

## "THE MEANING OF SACRIFICE"

8th in a series on Jewish Meanings

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Today's Bible Reading has no doubt perplexed a good many of us. The Portion of the Week, and the whole book of Vayikra for that matter, is a series of detailed instructions concerning the various sacrificial offerings performed in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. Not only do the intricate complexities of the Service itself bewilder us, but we wonder as well about the meaning behind the concept of Sacrifice. It is impossible to explain, within the confines of one lecture or sermon, the motives and rationale of animal sacrifice. Our Talmudic literature is full of learned discussions on this problem, and Maimonides has developed a good deal of his Philosophy of Religion about this question. But especially in our days, when Reform has declared this part of our religion as antiquated, when Reconstructionism has pronounced it uncivilized and when Conservative Rabbis have apologetically eliminated all mention of Sacrifice from their Prayer Books, especially today is it important to dwell upon the general idea of Sacrifice. For beyond and above the complicated descriptions of the ritual of slaughter, the sprinkling of the blood, the offering and the other rites, there is the grand religious ideal of Sacrifice as such, what laymen commonly refer to as "self-sacrifice". Perhaps if we understand the Jewish Meaning of Sacrifice, we will be better able to appreciate the ritual of animal sacrifice as Divinely revealed in the Bible.

The first thing to be understood about Sacrifice, is that it means more than merely giving something you have. Let us purge ourselves of the commercial slant of the world. The sign "Selling at a Sacrifice" one sees so often on store-windows is merely a clever business technique designed to stimulate sales later. When one sacrifices, one does not sell - he gives. Even more than that - sacrifice means not only giving what you have, it means giving what you are. What we have was never ours in the first place - LA'SHEM HA'ARETZ UMELO'AH, "for the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof". And we cannot speak of sacrificing that which is not ours. It is our souls - our very selves - that we are bidden to give if we would sacrifice. An ancient Jewish legend confirms this point when it relates that since the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of ritual animal sacrifice, Michael, the guardian angel of Israel, offers

sacrifices daily in heaven upon a spiritual altar. And what does he sacrifice? NISHMOS TZADIKIM, says the legend, the souls of the pious. For indeed the sacrifice of the soul, the giving of the self and from the self, is the true and highest meaning of worthy sacrifice. So many people unfortunately think they have sacrificed when they have merely given. Give of the dollars in your bank - no matter how much - and you have made a generous gift; but give of the sweat of your brow and the blood in your veins, then you have brought a sacrifice. It is the soul and the self, not the sum and substance, which makes for real sacrifice.

No wonder, therefore, that our Rabbis declared as Law the rule that: N'DARIM UNEDAVOS M'KABLIN MIN HA'GOYIM, VE'KORBONOS EIN M'KABLIN MEI'HEN, that we are permitted to accept, in the Temple and upon the altar, those offerings which are classified as NDARIM And NDAVOS, as gifts and vows, but we may not accept KORBONOS, sacrifices, from any other than a Jew. All the world can give gifts. But it is the pride of the Jew that he knows how to sacrifice. When Abraham walked into the Burning Furnace, he did more than give a donation - he sacrificed. When Esau gave his father Isaac choice cuts of meat from animals that he had hunted down, he merely gave; when Jacob decided to pattern his entire life after his father, he sacrificed. When we Jews of today gave and give to Israel, we can rightly be proud of ourselves - but in the end we have merely given. Our real Jewish claim to pride rests upon those CHALUTZIM, those fearless pioneers who left careers and prosperity to settle an unknown and rugged country, those who gave of their own persons, those who sacrificed. The secret of the Jew is indeed his ability to sacrifice. And therefore Rabbis today urge their people to do more than place their money in the synagogue's coffers; they appeal to them to place themselves in the synagogue proper.

