

Sacrifice is Binding

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I am grateful to be the rabbi at Congregation B'nai Israel, not a priest in Jerusalem's ancient Temple. In days of old, penitent Jews would bring animal sacrifices to the priest on this day. The priest was then duty-bound to slaughter the beast and sprinkle its blood upon the altar and the ark curtain. One would need to be good with a knife, which I am not, as my fingers and my family can attest.

Levity aside, sacrifice was a serious matter in ancient Israel. On Yom Kippur, repentance was attained through sacrifice. Other offerings were required for weekdays, sabbaths and festivals throughout the year. Our ancestors were constantly required to give up the choicest of their animals, fruits and other 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.

Anyone who has ever seen Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* remains haunted for a lifetime. The film begins and ends with our American flag, slightly faded, but nonetheless proud. It flutters in the wind at the American cemetery above Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. Between beholding the flag at the beginning of the film, and seeing it again at the end, we view countless images of death and suffering, particularly in the first half hour, depicting the invasion. We see healthy young Americans 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, are 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 are able 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 self-denial, the citizens of our nation knew that they were struggling to preserve American freedom. Some were soldiers with a mission, determined to protect the other members of their platoon. Others were homemakers stateside, lending ration cards to neighbors in need. 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 actually suggest 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.

Our best biblical example is the Binding of Isaac. Often we recoil from that story. We complain that God ought not to make such a request. We wonder whether Abraham should argue with God. Perhaps, though, we are missing the point of the story. The Binding of Isaac is about sacrifice.

Abraham has given up so much already. First, God asks him to leave his home and everything he has ever known, to go to the land of God's choosing. Giving up the comforts of familiarity, Abraham bonds with God. Now, God asks him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Abraham readily agrees to do so. From experience, he knows that his willingness to give up everything will bring him closer to God than

any other person in human history. Our patriarch's faithful eagerness to sacrifice ultimately forges an eternal bond with God. We share that covenant to this day.

In the end, of course, God substitutes a ram for Isaac. Thus begins Israelite animal sacrifice. That practice flourished in ancient Jerusalem, until the destruction of the second Temple left our ancestors no place to bring their offerings. Shortly thereafter, our rabbis declared that prayer would replace the sacrificial cult. The rabbis hoped that the offerings of our lips would function as the *korban*, bringing us close to God. At the same time, they yearned to restore the animal sacrifices, one day in the distant future. They instituted prayers for their reestablishment. Our rabbis were wise and realistic. They knew that words of prayer alone would not draw us close enough to God. Only self-denial is an effective *korban*, binding us to our Creator.

Sadly, though, sacrifice is terribly rare in our own experience.

Recalling the message of *Saving Private Ryan*, we may wonder what is needed to evoke the sacrifices that bound our country together in the 1940s. Do we require a global war, with a true threat to freedom, following a world-wide depression? Today, thank God, most of us are not called upon to risk life and limb on behalf of freedom and democracy. At this very season, though, our nation is debating whether to take on a bloody tyrant guilty of genocide and brutal slaughter of his own people with chemical weapons. Arguments are strong on both sides, but I can't help but wonder whether today's Americans would even have supported the War on Terror after 9/11, let alone an attack on Syria, if we were all asked to sacrifice for the cause. In our own day, our wars are fought only by young people who volunteer, in many cases because their best economic opportunity is in the military. Our taxes are not increased to pay for our military forays, but rather are added to a debt burden to be borne by our children. And we won't even sacrifice our massive use of imported oil, even though we know that part of the proceeds goes to pay off the very terrorists who attack us.

And what of those taxes we are required to pay? With resentment, we turn over a portion of our earnings to provide for our national defense, to protect our natural resources, and to care for the neediest among us. In light of the memory of World War II, the sacrifice of taxpaying is minuscule. After all, our incomes would not be possible without the freedoms and opportunities that America offers. Nevertheless, the most potent political promise today is lower taxes, not the protection of freedoms, not the education of our children, and not food security for the working poor. Certainly, we may justly complain about government mismanagement and sprawling bureaucracy; and reasonable people may disagree about how our nation's resources should be distributed. The root of America's seemingly permanent and intractable tax revolt, though, is our unwillingness to sacrifice. We are not eager to accept an act of self-denial, binding us with every other citizen in our country and with our nation itself. We do indeed have reason to pray for the restoration of national sacrifice.

