

The Lost Art of Sacrifice

In the Mishnah there is a warning: Be careful with the authorities, for they do not befriend a person except for their own sake. This was an admonition never heeded by Rabbi Amnon of Mayence, who according to legend, became very close friends with a Prussian Duke in the region of Mayence about 800 years ago. Because of his piety and wisdom, the Duke often consulted with him on matters of state and eventually became one of his most trusted advisors. Eventually the Duke's advisors wondered why a Jew was given so much trust and authority. "Your Highness," they began, "you should request from Rabbi Amnon that he become a Christian, like us. I am sure that considering the honor and many favors he has enjoyed at your generous hand, he will gladly abandon his faith and accept ours." The Duke agreed with the secretary and decided to speak with Rabbi Amnon about the matter.

He ordered the Rabbi to appear before him, and upon his arrival he declared, "My good friend, Rabbi Amnon, I know you have been loyal and devoted to me for many years. Now I wish to ask you a personal favor. Abandon your faith, and become a good Christian like me. If you do, I shall make you the greatest man in the whole of my State; you shall have honor and riches like no other man, and next to me, you shall be the most powerful man in my land."

Rabbi Amnon was horrified to hear the Duke's demands, but was worried that the Duke would punish him if he did not comply. The Rabbi asked the Duke for three days

to consider his decision, and the stay was granted. But after three days Rabbi Amnon was so shaken and despondent that he did not return to the court. His dismay though was not a result of the decision placed before him – it was because of his remorse for even asking for three days to consider the proposal, rather than rejecting it outright as he knew he should of.

Even after the third day had elapsed Rabbi Amnon continued to avoid the palace. The Duke grew increasingly impatient and eventually ordered his guards to retrieve the Rabbi and bring him before the court. When they finally arrived with Rabbi Amnon bound in chains, the indignant Duke ordered that the defiant rabbi be punished by having his arms and legs chopped off.

Though his body was shattered and his time on earth was rapidly drawing to an end, he requested that his followers bring him up to the bimah of the shul as Rosh Hashanah was beginning. As he stood before the Holy Ark he chanted, “*unetannah tokef kedushat hayom* – Let us express the mighty holiness of this day.” And when he finished his prayer, he died.

This prayer of Rabbi Amnon has become one of the most solemn and important pieces of the High Holy Day liturgy because it calls our attention to the consequences for our actions. It asks us in a clear and sobering tone; “Who has made sacrifices this year for the sake of their Judaism and who has not? Who has come to offer sincere repentance and who has no intention of altering their aberrant traits? Who has gone above and beyond and who only exerts minimum potential? As Rabbi Amnon taught us, it is through sacrifice that a Jew demonstrates loyalty and devotion.

But what do we mean by sacrifice today? According to the Torah, Jewish life was meant to be centered on a sacrificial cult of crop and animal offerings in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. When the Second Temple was destroyed the rabbis devised a system of prayer to serve as a replacement to the sacrificial cult for Jews both in the Holy Land and in the Diaspora. They instituted three prayer services a day, *shacharit*, *minchah* and *maariv*, which were representative of the actual sacrificial services that occurred in the Holy Temple. Instead of offering the fruits of our labors, in this new system we were meant to sanctify G-d's name with devotion and with sacrifices of our hearts.

One might expect that this would be an easier method of worship. Animal and crop sacrifices were a costly and a tangible demonstration of our ancestor's commitment to their religion and to their G-d. It was an emotional experience in which Jews gave a part of their labors, a part of themselves.

Of course today we don't have that particular emotional experience. But for the overwhelming majority of *liberal Jews* today, we don't have the experience of daily prayer either! While we often come together on Shabbat to pray, the concept of three times daily prayer that the rabbis of the Mishnah devised is not practiced in Reform Judaism. And so, if we are to be good students of our theological history, we must ask ourselves, if we do not use prayer to replace the sacrificial cult, with what do we replace it? Where does our sacrifice for G-d come from? What is it that we do?

Chasidic thought instructs us that a sacrifice requires us to go above and beyond our normative behavior. I once knew of a family that owned a Fortune 500 company and they were worth a couple of billion dollars. Every year they gave \$32 million to charity, and they were constantly winning awards and receiving accolades locally and nationally.

They were exceedingly generous. But in truth, their *tzedakah* was not a sacrifice for them. They did not have to change their lifestyle to contribute a percentage of their wealth to charity – they didn't need to sacrifice any of their houses, or their private jets, or their fancy cars, or their expensive vacations to receive their recognition as generous and revered donors. They had so much wealth that giving away large amounts of money did not infringe at all on their extravagant lifestyle. While their giving was admirable, it was not sacrificial.

On the other hand, I frequently see people who can barely afford to pay their own bills, but still find a way to donate to the Temple, or to other causes that resonate with their charitable instincts. These are people who make a sacrifice, who go above and beyond their capacity to do what is virtuous – to find ways to make sacrifices of themselves for the betterment of the community. When what we give of ourselves is actually a sacrifice, then G-d takes notice and our gift ennoble us.

Moses Montefiore was an Englishman who founded the first neighborhood in Jerusalem outside the walls of the old city. He was a wealthy and successful businessman in London and was a confidant of the Queen. One day the Queen, out of curiosity asked him how much money he had earned that year. He answered with a very high figure – to which the Queen responded that while that was a lot of money, she knew for a fact that he had made even more than that. Montefiore responded to her, “My Queen, it is true I made more this year, but the number I gave you was the amount of money that I have given to charity this year. That is the money I have sacrificed, so that is the money that I can truly call my own.”

