Holy Acts, Approaching the Altar, Sacrificing
Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5778
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

A couple of months ago, TBZ member and lay leader, Tali Walters invited me to meet Reverend Gretchen Grimshaw, Rector at the Episcopal Parish of St. Paul in Newton Highlands.

I went to meet her and see the church that we are partnering with, as they are a Sanctuary church, ready to welcome undocumented immigrants to their holy space, and TBZ -- as a Sanctuary 2 level -- is offering support.

I asked Rev. Gretchen why and how did she and her church make the decision to transform this house of worship into a home for a family who would need protection. Being Sanctuary level one means transforming a space that is not necessarily built to be a living space into one. It means lots of changes, from plumbing to heating, as well as many volunteer hours to accompany the family full-time. She shared with me the story of the church, the use of the space, and she said to me- I have been asking myself what we ought to do during these difficult times, and I felt strongly that it is time to do something Sacrificial.

That’s the word she used… *Sacrificial.*
I asked her what she meant.

She spoke about how easy it can be to help others when it is convenient, and how she felt it was time to do something that would demand from her and her parishioners more than they would ever imagine.

She showed us around, where the people would live and the changes they were making in the building and she spoke about how some programing will need to change locations or activities so they could have a family living in their space 24/7. She shared with me the financial commitments they were making towards this project.
I left profoundly inspired and filled with so many questions about myself and the communities I belong to. Since then, I have been thinking so much about the term sacrificial.

What does it mean to sacrifice something? To do something sacrificial.

There are different definitions to the word sacrifice:
A sacrifice is an act of slaughtering an animal or person or surrendering a possession as an offering to God or to a divine or supernatural figure.
A sacrifice is also defined as an act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy.

The origin of the word is from Latin sacrificium; related to sacrificus ‘sacrificial,’ from sacer ‘holy.’

**So an act of giving up something is a holy act.**

In Hebrew the word we use for sacrifice is קָרָב, often translated as offering.
Sacrifices were act of giving something valued. The root of קָרָב, is close. To make a sacrifice is to become closer.

In the book of Leviticus (9:7) we read:

> יָאָמֵר מְשַׁחַת אֶל-אָהָרֹן | בֹּקֶב אֶל הַמַעֲבֹד וְשַׁשָּׁה אֶת-מַשָּׁאֲתָה אֶת-עֲלָפָתָה | then Moses said to Aaron: “Come forward to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering…”

Aaron is called to approach the altar.
The word for approach is **Kraav**.

Now, he is about to offer the sacrifice, so he is clearly approaching the altar. Why then does Moshe remind him to approach, to get close?

Rashi, the medieval commentator explains:

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Aaron was hesitant, unsure, even embarrassed to come forward and take on this new role.

In Rashi’s imagination of the scene, Moses asks: What are you embarrassed about?! נאם אקחך בוש ויהיה לך נפש. אמר לי מַשְׁחֵת, אף על פי כן בוש? לך נברחת! For this you have been chosen. This is your purpose!!

According to a view in the Midrash, the Altar appeared to Aaron as looking similar to the shape of a bull and for that reason Aaron was afraid of approaching it. Moses speaks to his brother saying he should not be afraid but should approach it without worry.

The Midrash (which several of the commentators quote), imagines Aaron seeing the altar in the shape of a bull -- which reminds him of the sin he committed by helping the people of Israel to make the golden calf. As Aaron is about to get closer to the Divine and bring his offering, he is reminded of his own sin, his own weakness, and so he holds back.

The Hasidic master, Noam Elimelech, explains this verse and Rashi’s interpretation of aaron’s embarrassment and fear, and Moshe’s response: What are you ashamed of? This is what (lekha) you were chosen for!