And the second thought that presents itself in regard to Sacrifice, is that, in the words of Rabbi Lookstein, there is a "kick-back to sacrifice". Sacrifice is not a payment on an old debt; it is an initial investment from which you can expect to reap dividends. When you give of yourself, you get something in return - call it an uplifting, call it a clear conscience, call it happiness, call it what you will. Indeed, our Rabbis give the lie to the popular conception that the highest type of sacrifice is that which hurts most, and that which brings the least returns. Our Sages quote G-d as evaluating the different offerings brought in the Temple, and saying that of all of them

He prefers the K'TORESS, or incense. For the other sacrifices are all offered for ulterior motives, for extraneous reasons. One for a sin that was committed, another to clear a guilt feeling that a sin might have been committed, and so on. But HA'KTORESS EINAH BA'AH LO AL HA'CHEIT VE'LO AL HA'AVON VE'LO AL HA'ASHAM, EIA AL HA'SIMCHAH, the incense is offered neither for the expiation of a sin, nor for a crime nor for a guilt-feeling, but as a symbol of Happiness. G-d rates that sacrifice highest which brings spiritual pleasure to the giver. The dividends on Sacrifice are paid in happiness of mind, peace of soul and clarity of conscience.

A man who was an army chaplain in the last war \* tells of a touching incident which illustrates this point with great clarity. He says that he was witness to the following event: a father had come to pay his first visit to his son who was severely wounded in the Battle of the Bulge, and who was now in an army hospital after having both his feet amputated. When the father came into the room, the boy's eyes lit up. "Hello, Dad", he greeted him. But the father just looked at his beloved son. He stared at him, and tears began to flood his eyes. He could not speak, for his throat was taut and choked, and in desperation he turned his face away from that boy without saying a word. "What's the matter, Dad, what's wrong?" the young man asked. Finally the father answered, in a voice weighted with grief, "I can't bear to think of you having lost both your legs". "No, Dad," answered the boy, "don't think of it that way. I didn't lose any legs. I merely gave them - I gave them in return for a clear conscience".

A clear conscience gained, happiness won, is then the most important ingredient in the prescription for Sacrifice. There is indeed a "kick-back" to sacrifice, it pays dividends - in SIMCHAH, in happiness and spiritual elation.

Look at it that way, and you can anticipate the third point we ~~we~~ shall make this morning; and that is, that Sacrifice, thus understood, becomes the most important and most inclusive motif in all religion. When a man can give of himself, for a great and holy cause, and despite the pain and tragedy still feel that he has gained something <sup>\*</sup> to sacrifice in this manner is the ability to lead a holy life. Indeed, the word "sacrifice" itself is derived from two ancient words which mean "to make holy". To sacrifice is to sanctify, and sanctity stands out above all as the prime achievement of religion. In fact, the Laws of Sacrifice are referred to, in Talmudic Literature, as KODOSHIM, \*invaluable, then he has reached the highest rung of religious experience. The ability

## Holiness or Sanctity.

The Talmud had this supremacy of Sacrifice in mind when it recorded the following debate which took place some 18 hundred years ago. Ben Zoma said: MATZASI PASUK KOLEL BE'YOSSER, I have found a verse which includes the essence of the whole Torah, and that is SHMA YISROEL..... VE'AHAVTA ES HA'SHEM ELOKECHA, "Hear O Israel, the Lord thy G-d is One, And thou shalt love the Lord thy G-d with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy might." The Love of G-d, argues Ben Zoma, is the ultimate accomplishment of a Man of Religion. Do that and you have done all else. But there is a second opinion: Ben Nanass said: MATZASI PASUK KOLLEL YOSSER, I have found an even more inclusive verse, and that is: VE'AHAVTA LE'REYACHA KAMOCHA, "And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself". Love of Man, reasons Ben Nanass, is an even greater attainment than Love of G-d. For in order to begin to love your neighbor, you have got to love his Creator. Love of Man implies Love of G-d, in Whose image man was made. Ethics presumes religion. But there was yet a third opinion, uttered by Rabbi Shimon Ben Pazi, an opinion which caused a visiting Rabbi in the Academy to arise and announce in no uncertain terms that HALACH K'BEN PAZI, that this opinion was to be accepted as authoritative. And that is, MATZASI PASUK KOLLEL YOSSER, the most all-inclusive and all-embracing verse in the Torah is ES HA'KEVESS HA'ECHAD TA'ASEH BA'BOKER, a sheep is to be x sacrificed every morning. What an anti-climax that seems! Here two Rabbis argue the relative importance of such lofty concepts as Love of G-d and Love of Man, and this third Rabbi announces with a flourish that both are wrong, and that the greatest religious principle is the slaughter of a lamb! And yet HALACHAH K'BEN PAZI, his voice is the authoritative voice of Judaism. For Sacrifice is indeed on the top of the pyramid of Jewish ideals. It includes Love of G-d, which makes Sacrifice worthwhile, and Love of Man, which is what you sacrifice for, and, in addition - Love of Self. Yes, Love of Self. Not that self-love which makes a man seek more profit, not that which makes him hunt for security or popularity or power. But the Love of Self which makes man search for spiritual satisfaction, for a purpose in life, for a reason for existing, for the happiness to the self which comes from giving of the self. When Rabbi Akiva offered up his soul in holy martyrdom, he did it out of love of G-d - his last words were "thou shalt love the Lord thy G-d", and out of the love of Man,

