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חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

THE PERSISTANCE OF MEMORY: SACRIFICE, HUMAN SACRIFICE, AND AMALEK

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The Bible has been a bestseller for thousands of years. Leviticus as a stand-alone book, though, seems to have all the appeal of *Magical Creatures and How to Slaughter Them* next to a Harry Potter collection. A little more humor, and a lot more explicit gore, and perhaps it could compete with *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*. As best I recall, the Reader's Digest Condensed Bible simply skips from Exodus to Numbers.

All these challenges are intensified if one deals with Parshat Vayikra alone. Listen to the great medieval commentator Rabbi Yosef ibn Caspi in his *Mishnat Kesef*, believing that he is channeling Maimonides:

כבר התועדתי בפירושי זה פעמים,
ובספר הסוד ובספר במשל,
כי תכונתי חזקה בבחירת הקיצור בכל מקום.

לכן
כאשר ראיתי זאת הפרשה ורבות מהנמשכות אחריה סובבות על
מעשה זבחים וקרבתות

אשר ידוע שמשמע"ה כתבו בספרו מוכרח ואנוס,
כי אין חפץ לה' בעולות וזבחים,
רק הכרח מנהג האומות כולם בזמן ההוא הביאם לזה,

לכן
די לנו בידיעת מלות אלו הספורים
ואם לא נדעם - אין זה היזק בזה,
ורב במה שנמצא בפירוש רש"י וא"ע

לכן
אניח פרשה זאת, והפרשת צו ...

*I have already informed you twice in this commentary,
and also in my Sefer HaSod and Sefer HaMashal,
that my character tends strongly to choose brevity everywhere.*

*Therefore,
when I saw this Parshah and many that follow it focusing on the making of
sacrifices,
which it is known that Mosheh Rabbeinu wrote in his book compelled and
coerced,
because Hashem has no liking for sacrifices,
rather it was the compulsion of the universal custom of nations of the time that
brought them to this, therefore
it is sufficient for us to know the meaning of the words in these descriptions,
and if we don't know them - there will be no damage in this,
and more than enough can be found in the commentaries of Rasbi and Ibn
Ezra*

therefore

I will leave this Parshah be, and Parshat Tzav ...

But Ibn Caspi's comment begs the question: why did sacrifice become a universal expression of religion?

One possibility is that sacrifice achieves atonement, and atonement is a universally recognized human need. But I have always been bothered by the connection between sacrifice and atonement. What a waste! An animal – a living thing, or at the very least a valuable natural resource – is reduced to its maximal carbon footprint. What “sweet savor” could possibly waft from these pointless barbecues? Wouldn't it be better to genuinely make amends?

Ok, I get it; atonement sacrifices are largely for commandments between man and G-d, and there really is no way to make things up to G-d. Except there is – repentance, especially repentance out of love, which for some reason in G-d's perspective transforms past sins into virtues.

You'll tell me that sacrifices lead to repentance. The death of an animal is a significant thing – it makes one think *that could've/should've been me, there but for the chessed or rachamim of G-d go I*. But honestly, anyone who would think that way probably doesn't need a sacrifice to think that way – they'd react the same way to a dead squirrel on the sidewalk, maybe even to a pen that's run out of ink.

History/anthropology seem to show that prescribed modes of repentance inevitably lead to cost-benefit analyses – is this sin worth a goat to me, or not? The equation tends to work out badly for the goats.

I read an article this week that tried to equate philanthropy with sacrifice. It is true that the Temple accepted voluntary sacrifices. I suppose it's even likely that there was a plaque somewhere with the names of the people who gave the most and best voluntary sacrifices – perhaps we'll dig it up soon, which would seem to validate the initial investment in immortality. But I think the author was misled by the term in English. The Hebrew term *korban*, means thing which is brought closer, or that brings closer - it has nothing to do with giving something up, let alone of giving something up voluntarily for a greater purpose. The same negative applies to words such as **זבח** and **עולה**.

