COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from
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HaRav Ya'akov Zvi ben David Arieh zt"l

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Dedicated by
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Violence and the Sacred

Why sacrifices? To be sure, they have not been part of the life of Judaism since the destruction of the Second Temple, almost two thousand years ago. But why, if they are a means to an end, did God choose *this* end? This is, of course, one of the deepest questions in Judaism, and there are many answers. Here I want explore just one, first given by the early fifteenth-century Jewish thinker, Rabbi Joseph Albo, in his *Sefer HaIkkarim*.

Albo's theory took as its starting point not sacrifices but two other questions. The first: Why after the Flood did God permit human beings to eat meat? (Gen. 9:3–5). Initially, neither human beings nor animals had been meat eaters (Gen. 1:29–30). What caused God to, as it were, change His mind? The second: What was wrong with the first act of sacrifice, Cain's offering of "some of the fruits of the soil" (Gen. 4:3–5)? God's rejection of that offering led directly to the first murder, when Cain killed Abel. What was at stake in the difference between the offerings Cain and Abel each brought to God?

Albo believed that killing animals for food is inherently wrong. It involves taking the life of a sentient being to satisfy our needs. Cain also knew this to be true. He believed there was a strong kinship between humans and other animals. That is why he offered not an animal sacrifice, but a vegetable one. His error, according to Albo, is that he should have brought fruit, not vegetables – the highest, not the lowest, of non-meat produce. Abel, by contrast, believed that there was a qualitative difference between people and animals. Had God not told the first humans: "Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves in the ground"? That is why Abel brought an animal sacrifice.

Once Cain saw that Abel's sacrifice had been accepted while his own was not, he reasoned thus: if God, who forbids us to kill animals for food, permits and even favours killing an animal as a sacrifice, and if, as Cain believed, there is no ultimate

difference between human beings and animals, then I shall offer the highest living being as a sacrifice to God, namely my brother Abel. According to this reasoning, says Rabbi Albo, *Cain killed Abel as a human sacrifice.*

That is why God permitted meat-eating after the Flood. Before the Flood, the world had been "filled with violence." Perhaps violence is an inherent part of human nature. If humanity were to be allowed to exist at all, God would have to lower His demands. *Let humans kill animals*, He said, *rather than killing human beings* – the one form of life that is not only God's creation but also in God's image. Hence the otherwise almost unintelligible sequence of verses after Noah and his family emerge on dry land:

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings upon it. The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in His heart, "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood…"

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them…

"Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything…

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made humanity." (Gen. 8:29–9:6)

According to Albo, the logic of the passage is clear. Noah offers an animal sacrifice in thanksgiving for having survived the Flood. God sees that human beings need this way

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of expressing themselves. They are genetically predisposed to violence ("every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood"). If society are to survive, humans will need to be able to direct their violence towards non-human animals, whether as food or sacrificial offerings. The crucial line to be drawn is between human and non-human. The permission to kill animals is accompanied by an absolute prohibition against killing human beings, "for in the image of God has God made humanity."

It is not that God approves of killing animals, whether for sacrifice or food, but that to forbid this to human beings, given their genetic predisposition to bloodshed, is utopian. It is not for now but for the end of days. Until then, the least bad solution is to let people kill animals rather than murder their fellow humans. Animal sacrifices are a concession to human nature.[1] *Sacrifices are a substitute for violence directed against humankind.*

The contemporary thinker who has done most to revive this understanding is French-American literary critic and philosophical anthropologist René Girard, in such books as *Violence and the Sacred*, *The Scapegoat*, and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. The common denominator in sacrifices, he argues, is:

…internal violence – all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels within the community that the sacrifices are designed to suppress. The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else derives from that.[2]

The worst form of violence within and between societies is vengeance, "an interminable, infinitely repetitive process." This is in line with Hillel's saying, on seeing a human skull floating on water, "Because you drowned others, they drowned you, and those who drowned you will in the end themselves be drowned" (Mishnah Avot 2:7).

