

Is life a zero-sum game?

Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tavo*, we read about the commandment of *bikkurim* -- offering God the first fruit of the harvest:

You shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest... [and] put it in a basket... The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God... [You shall say:] "I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord have given me." You shall then leave it... and bow low before the Lord your God... And you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you and your household. [Deuteronomy 26:2~11]

The priests later divided the fruit among themselves, to be eaten later, and gave back the expensive containers to their owners.

Do ut des

People have a deep feeling that, if you want to get something, you must give up something in return, of equal or higher value. There is no free lunch. The Romans called it "*do ut des* -- I give so that you will give". It's an entrenched belief.

In ancient times, human beings were sacrificed to the gods to pacify them and obtain their favor. (The gods were always angry.)

-Children are one's most valuable "possession".

-Teenage virgin daughters are next in line.

Abraham did not protest when God told him to sacrifice his son. (He protested only when God threatened to destroy both righteous and wicked in Sodom and Gomorrah.)

Human sacrifice is found in just about every culture up to biblical times -- the Japanese, the Mongols, the Scythians, the Tibetans, the Indians, the West Africans, the ancient Egyptians, the ancient Chinese, the Cretans, the Celts, the Etruscans, the Germans, the Phoenicians, the Hawaiian, the

Carthaginians, the Incas... The Aztecs sacrificed 80,000 people in four days in 1487 when they re-consecrated the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan. Parents and teachers raised children to consider it a high honor to be chosen for sacrifice.

God weaned Jews from human sacrifice:

And you shall not let any of your seed pass through the fire to [the idol] Molech... [Lev. 18:21] [If you do,] you will surely be put to death [by stoning]. [Lev. 20:2; Mishna, Sanhedrin 53a]

However, to get people to accept the Torah, God could not completely remove the notion that He had to ask something tangible from them to grant His favor, so He asked that things be brought to him: Animal sacrifices; first fruits; what was needed to build the Tabernacle (gold, fine linens, animal skins and precious stones), etc.

An aside: Since the Middle Ages, Jews have often been maliciously accused of sacrificing Christian children to make Passover matzah. This is known as the “blood libel”. Yet Torah strictly forbids both human sacrifice and drinking blood! The bigger the lie, the more it is believed.

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides downplays sacrifices. He says they were a necessary transitional step between the human sacrifices of the pagans and the kind of worship God really wanted, which is prayer. If God had asked only for prayer back then, the people would not have followed. They were not ready to confine their worship to something so abstract:

The custom in those days among all men...consisted in sacrificing animals. God did not command us to give up these services; for this would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used.

Sacrifices [however] are not the primary object [of the commandments about sacrifice], prayers are. [To wit,] we were not commanded to sacrifice in every place, and in every time, or to build a Temple in every place, or to allow anybody to become a priest and sacrifice. Only one Temple was appointed, and only, [as the Torah says,] “in the place which the Lord shall choose” [Deut. 12:26]. In no other place are we allowed to sacrifice. [The Torah says,] “Be careful not to give your burnt-offerings in every place that you see” [Deut. 12:13]; and only the members of a particular family were allowed to officiate as priests.

All these restrictions served to limit this kind of worship. But prayer and supplication can be offered everywhere and by every person. Because of this, the Prophets rebuke people for being over-zealous in bringing sacrifices.

[Maimonides, *Moreh Nevuchim* (Guide for the Perplexed) 3:32]

The Midrash says that in the messianic age, all sacrifices will be discontinued, except for the thanksgiving offering. [Vayikra Rabbah 9:7]

But Maimonides still said:

Everything that is for the sake of God should be of the best and most beautiful. When you build a house of prayer, it should be more beautiful than your own dwelling. When you feed the hungry, you should feed him of the best and sweetest of your table. When you clothe the naked, you should clothe him with the finest of your clothes. Whenever you designate something for a holy purpose, you should sanctify the finest of your possessions; as it is written [in the Torah; Leviticus 3:16], "The choicest is for God." [Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Things Forbidden on the Altar 7:11]

The Lubavitcher Rebbe added that if a school day includes both religious and secular studies, the religious should be taught in the morning when the mind is freshest and most receptive; that if one has two jobs, one to make a living and one to benefit humanity, the latter must take priority.

Is life a zero-sum game?

Why do most people have a strong feeling that life is a zero-sum game?

Some experience suggests it is not:

- Our knowledge increases as we get older.
- We create new things in our lives.
- If you are nice to others, they may be nice to you. Both gain, no one loses.
- If you are surly to others, they may be surly to you. Both lose, no one gains.
- Zero-sum implies quantification, but some things cannot be quantified, such as love, happiness, success, etc.

But other experience suggests it is:

- When few and limited resources are available. Example in Talmud: [Suppose] two people are travelling [far from civilization]. One of them has a pitcher of water [sufficient for only one person; the other has no water]. If both drink, they will [both] die; but if only one drinks, he can reach civilization [and survive]... Rabbi Akiva... taught: [If the pitcher is yours, you may drink alone.] Your life takes precedence over his life. [Bava Metzia 62a]

Why do people believe life is a zero-sum game?

1-They reason: There must be a higher power that makes things happen. How do you make happen what you want? Give the power what you would wish to receive yourself: Children, food, luxury items...

-Then good things happen -- It worked!

-Or bad things happen: The power is angry -- give him more.

2-They find it reassuring to believe that there *is* a power you can bargain with; it's not all luck and randomness.

3-They don't always naturally believe it themselves, but are taught so by religious authorities who use to belief to control and exploit them.

Is this belief changing?

This belief is rooted in expectations. In olden days, people did not expect anything. They felt deeply they had to work for everything, and provide some kind of payment for what they got.

This belief is changing in the West. Prosperity, democracy, basic rights made people feel entitled to a lot of things without having to give anything in return.

-Also, secularism is partly at fault. If you are secular and the authority is an elected government, you feel entitled and don't feel you need to give back. If you are religious and the authority is God, you feel the need to earn what you get!

Is "feeling entitled" a good attitude? Yes and no:

-It is good to feel entitled to intangibles, to rights, such as democracy, free speech, free exercise of religion, free enterprise, equality before the law, etc.

-It is not good to feel entitled to tangible things, such as basic income, food, shelter, medical care, etc., (especially if one is able to earn them, but doesn't).

-It is also not good to feel entitled to get more than others, tangible or intangible.