The Noam Elimelech adds:

“Shame is an essential part of a person (...) Aaron’s strong feeling of shame came from his great submissiveness(...) This is what Moses told Aaron-- why are you ashamed? The fact that you are ashamed and hesitant makes you the perfect spiritual leader, one who is worthy to approach the altar. This is why (lekha) you were chosen (...) And Aaron

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1 With thanks to Rabbi Elie Lehmann for his Dvar Torah on Parshat Sh’mini
2 Sifra Shemini Milium 8
3 Rabeynu Bahya

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approached the altar means he brought himself to the altar, he found shortcomings in himself and constantly sought out an altar of atonement.⁴

In other words, it is in facing his weakness, and his shortcomings that Aaron becomes the leader that he is, and therefore is able to get close to God. He needs, in some sense, to sacrifice his image of himself as worthy by approaching the altar with his weaknesses revealed.

When reading these texts, I am confronted with the question of what does it mean to get closer, to sacrifice? To be able to devote yourself deeply to something. And why are we sometimes afraid to sacrifice ourselves for what we believe in? What holds us up?

As we reflect on the year that has passed, on a personal, communal, national and global level, I want to invite us to stop and reflect on the following questions: In which ways are we willing to step forward and get closer to the altar? In which ways are we willing to do sacrificial acts? In which ways do we make choices that don't allow us to do so? What stops us? What do we need to confront to be able to bring ourselves closer? What is holding us up?

Many of us have spent numerous hours and days in the last year at protests and rallies against policies and beliefs that are supported not only by many of our elected officials but also by many people around us and in this country. We have spent time volunteering through TBZ and other organizations. We have spoken loud and clear. Some of us have felt a great sense of anger as we see things unfolding in this country. For many of us, it is easier to blame the other for values that we do not believe or share. We judge, and we separate ourselves: They are bad and we are good. But, perhaps the hardest work we need to do is to hold a mirror to the society we live in and see ourselves. In what ways have we contributed to a society that is so polarized?

⁴ Speaking Torah, Volume 1, Rabbi Art Green, pages 268-269

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In what way are each of us responsible for the fact that we live in a society that values the individual over our responsibilities for one another?

Rabbi Sharon Brous wrote the following:
“...Rosh Hashanah is our time to look in mirror; to contend with who we have become and dream again of who and what we’d like to be. We do this personally, taking a self-audit of our behaviors (what held me back this past year? What patterns were destructive? Where did I take up too much space? Too little?). We do this in our relationships (who did I hurt? Who hurt me? Who have I neglected to see? Honor? Prioritize? Thank?). And we do this more globally, looking at our families, our communities, our country, the Jewish people and the world. Ma anu is the banner language of these holy days. What are we? Who are we? Who do we want to be? And, perhaps most importantly, what are we willing to do about it?”

I have lived in four different countries, each of them with very different cultures. I am generalizing or at least giving you in one sentence a sense of each of those cultures, based on my own experience.

In Chile, people are nice. Rarely will someone say no to you, even if they mean no… people don’t get too involved and don't criticize much. Chileans are known for being nice.

I moved to Argentina, where people have no problem saying to your face what they think and believe. It was pretty shocking to me (I should say this is specific of the porteños, people from Buenos Aires). People want to be involved in your life… and they are. They are italians, mediterraneans…

And then I moved to Israel. Not even living in Buenos Aires prepared me for Israel. I remembered the first time I just stopped in the street and cried, because I thought people were being so mean to me, the nice girl from Chile. People in the streets

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always have something to say to you. They share their opinions out loud and they
don't care if you agree or not. It took me many many years to see the beauty of this.
“Mind your own business” is not something that works in Israel. The opposite is
the reality there: there is no such thing as your own business, your business is my
business, for bad, but also for good.

And then I moved here to Boston and as I raise my daughters here in America, I have
been asking myself a lot about the society in which we live.

