

WHAT PRICE SACRIFICE?

Rosh ha-Shana Morning II — Sunday, 20 September 2020

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During this most unconventional of services, we have opted for a conventional Torah selection. In contrast to years past, we have read the traditional Torah reading for the second morning of Rosh ha-Shana, the *Akidah*.

The story relating Adonai's instruction to Abraham to prepare his son Isaac for sacrifice, followed by the further direction to spare Isaac and sacrifice a ram instead, is familiar to nearly all of us. The obligation to sacrifice recurs in the Torah. Biblical sacrifices typically involve an animal, or a measure of grain or oil, such as the one referenced in today's Haftorah portion. Those who offer them are surrendering something of value. But most Torah sacrifice seems more akin to a modern tax or community assessment to support the priesthood than a mandate to part with something dear.

That's not the case here. One translation I consulted emphasized this point by using particularly evocative language: "Isaac, your son, your only one, whom you love." That's not the type of language the Torah uses later in describing offerings provided to the priests. Abraham believes he is

being forced to part with a favored son for whom he and Sarah, as we read yesterday, waited many years.

Why make a real sacrifice? That's a question nearly all of us have had to consider during the last seven months. Thanks to the public health emergency, we've all made some sacrifices, a few voluntary, many not so much. Certainly those who have sacrificed the most, losing loved ones to disease or suffering bouts of ill health themselves, did not ask to do so. Neither did those who lost jobs or businesses. But even people with good health and finances cannot proceed with life normally. Our movement and activities are curtailed. We can't celebrate life cycle events with family and friends physically present. We can't pray together or engage in the social opportunities common this time of year. While I'm privileged to be able to spend time with a wonderful spouse, I still miss the opportunity to dine and break the fast with extended family. I also missed serving as an usher, as I typically do at first morning Rosh ha-Shana services. There I get to greet people and can be assured that I am providing useful information. People do need to know where the restrooms are.

While providing assistance may be easy, real sacrifice is hard. But calls for sacrifice are common from the *bima* in normal times and from speakers' homes currently. We're all familiar with orations listing common

activities that we should forego, different behaviors we should adopt, other ways we should be spending our time and money. And what do we do? Sometimes we heed the speaker's call. Often, we tune out.

There are many reasons we may do so. Sometimes those calling for sacrifice are not credible. Abraham had Adonai calling on him; we have humans with many flaws. They may advocate one type of action for others but do something totally different themselves. Some call for different things at different times, seemingly more out of expediency than any principle. Then there are those who are consistent, but whose promises seem unrealistic or empty.

Even when the advocate is credible and the cause compelling, providing an affirmative response to a call for sacrifice may seem unwise. There are demands for time or money we just do not have. If our role is too public or prominent, there may be possible loss of our profession or means of financial support. Just think about the price individuals as disparate as Colin Kaepernick and Alexander Vindman had to pay in recent years for, respectively, kneeling down and speaking out. There's the risk of loss of social standing or friends. Finally, there is the risk of loss of peace of mind. Our weekly liturgy features a prayer urging we have sufficient serenity to be able to sleep at night. Will making a sacrifice promote this?

All too often, the answer is no. The price seems too high, the reward too remote. A common response is: let someone else do it. Or: nothing I can do will accomplish anything.

Indeed, one of the most poignant commentaries I saw about the Torah passage that we just read stated that: “Many medieval Jewish communities suffering persecution saw themselves as reenacting the drama of the *Akidah* without the redemptive ending.”

We need to avoid this feeling. Over the last several months, I have seen much in the news media that was unsettling and dispiriting. One of the few uplifting pieces I read was an op-ed the Washington Post published in June from Michelle Obama in the form of a commencement address. In it, she cautions against hopelessness and advises that “In an uncertain world, time-tested values like honesty and integrity, empathy and compassion — that’s the only real currency in life. Treating people right will never, ever fail you.”

That’s better than anything I can provide. Displaying these qualities, and avoiding the temptation to sink to the level of the crowd is not on the level of Abraham’s selfless response to Adonai. It’s not responding to a clarion call for action. But resisting temptation to do badly can be a form of

sacrifice nonetheless. And perhaps it also improves the world from the state it would be in otherwise.

Recall that this congregation would not be here today were it not for the best efforts, if not actual sacrifices, of so many who did not despair, and navigated through uncertain, and sometimes outwardly hostile, environments. Should we treat ourselves and each other well, chances are enhanced that we will be back together next year. *Shana Tova.*