

## VaYikra – Is Sacrifice A Thing of the Past?

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It was fifty years ago when we first heard the stirring words proclaimed by the young president who inspired us with a memorable inaugural address. I still remember the speech and recall being uplifted by the message.

“...Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage and unwilling to witness or permit the (slow) undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world...

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty...

To those peoples in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it.”

With these words in January of 1961 President Kennedy articulated a policy and outlook which staked out the role of the United States as the leader of the free world. He aligned the United States with the struggle for freedom and the spread of liberty and democracy. He proclaimed our responsibility to be a beacon of light for the world. We have come a long way from that time when those noble goals stirred us and when idealism and the sharing of our values motivated our foreign policy.

When millions of Rwandans were being killed in a bloody civil war, President Clinton refused to intervene to try to stop the killing. To this day, he admits that he regrets not having used American forces to act. By all accounts a massacre is taking place in Libya at this very moment. I do not deceive myself and am not delusional about the nature of the rebel forces. In contrast to the naïve and simplistic portrayal of the media we have seen in Egypt that the people who replaced Hosni Mubarak and his thugs are no less violent, as evidenced just this past week, when 13 people were killed and 140 wounded by armed Muslims who attacked Christian Copts. These new regimes in the Arab world are not going to suddenly embrace the principles of democracy, or exhibit tolerance of minorities. We must be realistic and recognize that chances are they are not going to extend rights to gays, adopt the platform of the Zionist Congress or drop their anti-Semitism or hostility towards Israel.

Nevertheless as the fight in Libya is being waged and Qadafi's opponents are being shelled by massive airpower, are up against unlimited oil money being used to pay hired foreign mercenary forces, our government stands on the sidelines waiting for NATO and other international bodies to agree on a course of action.

As President Obama said this past week, the United States is watching what Qadafi is doing in Libya. Although he meant it as a warning, the truth is it was more descriptive than threatening. He is absolutely correct. We are watching. Watching, and not taking the kind of unequivocal strong actions necessary to bring about a stop to the killing.

And what is the message to those peoples around the world struggling for freedom, hoping to cast off the shackles of repressive regimes and the rule of oppressive dictators? Just as we did not do enough to give encouragement to the forces in Iran last year who wanted to replace the regime of Mahmud Ahminejad, once again we are watching on the sidelines. Our current policy has changed radically from the vision President Kennedy had.

This shrinking role may be the result of skepticism as to whether our policy was guided by idealism or more by capitalism. It may be the result of our failures in Viet Nam, coupled with a greater sense of humility, as well as many other factors.

Lest you think I am criticizing just the Democratic Presidents, George W. Bush is every bit as guilty of the same shortcoming, a failure which I think explains the true problem and deficiency of our approach, and which is the underlying principle of this week's Torah portion. After the attacks of 9-11 George W. Bush launched a war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as Al Qaeda and Iraq. He did so without raising the funds necessary to obtain the resources to fight this war. No new taxes were imposed. Instead the bill was added to our credit card, the national debt, to be paid by future generations. In 1991 President George H.W. Bush called on the people of Iraq to rise up against Saddam Hussein. When two weeks after that call thousands of Kurds in the north and others in the south rose up against Hussien, we did nothing to come to their aid. And the truth is this is the problem permeating not just in the realm of defense, but much of our public discourse today - whether it is in regard to the current squabbles taking place in state capitols around the country or over tax policy and what must be done to solve our economic woes, or actions we need to take to reduce the national debt or our dependence on foreign oil.

I would suggest this morning that the reason we find ourselves on the sidelines and reluctant to take action is the same reason the book of the Torah, the Book of Leviticus, we began reading this morning is so distant and difficult for us to understand. Put simply: we have lost the willingness to sacrifice.

Vayikra, Leviticus describes the sacrificial rites and is predicated upon a system whereby individuals would bring animals to the Temple to atone for their sins, to make up for their wrongdoings. Although the Hebrew word korban derives from the notion of drawing near to God, the English word is most instructive, for sacrifice implies exactly what it means -- giving something up.

Nowadays we speak more in terms of rights than obligations, entitlements and privileges owed us rather than of our responsibility to others. But the lesson this week's Torah reading reminds

us of, and which we need to reaffirm is that we should think more about what we are willing to do without for the greater good.

The most memorable and frequently quoted line of President Kennedy's speech, "And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" calls upon us to be willing to sacrifice and not to think only of our own self interests. Let us heed his call. Let us understand the message of the book of Leviticus as reminding us that life is not just about what you get, but about what you give, and maybe even more, about what you are willing to give up.

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