

Sacrifice

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I am grateful to be a rabbi, not a priest in Jerusalem's ancient Temple. This week, we begin to read the detailed procedures by which Israelites would bring animal sacrifices to the priest, who was then duty-bound to slaughter the beast, render its fat, sprinkle blood on the altar, turn portions of the carcass into smoke on the altar's fire, and then clean up the ashes. Not my expertise

I'm making light, but sacrifice was serious in ancient Israel. God was worshiped through sacrifice, not prayer. Our ancestors were constantly required to give up their choicest animals and agricultural produce. By parting with the best of their herds, flocks and fields, they were depriving themselves for a higher purpose.

At one time, not as long ago, the American people did the same.

This point that is driven home in Steven Spielberg's classic film, *Saving Private Ryan*. The movie begins and ends with our American flag, fluttering in the wind at the American cemetery above Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. Between those two flag displays, our eyes are assaulted by countless images of death and suffering. Healthy young Americans appear on the screen. Then, by the hundreds and thousands, they are instantaneously transformed into dead bodies, before our very eyes. Interspersed between scenes of death, is the threat of death, and the fear of death, with inestimable suffering for both the dying and their comrades-at-arms. The brilliance of the film is in its reality, acclaimed by World War II veterans themselves. We are shown the true horror of that war. We come to appreciate the very real sacrifices tendered in the noblest war our nation has ever fought.

My mind keeps drifting back, though, to our flag, whipping in the wind at the beginning of the film and its conclusion. No irony is intended in the image. With all the death, with all the loss, with all the destruction, with all the rationing, the citizens of our nation knew that they were struggling to preserve American freedom. Together, the citizens of the United States sacrificed dearly to safeguard

America. At war's end, the flag flew high, the nation was revered, and the American people felt close to one another.

The Hebrew word for sacrifice helps to explain this phenomenon. That word, *korban*, doesn't imply giving up something. Rather, the word is based on the concept of coming close, of drawing near. Bringing a sacrifice draws us closer to God, raising our lives to higher purpose. The "greatest generation" drew the nation together through shared sacrifice.

Sadly, though, sacrifice grew out of favor in America.

I have often wondered whether our country would have fared better in its war on terror had we all sacrificed to achieve that worthy goal. The world remains threatened by a nihilistic force that values extremist religious ideology over life itself. After 9/11, though, instead of asking every American to join in paying the taxes to enable a robust effort, our leaders cut taxes and left the bill for future generations. Unwilling to pay more at the pump, Americans early in this century refused gasoline taxes that would have reduced consumption of oil, much of it produced by the forces that underwrite terrorism. Unwilling to sacrifice, we did a better job of paying for the other side of the war than our own. Above all, we turfed the battle to an all-volunteer force, with the result that many Americans knew nobody on the front lines. We expressed gratitude to those who served, but most of us did not offer to sacrifice our own to the greater good.

Sacrifice is frightening. We are asked to forfeit something of perhaps inestimable value, without first knowing the extent of the benefit. We would deprive ourselves of something material, for a gain that may well be intangible. We must clearly identify our higher purpose, at the expense of something we dearly love.

When put to the test, our Israelite forebears demonstrated that their devotion to God was more important than their prize material possessions, the best of their flocks. Each animal sacrificed was a *korban*, drawing them closer to God.

When put to the test, American families in the 1940s understood that the world's future was worth even the very lives of their dear ones. Their terrible losses were their *korban*, uniting Americans to assure American liberties for future generations.

Facing a horrific pandemic, we are asked to sacrifice once again. This week, our Governor, who has been boldly leading our state through this crisis, forbid us to gather in groups greater than ten. At Temple, we are yet more restrictive. We are sacrificing both necessities and joys of daily life to reduce infections and save lives.

Millions of Americans, including our own congregants, are making unwelcome and involuntary sacrifices. High school and college seniors, alongside soon-to-be ordained rabbis and cantors, are grieving the loss of ceremonies and festivities of which they had long dreamed. Weddings and Bat Mitzvah celebrations have been postponed. Many face uncertain futures, relying on the value of suddenly and drastically diminished invested retirement funds. Worse still, thousands in Arkansas have lost their jobs and wonder how they are going to pay the rent or mortgage, the light bill and for the groceries.

Our representatives in Washington came under criticism this week for the time they took to adopt a stimulus package to respond to this disaster. I urge us to see that process differently: They **did** reach agreement across the aisle, unusual these days, each side sacrificing some of what it wanted in order to achieve the greater good of providing for American families in crisis.

Infamously, Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick has suggested that older Americans like himself should risk sacrificing their lives by returning to business as usual, prioritizing the economy over human life. Sadly, he's not alone. Jewish tradition, though, reminds us: *pikuach nefesh*, saving human life, must always be our priority. Even our economic wellbeing, even packed churches on Easter Sunday, must be sacrificed for the greater good of saving lives.

If we learn our lesson from World War II, we will not only slow the spread of Coronavirus, we may emerge from this crisis more united, our shared sacrifices binding us to one another and to our nation.

Reflecting on the ancient sacrifices of this week's Torah portion while grieving the sacrifices we are making today, Rabbi Nikki DeBlosi has written:

“During this crisis, we can maintain our holy and life-giving distance, and we can mourn the loss of closeness, community, and contact. We can sacrifice

what is needed, the ‘fat’ of our material resources, and we can season those offerings with our feelings of loss.

“Our tradition demands much of us: no longer the precisely rendered fats and juices of bulls and rams and turtle-doves; instead, a daily, rhythmical, cyclical attention to the blessings ([ordinary] and extraordinary) that surround us, and a scrupulous quest to engage in practices ethical and collectively beneficial...

“Ask yourself today: What sacrifices have I made to benefit the public good during this crisis? What sacrifices have I made to preserve my own safety, the safety of those I love, or the safety of my neighbors and community.

“Light a candle. Breathe in for a count of four. Focus on a sacrifice you have made. Now breathe out for a count of four. As you watch the flickering flame, as you see its smoke rise, know that your sacrifices are linked to the sacrifices our people have made in the past.”ⁱ

Our ancestors in the Jerusalem Temple found their ways to come forward with sacrifice. Let us find ours. And may our offerings, like theirs, be pleasing to God and humanity. And let our sacrifices bind us together in common purpose, for life.

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Nikki DeBlosi, “The Salted Offering: Grief’s Place on the Altar,” RavBlog, March 25, 2020.