of the offering."

Rabbeinu Bachya notes that this is one aspect of the sacrificial process that cannot be handed over to the kohen, the priest. Everyone had to place their hands on their own animal before offering it.

Through this, each person would really feel the life force within the animal that is being offered. The warmth of its head, the quickness of its movement. Every life, even this life, is to be felt and appreciated.

In this way the Israelites sought to transform the sacrificial system. Sacrifice was not in order to achieve good fortune but for atonement, gratitude and celebration. It was not to ensure that good things happened to them, it was to acknowledge when they did wrong, that things they didn't deserve came their way and to create a connection with community through celebration.

It was not a bribe it was a gift. And it was an animal life, not a human life. And even that animal life needed to be appreciated.

We are faced today with questions of sacrifice and there is a Molech approach and an Israelite approach.

As we are well aware we are sitting at home right now because we are all sacrificing in order to save others.

In some countries we know that hospitals have had to create protocols and triage saying that patients in their 70s and 80s would not be treated in order to treat the younger.

We are trying to avoid that.

There have been suggestions that we should relax restrictions and that older Americans should be willing to sacrifice for the overall prosperity of the country.

I am concerned that that is the pathway to Molech and not the Israelite and Torah understanding of sacrifice.

Jill Ratner founded the non-profit medical organization Hands up For Haiti, that brings medical technology and training to Haiti in order to sustainably improve their standard of health. Karen Schecter is the executive director. Jill came back from a trip once and told me that though the Haitians she met live in modest homes, almost primitive by our standards, have none of the modern conveniences we enjoy and are challenged by health issues we don't think twice about, she could not get over the persistent smiles on the children's faces and the satisfaction many adults had with their

lives. Communities were tight because they had to be in order to collectively address the issues they faced. They simply could not afford to live independently and harbored few of the aspirations for personal success that fuel our incessantly competitive society.

I imagine much of their happiness is predicated on connection, feeling responsible for others and knowing others feel responsible for them.

Leviticus uses the Hebrew word Korban for sacrifice. The root of the word means “near” creating this sense that through the process of sacrifice one is drawn closer. A nation is made by what it does together as a collective. That is the Israelite understanding of sacrifice.

We have the opportunity to come together for a higher purpose. The kind of higher purpose that calls us to sacrifice and through that draw nearer.

We have the opportunity to all put ourselves on the line in one great unified expression of love for each other. Love for the healthcare workers putting in hours and risking their own health. Love for the first responders who are there when we need them. Love for the wisdom that fills nursing homes.

As the torah teaches “al tashlicheini l’et zikna, do not cast me out in my old age.”

Sacrifice is not what we force others to do for us. Sacrifice is the gift we give for the privilege of being connected to the most important and meaningful reasons to be alive.

It is not what the vulnerable do for us, its what we can do for the vulnerable.

Because true happiness is feeling responsible for each other.