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A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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## Violence and the Sacred

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Why sacrifices? To be sure, they have not been part of the life of Judaism since the destruction of the Second Temple, almost 2,000 years ago. But why, if they are a means to an end, did God choose *this* end? This is, of course, one of the deepest questions in Judaism, and there are many answers. Here I want explore just one, first given by the early fifteenth century Jewish thinker, R. Joseph Albo (Spain, 1380-1444), in his *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* (*The Book of Principles*, 1425).<sup>1</sup>

**“Why sacrifices? Why, if they are a means to an end, did God choose *this* end?”**

Albo’s theory took as its starting point, not sacrifices but two other intriguing questions. The first: Why, after the flood, did God permit human beings to eat meat? (Gen. 9: 3-5). Initially, neither human beings nor animals had been meat-eaters (Gen. 1: 29-30). What caused God, as it were, to change His mind? The second: What was wrong with the first act of sacrifice -- Cain’s offering of “some of the fruits of the soil” (Gen. 4:3-5). God’s rejection of that offering led directly to the first murder, when Cain killed Abel. What was at stake in the difference between Cain and Abel as to how to bring a gift to God?

Albo’s theory is this. Killing animals for food is inherently wrong. It involves taking the life of a sentient being to satisfy our needs. Cain knew this. He believed there was a strong kinship between man and the animals. That is why he offered, not an animal sacrifice, but a vegetable one (his error, according to Albo, is that he should have brought fruit, not vegetables – the highest, not the lowest, of non-meat produce). Abel, by contrast, believed that there was a qualitative

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Joseph Albo, *Sefer HaIkkarim* III:15.

difference between man and the animals. Had God not told the first humans: “Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves in the ground”? That is why he brought an animal sacrifice. Once Cain saw that Abel’s sacrifice had been accepted while his own was not, he reasoned thus. If God (who forbids us to kill animals for food) permits and even favours killing an animal as a sacrifice, and if (as Cain believed) there is no ultimate difference between human beings and animals, then I shall offer the very highest living being as a sacrifice to God, namely my brother Abel. *Cain killed Abel as a human sacrifice.*

That is why God permitted meat-eating after the flood. Before the flood, the world had been “filled with violence”. Perhaps violence is an inherent part of human nature. If there were to be a humanity at all, God would have to lower his demands of mankind. *Let them kill animals*, He said, *rather than kill human beings* – the one form of life that is not only God’s creation but also God’s image. Hence the otherwise almost unintelligible sequence of verses after Noah and his family emerge on dry land:

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart, “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood . . .”

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them . . .

“Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything . . .

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God, has God made man.” (Gen. 8: 29 – 9: 6)

According to Albo the logic of the passage is clear. Noah offers an animal sacrifice in thanksgiving for having survived the flood. God sees that human beings need this way of expressing themselves. They are genetically predisposed to violence (“every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood”). If, therefore, society is to survive, human beings need to be able to direct their violence toward non-human animals, whether as food or sacrificial offering. The crucial ethical line to be drawn is between human and non-human. The permission to kill animals is accompanied by an absolute prohibition against killing human beings (“for in the image of God, has God made man”).

It is not that God approves of killing animals, whether for sacrifice or food, but that to forbid this to human beings, given their genetic predisposition to violence, is utopian. It is not for now but for the end of days. In the meanwhile, the least bad solution is to let people kill animals rather than murder their fellow humans. Animal sacrifices are a concession to human nature<sup>2</sup>. *Sacrifices are a substitute for violence directed against mankind.*

The contemporary thinker who has done most to revive this

**“The crucial ethical line to be drawn is between human and non-human. The permission to kill animals is accompanied by an absolute prohibition against killing human beings.”**

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<sup>2</sup> On why God never chooses to *change* human nature, see Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Book III, ch. 32.

understanding (without, however, referring to Albo or the Jewish tradition) is René Girard, in such books as *Violence and the Sacred*, *The Scapegoat*, and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. The common denominator in sacrifices, he argues, is:

. . . internal violence – all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels within the community that the sacrifices are designed to suppress. The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else derives from that.<sup>3</sup>

The worst form of violence within and between societies is *vengeance*, “an interminable, infinitely repetitive process”. Hillel (whom Girard also does not quote) said, on seeing a human skull floating on water, “Because you drowned others, they drowned you, and those who drowned you will in the end themselves be drowned” (Avot 2: 7).