There is no natural end to the cycle of retaliation and revenge. The Montagues keep killing and being killed by the Capulets. So do the Tattaglias and the Corleones, and the other feuding groups in fiction and history. It is a destructive cycle that has devastated whole communities. According to Girard this was the problem that religious ritual was developed to resolve. The primary religious act, he says, is the sacrifice, and the primary sacrifice is the scapegoat. If tribes A and B, who have been fighting, can sacrifice a member of tribe C, then both will have sated their desire for bloodshed without inviting revenge, especially if tribe C is in no position to retaliate. Sacrifices divert the destructive energy of violent reciprocity.

Why then, if violence is embedded in human nature, are sacrifices a feature of ancient rather than modern societies? Because, argues Girard, there is another and more effective way of ending vengeance:

Vengeance is a vicious circle whose effect on primitive societies can only be surmised.

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1 On why God never chooses to change human nature, see Rambam, The Guide for the Perplexed, III:32.

2 Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 8.

For us the circle has been broken. We owe our good fortune to one of our social institutions above all: our judicial system, which serves to deflect the menace of vengeance. The system does not suppress vengeance; rather, it effectively limits itself to a single act of reprisal, enacted by a sovereign authority specialising in this particular function. The decisions of the judiciary are invariably presented as the final word on vengeance.[3]

Girard's terminology here is not one to which we can subscribe. Justice is not vengeance. Retribution is not revenge. Revenge is inherently I-Thou, or We-Them. It is personal. Retribution is impersonal. It is no longer the Montagues versus the Capulets, but both under, the impartial judgement of the law. But Girard's substantive point is correct and essential. The only effective antidote to violence is the rule of law.

Girard's theory confirms the view of Albo. Sacrifice (as with meat-eating) entered Judaism as a substitute for violence. It also helps us understand the profound insight of the Prophets that sacrifices are not ends in themselves, but part of the Torah's programme to create a world redeemed from the otherwise interminable cycle of revenge. The other part of that programme, and God's greatest desire, is a world governed by justice. That, we recall, was His first charge to Abraham, to "instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Gen. 18:19).

3 *Ibid., p. 15.*

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Have we therefore moved beyond that stage in human history in which animal sacrifices have a point? Has justice become a powerful enough reality that we no longer need religious rituals to divert the violence between human beings? Sadly, the answer is no. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the Cold War, led some thinkers to argue that we had reached "the end of history." There would be no more ideologically-driven wars. Instead the world would turn to the market economy and liberal democracy.[4]

The reality was radically different. There were waves of ethnic conflict and violence in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, and Rwanda, followed by even bloodier conflicts throughout the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Asia. In his book *The Warrior's Honour*, Michael Ignatieff offered the following explanation of why this happened:

The chief moral obstacle in the path of reconciliation is the desire for revenge. Now, revenge is commonly regarded as a low and unworthy emotion, and because it is regarded as such, its deep moral hold on people is rarely understood. But revenge – morally considered – is a desire to keep faith with the dead, to honour their memory by taking up their cause where they left off. Revenge keeps faith between generations…

This cycle of intergenerational recrimination has no logical end…. But it is the very impossibility of intergenerational vengeance that locks communities into the compulsion to repeat…

Reconciliation has no chance against vengeance unless it respects the emotions that sustain vengeance, unless it can replace the respect entailed in vengeance with rituals in which communities once at war learn to mourn their dead together.[5]

Far from speaking to an age long gone and forgotten, the laws of sacrifice tell us three things as important now as then:

First, violence is still part of human nature, never more dangerous than when combined with an ethic of revenge.

Second, rather than denying its existence, we must find ways of redirecting it so that it does not claim yet more human sacrifices.

Third, the only ultimate alternative to sacrifices, animal or human, is the one first propounded millennia ago by the Prophets of ancient Israel, few more powerfully than Amos:

Even though you bring Me burnt offerings and offerings of grain,

I will not accept them…

But let justice roll down like a river,

And righteousness like a never-failing stream. (Amos 5:23–24). ■

4 *Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York: Free Press, 1992).*

5 *Michael Ignatieff, The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience (Toronto: Penguin, 2006), 188–190.*

Covenant and Conversation 5782 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l.These weekly teachings from Rabbi Sacks zt"l are part of the 'Covenant & Conversation' series on the weekly Torah reading. Read more on www.rabbisacks.org.