In his commentary to Deuteronomy 12:30-13:1, Ibn Caspi raises a much darker possibility. Here are the relevant verses, followed by his commentary:

הַשְׁמֵר לְךָ פֶּן־תִּנְקֹשׁ אַחֲרֵיהֶם
 אַחֲרֵי הַשְּׂמֵדִם מִפְּנֵיךָ
 וּפְנֵי־תִדְרֹשׁ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר
 אֵיכָה יַעֲבֹדוּ הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה אֶת־אֱלֹהֵיהֶם
 וְאֶעֱשֶׂה־כֵּן גַּם־אֲנִי:
 לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כֵּן לְה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
 כִּי כָל־תּוֹעֵבֹת ה' אֲשֶׁר שָׁנֵא
 עָשׂוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם

כִּי גַם אֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת־בְּנֹתֵיהֶם
 יִשְׂרְפוּ בְּאֵשׁ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם:
 אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֲתֶכֶם אֹתוֹ תִשְׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת
 לֹא־תִסְרֹף עֲלֵיו וְלֹא תִגְרַע מִמֶּנּוּ: פ

Guard yourself,

*lest you be ensnared after them,
 after they have been destroyed from before you,
 and lest you seek after their gods, saying:
 "How would those nations worship their gods?
 I too will do the same."*

*Do not do the same for Hashem your G-d
 because all the abominations of G-d that He hates,
 they did for their g-ds
 because even their son and daughters
 they would burn in fire for their gods.*

*It is everything that I command you – that is what you must guard to do;
 you must add nothing above it; you must subtract nothing from it.*

הנה אלו יכול משה למונעם מהזבחים לגמרי,
 להיותם נעשים לאלהי העמים,

היה השם חפץ בזה

ואחר כי לא היה יכול להעתיקם משרש

והעתק הסעיפים

ככל אשר יוכל

בעבודות המגונות,

כשריפת הבנים

אם שריפתם לגמרי או שריפת עורם או שערם בהעברם,

כי על הכל יאמר שריפה בשיתוף מה

Now had Mosheh been able to completely prevent them from sacrifices,

seeing as they were done for the gods of the nations,

Hashem would have desired this.

But since he could not remove them from the roots -

he removed them from the branches -

to the extent he was able –

of the disgraceful modes of worship

such as burning children

*whether completely burning them up, or burning their skin or hair by passing
 them through flame,*

because all of them can be called burning, with some commonality

I suggest that Ibn Caspi sees “sacrifice” anthropologically as at core the dedication of an act of violence to a god. What matters is not that the sacrifice is killed, but that you killed it, and the more significant the thing you kill, the better. All sacrifice is at core human sacrifice, not self-sacrifice.

The Torah came along and, unable to extirpate this practice directly, tried to change its meaning. Removing human sacrifice from the apex of the ritual pyramid opened up the possibility of understanding animal sacrifice as sublimating violence rather than as sanctifying it. There is always a danger that the original meaning will break through. But when violence is given no controlled religious outlet, sanctified violence often finds far more dangerous expressions.

Ibn Caspi’s understanding of the etiology of sacrifice does not mean that all those who endorse sacrifice at core endorse violence. Sublimation can be real and effective. Moreover, maybe the Canaanite meaning was not the original meaning either, but a later distortion, and the Torah restored sacrifice to its pre-Canaanite glory.

Preserving a practice while changing its meaning runs two risks: critics may accuse you endorsing its original meaning, and followers may come to adopt its original meaning.

A similar dynamic may occur with regard to the mitzvot of battling, remembering, and erasing the memory of Amalek. The urge to extirpate evil can be positive, but it can also be the inspiration for much greater evils than those it seeks to extirpate. Halakhah postpones the mitzvah to the Messianic age, noting that Yehoshua made a point to attack only combatants, and categorizing Samuel’s instructions to Saul as extralegal. This in turn drives many commentators to find ways to “spiritualize” the mitzvah and expand the category of Amalek so that it can have contemporary relevance. But this approach is subject to three kinds of misunderstandings.

1. It is often misunderstood as reflecting an ethical difficulty with the halakhah, when instead it is a reaction to the practical irrelevance of the halakhah. Sometimes it is even an ethical protest against a halakhah that seems insufficiently exercised by the persistence of evil.
2. Sometimes critics misunderstand such spiritualizing expansions as instead expanding the literal mitzvah of total war. A recent article in an online Jewish magazine got there by mistranslating the Hebrew phrase *נפש להריגה במסירת* as “prepare to kill,” rather than correctly as “accept the risk of being killed.”
3. Most dangerously, sometimes followers make the same mistakes as the critics, or worse, sometimes interpreters genuinely mean to expand the category so that the mitzvah can find practical expression. It is therefore imperative to reiterate that not only is the mitzvah eschatological, the halakhic category of Amalek cannot apply to any people who have territorial conflicts with the Jewish people, and all ethnic Biblical categories were rendered halakhically obsolete by Assyrian population transfer policies. Every attempt at giving contemporary relevance to the category Amalek must be monitored with great caution as a potential “stringency that leads to leniency.”

Shabbat shalom and Purim sameiach!