Sacrifices are one way of diverting the destructive energy of revenge. Why then do modern societies not practice sacrifice? Because, argues Girard, there is another way of displacing vengeance:

Vengeance is a vicious circle whose effect on primitive societies can only be surmised. For us the circle has been broken. We owe our good fortune to one of our social institutions above all: our judicial system, which serves to deflect the menace of vengeance. The system does not suppress vengeance; rather, it effectively limits itself to a single act of reprisal, enacted by a sovereign authority specializing in this particular function. The decisions of the judiciary are invariably presented as the final word on vengeance.<sup>4</sup>

Not only does Girard’s theory re-affirm the view of Albo. It also helps us understand the profound insight of the prophets and of Judaism as a whole. *Sacrifices are not ends in themselves, but part of the Torah’s programme to construct a world redeemed from the otherwise interminable cycle of revenge. The other part of that programme, and God’s greatest desire, is a world governed by justice.* That, we recall, was His first charge to Abraham, to “instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by *doing what is right and just*” (Gen. 18: 19).

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Have we therefore moved beyond that stage in human history in which animal sacrifices have a point? Has justice become a powerful enough reality that we no longer need religious rituals to divert the violence between human beings? Would that it were so. In his book *The Warrior’s Honour* (1997), Michael Ignatieff tries to understand the wave of ethnic conflict and violence (Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Rwanda) that has scarred the face of humanity since the end of the Cold War. What happened to the liberal dream of “the end of history”? His words go the very heart of the new world disorder:

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<sup>3</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

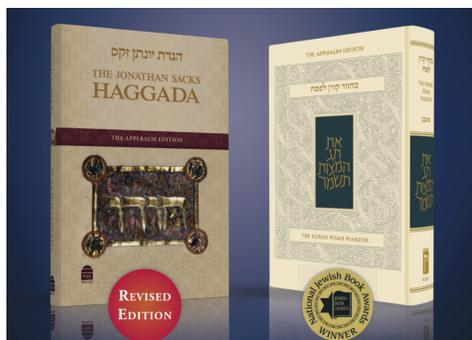
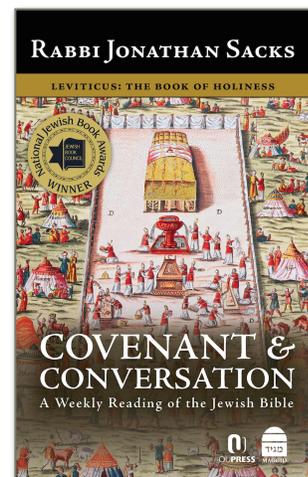
The chief moral obstacle in the path of reconciliation is the desire for revenge. Now, revenge is commonly regarded as a low and unworthy emotion, and because it is regarded as such, its deep moral hold on people is rarely understood. But revenge – morally considered – is a desire to keep faith with the dead, to honour their memory by taking up their cause where they left off. Revenge keeps faith between generations . . . This cycle of intergenerational recrimination has no logical end . . . But it is the very impossibility of intergenerational vengeance that locks communities into the compulsion to repeat . . . Reconciliation has no chance against vengeance unless it respects the emotions that sustain vengeance, unless it can replace the respect entailed in vengeance with rituals in which communities once at war learn to mourn their dead together.<sup>5</sup>

Far from speaking to an age long gone and forgotten, the laws of sacrifice tell us three things as important now as then: first, violence is still part of human nature, never more dangerous than when combined with an ethic of revenge; second, rather than denying its existence, we must find ways of redirecting it so that it does not claim yet more human sacrifices; third, that the only ultimate alternative to sacrifices, animal or human, is the one first propounded millennia ago by the prophets of ancient Israel. No one put it better than Amos:

Even though you bring Me burnt offerings and offerings of grain,  
I will not accept them . . .  
But let justice roll down like a river,  
And righteousness like a never-failing stream (Amos 5: 23-24)



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<sup>5</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honour: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*, 188-190.