Going above and beyond – those are the instances in which we truly actualize our own potential. We learned about this on Rosh Hashanah when we read the story of the *akeidah* – the binding of Isaac. When Abraham is asked to sacrifice his own son, his favorite son, the one who is most beloved to him, the actual purpose was not to convince G-d that Abraham would make the ultimate sacrifice on his behalf. According to the great medieval sage Nachmanides, the real intent was for Abraham to convince himself that he was capable of such a noble act, to convince himself he could go *above and beyond* anything else G-d had ever asked him to do before. And once Abraham learned that he could make the supreme sacrifice for G-d, other, more remote sacrifices suddenly no longer seemed so daunting.

At the time of the binding of Isaac, Isaac was 37 years old. The Midrash teaches us that immediately after the aborted sacrifice, Abraham and Isaac parted ways. Isaac went to continue his studies of the ways of G-d with Shem and Eivar, two of the sons of Noah. Up until that point Abraham was not willing to make the small sacrifice of allowing Isaac to go off on his own, but after this test he realized he needed to make other sacrifices in his life as well. Rabbi Ahron Solevetichik, a well-known 20th century rabbi and thinker, explains that G-d halted the sacrifice of Isaac to teach us that we do not demonstrate our sacrifice to G-d through martyrdom, but rather through the “constant, small sacrifices of life.” For a Jew, sacrifice is found in the daily toils of life, not in the escape from this world that death provides.

Pablo Picasso used to say that he found inspiration from trying to do the things he could not do. Unfortunately for many of us, the Jewish tradition of sacrifice is a foreign

concept. We do what is convenient, we do what is easy, we do the least we can do to get away with it, we really do not sacrifice at all.

There was once a cartoon in the newspaper that depicted an out of shape, somewhat disheveled business man in a doctor's office speaking with his physician. He was being lectured about his unhealthy lifestyle and his poor diet. Above in the caption, the doctor said, "Would you rather exercise one hour a day or be dead twenty four hours a day?" What an alarming wakeup call it is when your doctor tells you that you are heading down a path of self destruction?" For Jews Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are our yearly spiritual wakeup call, a wakeup call to reevaluate the direction of our lives, to reevaluate our relationships, and to reevaluate our response to the needs of our community. Judaism says to us it is never too late to change course. It is never too late to sacrifice our pride, and to apologize to those we have hurt. It is never too late to devote ourselves to the causes we have neglected. But all of these tasks demand sacrifice. All of these tasks demand a part of ourselves - but most importantly all of these tasks are within our power to accomplish.

I cannot begin to describe how impressed I was last year with our *Anshei Mitzvah* class who devoted themselves to two years of study in order to experience the Bar/Bat Mitzvah they have never had during their youth. They toiled over Hebrew, learned the basics of our people's history and theology, and eventually led our congregation in prayer - and all fourteen of them read from the Torah. That is the kind of sacrifice I am talking about - the kind of thing where your initial impression is, "oh, I could never do that." For most that is enough to deter them, but for people with the inspiration of a Picasso,

that preliminary feeling of doubt is exactly what motivates them to conquer the task at hand.

Anshei Mitzvah is just one option. Last year on our Israel trip one of our families was so inspired by being in the Holy Land that they told me when they got back they were going to renew their commitment to Judaism. They decided they were going to start by properly observing all the holidays on the Jewish calendar, and for the most part they have been keeping to that commitment. Others have made efforts to light Shabbat candles as a family every Friday night at the beginning of Shabbat and to celebrate *Havdalah* at the end of Shabbat, while others have made extreme financial sacrifices to make sure they could send their children to Jewish camps in the summertime. Some have committed to coming to Shabbat services a minimum of once a month and some have joined a committee in order to give back to the Temple everything that they receive from being part of our family.

These are just some options that when most of us hear them, our initial impression is, that is not for me. Or, I have done that already and it's time for others to do their share. Today I am reminding you that the sacrifices required of us are daily – everyday we must give of ourselves something worthwhile, something meaningful and not only the things that are non-evasive of our normal routine. Often I hear personal laments from those who feel that they do not “get” anything out of organized religion and that is why they are not active. But in virtually every case, those who do not “get” anything out of Judaism are those who do not “give” anything to Judaism. They are those who never sacrifice above and beyond what is comfortable to them. They are the spiritually myopic among us who are unwilling to internalize the sacrifices required of any Jew that expects to have a

relationship with the Almighty. They are those who are not willing to imagine what they might truly be accomplish.

The great violinist Itzhak Pearlman once gave a performance in 1995 in front of a sold out theatre. Pearlman suffers from polio and had great difficulty settling into his chair to begin the concert. Once ready, he began to play when suddenly a loud pop reverberated through the hall. It was so loud that the orchestra halted their music. What had happened was one of the four strings on Pearlman's violin snapped rendering the violin unusable since everyone knows that a violin cannot be played with only three strings. Pearlman remained quiet for a moment, and then instructed the orchestra to continue. With tremendous focus, he continued playing. Sweating profusely and concentrating with great ferocity, Pearlman performed with unheard of skill and valor and completed the entire concert. When he finished, a stunned and silent audience erupted in a deafening standing ovation that brought Pearlman to tears. He had accomplished something with a violin that even he never thought was possible.

Judaism is about going above and beyond. The word Israel means to "strive with G-d." We are a people who should be in constant conversation with our inner being, challenging ourselves to strive and to sacrifice in order to achieve our moral and spiritual pursuits. The Day of Atonement is upon us. The great Shofar has sounded. Let it be a clarion call for self reflection, for spiritual self renewal.

Kein Yehi Ratzon – May this be G-d's will.

Amen.