- he was fighting for the freedom of Israel, his people, and out of Love of Self, the love of self which made him strive to satisfy his deep spiritual yearnings and justify his whole life's work. It was that Love of Self which made him reply to his students, who asked him why he made no attempt to save himself, that "KOL YAMAI HITZTA'ARTI AL PASUK ZEH, VE'ACHSHAV SHE'BA LE'YADI LO AKAYMENU", that all my life I strove for the chance to sanctify G-d's Name, and now that I have the opportunity, shall I not do it? His sacrifice was guided by the desire to give meaning to his whole life. Love of Self, indeed, and a holier and higher type than most people recognize. Sacrifice certainly is the PASUK KOLLEL YOSSER, the most all-inclusive verse in the Bible of Life.

We have ascertained, then, that first, Sacrifice means more than giving what you have, it means giving what you are; secondly, that Sacrifice means taking as well as giving, it means getting spiritual satisfaction - happiness and a clear conscience; and thirdly, that therefore Sacrifice is the highest religious ideal known to us, for Sacrifice is an act of Holiness and includes Love of G-d, Love of Man and Love of Self.

But we cannot conclude this talk without mention of a fourth and final observation on the meaning of Sacrifice. And that is, that it is not sufficient to merely perform an act of sacrifice and then forget about it. The true act of sacrifice may be accomplished in one moment, but it is preceded by years of preparation and followed by years of recollection. Without that recollection and reliving, the sacrifice might be in vain. For the sacrifice must teach and direct long after it is done, and this it cannot do unless it is watched over, kept in mind, remembered and relived.

Our Rabbis indicate the same idea when they add a terse but enlightening commentary to the words of the Bible when, in describing Adam's sojourn in the Garden of Eden, the Torah relates that G-d charged Adam with the duty of LE'AVDAH ULE'SHAMRAH, "to work it and to keep it". Our Sages say but one word with regard to this command "to work it and keep it" - EILU HA'KARBONOS, "this refers to the sacrifices". Ah yes, if a man is to build himself an Eden, if a man is to secure an earthly Paradise, then his sacrifices must be more than LE'AVDAH, more than merely worked and accomplished, done and then gone and forgotten; there must be LE'SHAMRAH as well, these sacrifices must be kept. They must be remembered, they must be recalled at appropriate occasions, their effects

must be observed and sanctified even unto eternity, the changes to the good in the soul of man wrought by these sacrifices must be carefully guarded and watched and observed and nurtured, lest the sacrifices prove to have been in vain. Not only LE'AVDAH, but also LE'SHAMRAH; not only "to work" but also "to keep"; only then do the KORBONOS, the sacrifices, provide for a true Paradise. The lessons and morals drawn from true Sacrifice must be able to flood one's whole being and self to the end of days.

We are a people who are learned in the art of offering ourselves and skilled in the art of Sacrifice. As a people and as individuals we have and we do sacrifice much. May G-d, in His eternal beneficence, give us the strength to offer true KORBONOS, and may these sacrifices transform our world into a Paradise of Peace, our people into a Happy People, and us as individuals into dedicated, high-minded and blissful men and women.