

# COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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## Why Do We Sacrifice?

Vayikra - 21 March 2015 / 1 Nisan 5775

The laws of sacrifices that dominate the early chapters of the book of Leviticus, are among the hardest in the Torah to relate to in the present. It has been almost 2,000 years since the Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system came to an end. But Jewish thinkers, especially the more mystical among them, strove to understand the inner significance of the sacrifices and the statement they made about the relationship between humanity and God. They were thus able to rescue their spirit even if their physical enactment was no longer possible.

Among the simplest yet most profound was the comment made by R. Shneur Zalman of Ladi, the first Rebbe of Lubavitch. He noticed a grammatical oddity about the second line of today's parsha:

Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: *when one of you offers a sacrifice to the Lord, the sacrifice must be taken from the cattle, sheep or goats.* (Lev. 1:2)

Or so the verse *would* read if it were constructed according to the normal rules of grammar. However, in Hebrew the word order of the sentence is strange and unexpected. We would expect to read: *adam mikem ki yakriv*, "when one of you offers a sacrifice". Instead what it says is *adam ki yakriv mikem*, "when one offers a sacrifice of you". The essence of sacrifice, said R. Shneur Zalman, is that we offer ourselves. We bring to God our faculties, our energies, our thoughts and emotions. The physical form of sacrifice – an

animal offered on the altar – is only an external manifestation of an inner act. The real sacrifice is *mikem*, “of you”. We give God something of ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

What exactly is it that we give God when we offer a sacrifice? The Jewish mystics, among them R. Shneur Zalman, spoke about two souls each of us has – the animal soul (*nefesh ha-behamit*) and the Godly soul. On the one hand we are physical beings. We are part of nature. We have physical needs: food, drink, shelter. We are born, we live, we die. As Ecclesiastes puts it:

**“The essence of sacrifice, said R. Shneur Zalman, is that we offer ourselves. We bring to God our faculties, our energies, our thoughts and emotions.”**

Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. Both have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is a mere fleeting breath. (Ecclesiastes 3: 19)

Yet we are not simply animals. We have within us immortal longings. We can think, speak and communicate. We can, by acts of speaking and listening, reach out to others. We are the one life form known to us in the universe that can ask the question “Why?” We can formulate ideas and be moved by high ideals. We are not governed by biological drives alone. Psalm 8 is a hymn of wonder on this theme:

When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place,  
what is man that you are mindful of him,  
the son of man that you care for him?  
Yet You made him a little lower than the angels  
and crowned him with glory and honor.  
You made him ruler over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under his feet . . . (Psalm 8: 4-7)

Physically, we are almost nothing; spiritually, we are brushed by the wings of eternity. We have a Godly soul. The nature of sacrifice, understood psychologically, is thus clear. What we offer God is (not just an animal but) the *nefesh ha-behamit*, the animal soul within us.

How does this work out in detail? A hint is given by the three types of animal mentioned in the verse: *behemah* (animal), *bakar* (cattle) and *tzon* (flock). Each represents a separate animal-like feature of the human personality.

*Behemah* represents the animal instinct itself. The word refers to domesticated animals. It does not imply the savage instincts of the predator. What it means is

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<sup>1</sup> R. Shneur Zalman of Ladi, *Likkutei Torah*, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1984, Vayikra 2aff.

something more tame. Animals spend their time searching for food. Their lives are bounded by the struggle to survive. To sacrifice the animal within us is to be moved by something more than mere survival.

Wittgenstein, when asked what was the task of philosophy, answered “To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle”<sup>2</sup>. The fly, trapped in the bottle, bangs its head against the glass, trying to find a way out. The one thing it fails to do is to look up. The Godly soul within us is the force that makes us look up, beyond the physical

world, beyond mere survival, in search of meaning, purpose, goal. The word *bakar*, cattle, in Hebrew reminds us of the word *boker*, “dawn”, literally to “break through”, as the first rays of sunlight break through the darkness of night. Cattle, stampeding, break through barriers. Unless constrained by fences, cattle are no respecters of boundaries. To sacrifice the *bakar* is to learn to recognize and respect boundaries – between holy and profane, pure and impure, permitted and forbidden. Barriers of the mind can sometimes be stronger than walls.