What kind of communal responsibility do we have for each other?
Do we make ourselves available to others in the community or do we only
mind our own business?
Do we make sure that there is a sense of obligation towards each other?
Are we interconnected as human beings?
Does inconvenience wins over being present to each other?
Are we making sure that our society has a sense of community at the center
and not individualism?
What are we to each other and what claims we have on each other? What do
we do that is sacrificial and not necessarily convenient?
Do we make excuses or do we really confront our own weaknesses and
failures?
Are we able to make ourselves vulnerable so we can deeply connect and get
closer to each other?

When we sacrifice ourselves for the other, we put the other person ahead of
ourselves, even if only for a moment. Perhaps the concept of “Minding your own
business” is an excuse for not getting involved, for not getting invested.

So, how can each of us find ways to put others ahead of ourselves? How can we live a
life that asks from us sacred sacrificial behaviors?

In the personal realm, it starts from calling and checking in with someone from shul
or other communities we belong to see if they are ok? Or bringing a meal to someone

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who is sitting shiva, even when it is inconvenient. It is knocking on people’s doors and caring for their wellbeing, even if you’re feeling shy or fearful.

On a communal level, it is about volunteering, and taking responsibility, not only in your “spare time,” -- because that time may never come -- but making it a priority.

On a national and political level, it is about taking a stand. As Elie Wiesel of blessed memory said: “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented”. Take a stand in the political discourse, teach your children to take a stand. Make this a part of your daily lives. Don’t wait for moments of crisis, because then it might be too late. When possible make contributions to organizations that matter, don’t wait for someone else to get involved. Yes, march and go to rallies, but also see in which ways you are contributing to a society that put individualistic values at the center, and make the small changes in your own life that re-center your values.

I know of people that do things for others I can't imagine myself doing. A Jewish leader in our community that for the last 8 months has been carrying a child as a surrogate for a Jewish family in London. A rabbi in Phoenix that donated a kidney and that same rabbi is a foster parent. And I don't have to go so far, in our own community we see foster families and other acts that demand a tremendous amount of dedication, time and resources. Acts that put the needs of others at front. Acts that make us closer to each other and to the presence of God in the world. Not all of us can do these kind of acts, but all can do something.

We are all so terrified of giving too much of ourselves - too much time, too much money, too loud, too out there. At what cost? What do we lose when we don't get closer, to one another, to our higher values.

Yesterday I suggested that Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own children -- sending away Ishmael (in yesterday’s torah reading) and offer up Isaac (in today’s) -- was perhaps a failure of his, not an act of piety. But today, in the context of this definition of what it means to sacrifice, I look at Abraham and ask , what does it

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mean to be willing to sacrifice that which is the most dear to you for a greater good? What are we willing to demand of our own selves, what are we willing to expect from each other, how can we help each other to do that? How can we call on each other, the way that Moses called on his brother to get closer, to approach the altar? How can we make sure to love and build communities where each of us can support one another in bringing the best of ourselves, and being responsible for each other in the deepest way possible.

Perhaps some of the questions to ask is what gets in the way that prevents us from getting closer, from sacrificing? And what is at stake when we decide NOT to do so? Is the failure to sacrifice in some way becoming its own obstacle -- because our shame holds us back from stepping forward when the next opportunity arises? In what ways is the practice of getting closer also the practice of confronting our own weakness?

I learned about a teaching regarding tzedakah and giving from TBZ member, Dan Marx, that the hardest or perhaps highest level of giving is when you give beyond what you are able. This may seem like an irresponsible act, not a sacred one. How do we know when we should stretch ourselves beyond our capacity? So, as I go back to Rev. Gretchen, and the sacrifice that she and her church are making to take on the responsibility of serving as a level one sanctuary, I ask myself and I ask each of us to consider deeply in which ways are we willing to sacrifice. How can we push ourselves and each other to get closer to the altar. This will require the personal work of confronting our own weaknesses and insecurities, and stepping beyond what is convenient and comfortable. And it will also require communal work -- to hold each other accountable and to participate more fully in communities -- the TBZ community and others to which we belong --that support each other in this holy task.

Shana Tova.