

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Demystifying the Paradox of Animal Sacrifices



I often recall the stories my father and grandfather told me about fighting in the World Wars. Their experiences taught me that “sacrifice” means the 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 the Bible, the word “sacrifice” has a different connotation, one I never thought about when I was young.

I knew Judaism rejected human sacrifices. That was something the Aztecs and ancient Egyptians practiced. So, when I read that the Bible devoted many chapters to animal sacrifices, I was taken aback. The idea of sacrificing animals seemed to contradict the Torah’s prohibition against cruelty to animals.

The Bible contains a variety of rulings that prohibit cruelty toward animals. In Genesis 9:4, mankind is forbidden from eating flesh torn from a living animal—which is the epitome of animal cruelty. In addition to physical pain, we are commanded to avoid causing animals emotional distress (Leviticus 22:28). We are also commanded to allow our animals to rest on the Sabbath (Exodus 23:12) and not to overburden them (Deuteronomy 22:10). No wonder King Solomon stated, “*The righteous man cares for the needs of his animals*” (Proverbs 12:10).

So how do we reconcile animal sacrifices with the Torah’s directive to have compassion for animals? In biblical times the Jewish ritual of animal sacrifices was considered tame in comparison to the prominent pagan practice of human sacrifice. According to Maimonides, animal sacrifices helped wean the Jews away from these barbaric pagan rituals. Furthermore, sacrifices were permitted only in the Temple, where its holiness promoted reverence for animal life.¹

This paradox speaks to the fundamental purpose of sacrifices.

Since the destruction of the Temple, sacrifices have been replaced by prayer (Hosea 14:1-3), and the timeless spiritual component of sacrifices is still applicable. This week’s Torah portion, *Vayikra* (Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26), provides insights into the commandment to bring animal sacrifices, which included holiday, communal, guilt, and sin offerings.

Contrary to what Christian missionaries claim, animal sacrifices were not brought to atone for all sins. In some situations, a person who could not afford to bring an animal could replace it with a grain offering of fine flour (Leviticus 5:11). Furthermore, according to Leviticus 4:2, sacrifices were required only for certain sins, and even then, primarily if they were done unintentionally.

One might expect that rather than an unintentional sin, an intentional sin would require a sacrifice. The explanation of this paradox speaks to the fundamental purpose of sacrifices.

When King Solomon proclaimed, “*The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination*” (Proverbs 15:8, he made it abundantly clear that repentance must precede the actual sacrifice.

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However, a person who sins unintentionally might mistakenly think there is no need to repent because the transgression was not very serious because “it was just an accident.” Therefore, the sacrificial procedure served to inspire personal spiritual self-reflection, remorse, and repentance. For example, bringing an animal offering stressed the need to direct our animal passions toward Divine pursuits, and examining the animal for blemishes provided an opportunity to “look within” and contemplate our spiritual blemishes and shortcomings.

On the other hand, a person who sinned intentionally was fully aware of the transgression; therefore, he did not require a sacrifice to inspire repentance. Once he decided to return to God, he could repent wholeheartedly.

On a deeper level, returning to God consists of two stages. Remorse and repentance achieve forgiveness [סליחה–*slichah*], and, when necessary, sacrifices also provide an atonement [כפרה–*kaparah*,] that cleanses the soul and restores the individual to his/her original relationship with God.² It should be noted that in addition to sacrifices, there were other ways to achieve atonement, including giving charity.

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’” (Zachariah 1:3); “*Mercy and truth atone for sin*” (Proverbs 16:6); “*Offer your prayers in place of sacrifices*” (Hosea 14:2-3).

“To obey is better than sacrifice.” Moreover, in addition to prayer taking the place of sacrifices, we are taught that God prefers proper behavior over sacrifices as it says, “*Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice*” (I 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 [יקריב–*yakriv*] 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 that our bond with God is eternal and will never be broken.³ This concept 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, proper behavior, and our eternal covenant with God.

Shabbat Shalom,

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¹ Likewise, the Torah’s method of ritual slaughter seeks to minimize pain and trauma to the animal.

² See *Igeret Hateshuvah*, Chapters 1 and 2, by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi.

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 [לחם–*lechem*] and salt [מלח–*melach*] contain the same letters.