Sacrifice is sorely needed in our personal lives, as well. How many marriages have ended because neither partner would forego individual desires for the benefit of the union? How many youngsters would experience healthier childhoods if their parents would sacrifice rungs on career ladders? How many of our elderly could receive better care if their adult children would give up their luxuries? Spouses are drawn closer together when one truly yields for the other. Children know they are loved when their parents forsake their own pleasures for their offspring. Older parents feel truly honored when their adult children abstain from personal luxuries, in order to provide for their elders. Certainly, such sacrifice can be taken to an unhealthy extreme, and may counterproductively lead to resentment. For most of us, though, the need to sacrifice is the more urgent message.

Interestingly, Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrants internalize the significance of sacrifice beautifully. As I've spoken to young people who became B'nai Mitzvah recently, as I witnessed my own Robert's preparation process, and as I've worked with almost-teens and adults preparing for upcoming services, almost every one mentions having given up various activities in order to prepare for that special day. Sometimes, they acknowledge having resented the sacrifice at first. Without exception, they come to see that the very act of giving something up has made the Bar or Bat Mitzvah more meaningful. The soccer practices or the chess tournaments they have eschewed constitute the *korban* that has brought them closer to their families, to their Judaism, and to their God on that Bar or Bat Mitzvah day.

I recall counseling an interfaith couple, struggling with the religious identification of their children. The details are changed to protect the anonymity of the couple, even though they don't live in Arkansas. Early in their relationship, in the spirit of compromise, the couple had decided to raise their little ones with plenty of exposure to both Judaism and Christianity, allowing their children to choose for themselves. After the first child arrived, though, they changed their minds, fearing that their earlier plan would confuse and burden the child. They came to see me, having agreed to choose one faith. They were close to deciding that their kids would be Jewish, but there was still a problem.

The Jewish husband felt that his wife was giving up too much; she was making a sacrifice that he was unwilling to make. How could he ask her to do that? Finally, I asked him about the greatest sacrifice he had ever made for his wife. He had made a significant career change, moving across the country to be nearer to her family. To his surprise, that move had strengthened their marriage, despite his having resisted it strongly. His wife then confessed that she really did want her children to be Christian, but that she had decided to make this sacrifice for him, for their marriage, and for their children.

Nobody suggested that the two sacrifices constituted an equal exchange. One sacrifice does not off-set the other, creating a compromise. Rather, both sacrifices are testimony to each spouse's willingness to give up an individual desire for the good of their union. Sacrifice is the binding force in marriage.

Sacrifice is frightening. We are required to forfeit something of perhaps inestimable value, without first knowing the extent of the benefit. We are asked to 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 patriarch Abraham knows that God is ultimate, above even his own son, who is, after all a gift from God. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is a *korban*, forging an eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people.

When put to the test, our Israelite forebears demonstrated that their devotion to God was more important than their prize material possession, 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*, assuring American liberties for future generations. We shall see a sterling example – Lt. Harold Tenenbaum, of blessed memory – during “Standing on Their Shoulders,” in our Oakland Cemetery, on Sunday.

When put to the test, the Bat Mitzvah identifies her Judaism as a greater lasting value than this year's basketball team. Her sacrifice is a *korban*, drawing her closer to God.

On this day when our ancestors brought their most precious offerings to the ancient Temple, let us recommit ourselves to sacrifice in our own lives. Let us see beyond our individual needs and desires, in our national life, in our Jewish life, and in our personal lives. May the sacrifices we bring bind us to our noblest purposes, and make us one with God.

In traditional synagogues, prayers are recited for the restoration of the ancient sacrifices. On this Rosh Hashanah, let us offer our own prayer for the return of sacrifice to our lives:

Be gracious, O God, to Your people Israel, and receive our offerings in love. Restore sacrificial service to Your people, in this, Your house, in every home, among all Jewish people and throughout our nation. Fill us with the knowledge that You are near to all who seek You selflessly. Let our eyes behold Your presence in the midst of all who sacrifice with sincerity. By Your grace, O God, may the spirit of our patriarch Abraham come alive within each of his descendants. Blessed is our God, Who receives the sacrifices of Israel, and all the faithful, with love.

Amen.