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Finally *tzon*, flocks, represents the herd instinct – the powerful drive to move in a given direction because others are doing likewise.<sup>3</sup> The great figures of Judaism – Abraham, Moses, the prophets – were distinguished precisely by their ability to stand apart from the herd; to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, to refuse to capitulate to the intellectual fashions of the moment. That ultimately is the meaning of holiness in Judaism. *Kadosh*, the holy, is something set apart, different, separate, distinctive. Jews were the only minority in history consistently to refuse to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith.

The noun *korban*, “sacrifice”, and the verb *le-hakriv*, “to offer something as a sacrifice” actually mean “that which is brought close” and “the act of bringing close”. The key element is not so much giving something up (the usual meaning of sacrifice) but rather bringing something close to God. *Le-hakriv* is to bring the animal element within us to be transformed through the Divine fire that once burned on the altar, and still burns at the heart of prayer if we truly seek closeness to God.

By one of the ironies of history, this ancient idea has become suddenly contemporary. Darwinism, the decoding of the human genome, and scientific materialism (the idea that the material is all there is) have led to the widespread conclusion that we are animals, nothing more, nothing less. We share 98 per cent of our genes with the primates. We are, as Desmond Morris used to put it, “the naked ape”<sup>4</sup>. On this view, *Homo sapiens* exists by mere accident. We are the result of a random series of

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<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, New York: Macmillan, 1953, 309.

<sup>3</sup> The classic works on crowd behavior and the herd instinct are Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, 1841; Gustav le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 1897; Wilfred Trotter, *Instincts of the herd in peace and war*, 1914; and Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, New York, Viking Press, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape*. New York: Dell Pub., 1984.

genetic mutations and just happened to be more adapted to survival than other species. The *nefesh ha-behamit*, the animal soul, is all there is.

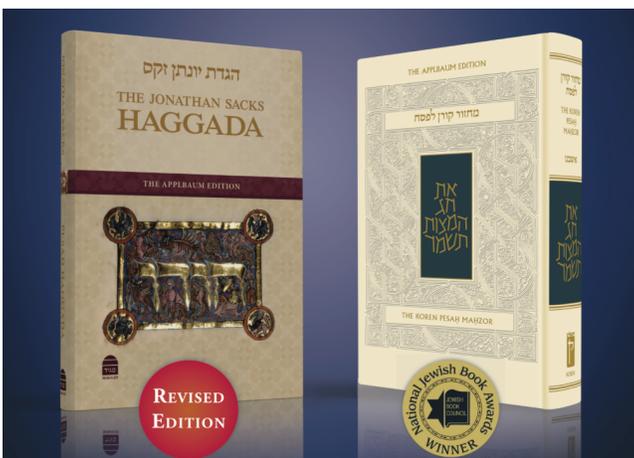
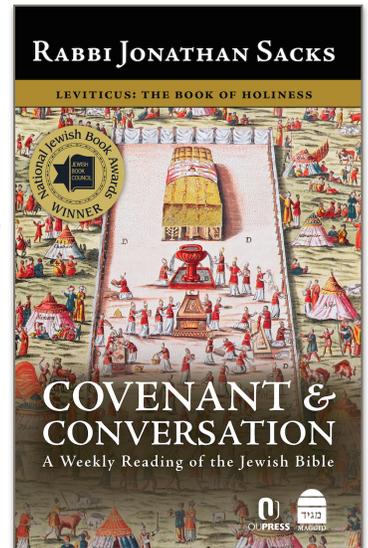
The refutation of this idea – and it is surely among the most reductive ever to be held by intelligent minds – lies in the very act of sacrifice itself as the mystics understood it. We can redirect our animal instincts. We can rise above mere survival. We are capable of honouring boundaries. We can step outside our environment. As Harvard neuroscientist Steven Pinker put it: “Nature does not dictate what we should accept or how we should live,” adding, “and if my genes don't like it they can go jump in the lake.”<sup>5</sup> Or as Katharine Hepburn majestically said to Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*, “Nature, Mr Allnut, is what we were put on earth to rise above.”

We can transcend the *behemah*, the *bakar* and the *tzon*. No animal is capable of self-transformation, but we are. Poetry, music, love, wonder – the things that have no survival value but which speak to our deepest sense of being – all tell us that we are not mere animals, assemblages of selfish genes. By bringing that which is animal within us close to God, we allow the material to be suffused with the spiritual and we become something else: no longer slaves of nature but servants of the living God.

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<sup>5</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1997, 54.