On Sacrifice is a brief tome, a philosophical treatise on the give and take of Scripture and liturgy that is manifested so frequently in today's headline news, embodying acts of religion, terror, suicide, and war, seen in Moshe Halbertal's context as contributions to the public governance—as a sacrificial community. The gleanings from Halbertal's On Sacrifice reflect the multi-faceted idea and practice of sacrifice within theistic Judaism (e.g., korbanot [animal offerings] and kiddush ha-Shem [acts of martyrdom]) and its implications in historic and contemporary ethics, politics, and religion. In the religious domain, the sacrificial offering is given in the context of a hierarchical relationship—acceptance, rejection, drama, and trauma thereof are appropriately discussed.

Self-transcendence for the sake of higher commitments and values is central in the moral and political arenas. Positive and negative dimensions of self-sacrifice (i.e., noble and ideal or brutal and violent) contribute to societal cohesion and bind past and future memory and obligation. These and other issues (e.g., morality may demand sacrifice but sacrificial acts do not necessarily create legitimacy) are succinctly introduced and analyzed from historical, cultural, and psychological perspectives and in the fullness of Jewish sacred texts, halakhic jurisdiction, and non-Jewish sources. In sum, Halberthal presents an exacting and lucidly written narrative about the sense and essence of sacrifice from religious biblical injunction of animal sacrifices to patriotic ideas such as self-sacrifice in war.

KORBAN

The key to unlocking Halbertal's intent with this recent work is understanding the meaning and application of korban (sacrifice), which is spelled out in his Introduction in terms of religion, ethics, and politics. This, in turn, implies the binary division of the book into sacrifice as a religious ritual and commitment of “Man to a Higher Being” and sacrifice motivated by obligation entailing “giving for” as an idea, a cause, etc. Part One, “Sacrificing To,” suggests that korban in biblical, rabbinic, and liturgical texts is divided across grateful expression and a course of action, method, or instrument by which an act can be accomplished or an end achieved. Religion-related issues are primarily discussed. Primarily animal sacrifices but also human sacrifices are depicted as obligated fulfillment of the command of God. Contrary to contemporary expectation, no reciprocal benefit is guaranteed or received, since God as God is beyond mortality and powers thereof. The divine-human contract is uneven. Required obligation of man to God does not equate to a God restricted to the whims of man. Thus, bringing sacrificial animal offerings to secure some health, happiness, victory in battle, wealth, and so on is wishful vanity. Additionally, sacrificial offerings portrayed as a gift to God is weighed by Halbertal, who also acknowledges the Semitist William Robertson Smith's cogent point that the act of sacrifice is an expiation of sins.

Part Two, “Sacrifice For,” deals in moral and political usage, which emboldens self-sacrifice, martyrdom, and acts of brutality and violence.
Halbertal views his sections as independent fields of inquiry, but he acknowledges that in various cultures and languages, the categories are interdependent and, in the end, “encompass rich and diverse realms of human life.”

GIFT TO GOD

Part One, “Sacrificing To,” raises issues specifically related to sacrificial offerings: acceptance, and rejection, substitutes (charity, suffering, prayer), exchanges, and love. Torah and other biblical references are coherently viewed through the lenses of revelation, rabbinics, and reason (deductive). Halbertal grasps the differences between theoretical and practical constructs of sacrifice, that is to say, meaning and acceptance (or rejection). Against the canvas of ancient Mediterranean religions, Greek Hellenistic and Roman thought, and a nod to the early Church leaders, or Church fathers, the author conjectures biblical narrative, Second Temple Judaism, and rabbinic thought as reenactments of God’s sacrificial design on humanity’s terms. He uses liturgical selections to underscore specific Jewish parallels and departure.

Part One discusses at length that sacrifice is a gift to God but the reward is the giver’s and not the receiver’s. God as God is the creator of light and life, the provider of the good and peace, and is in no need of mortal accolades, which function as tokens of submission and gratitude, and are driven toward an end to wars. Sacrifice plays a purification role suggested by the link between animal sacrifice, divine expiation, and violence. Namely, the purport of animal sacrifice emboldened by true contrition per divine dicta notably diminishes the spread of violence and the dominance of war. How so? A chosen victim (animal or human), as substitute for the participants in the atonement ritual, is offered to placate God, to annul self and group punishment, and to halt violence by one’s foe. The lesson taught here is that sacrifice leads to the atonement of sin. Noteworthy is the language of natal origin of Israel, first-born Son of the Lord, and (in Christian context) Jesus, the son of God. The former is birthed in slavery and traverses to freedom, and the latter is crucified to attain atonement for others.

Tzedakah

Part One discusses other acts of divine atonement. Tzedakah (from the Hebrew root šdq, meaning justice and encompassing righteousness and fairness) refers to the responsibility to assist the poor, to sustain the needy, and to provide support for worthwhile causes. Believing in tzedakah is doing tzedakah, conscientiously contributing to a moral society and worldview. Practice of the doctrine of tikkun olam (repair of the world/construction for eternity) is incumbent on Jew and Gentile to restore the earth and all therein to receive a fair and just share of the world’s resources. Gleanings reflect the role of tzedakah in Jewish theological and ethical thought; cited sources on the subject of charitable giving and receiving are also noted.

Tzedakah donations are a central part of the Jewish way of life. The norm of giving to charity is 10 percent of one’s income though many who are able might give more. Tzedakah boxes adorn homes and synagogues. They are filled regularly for a variety of reasons, both personal and communal. Take prayer time, for example: worship attendees donate at the end of a weekday service (not on Shabbat or at festivals where currency is prohibited); mourners contribute on days of mourning and yahrzeit (customarily, a year after burial); both donate in memory of the deceased. Traditionally, women’s private prayer and petition are before licht bentshen, domestic candle lighting ushering in holy time, Shabbat, and festivals, and so forth. The purport of animal sacrifice (biblical and rabbinic), in the main for petition, forgiveness, and thanksgiving is universally replaced today by acts of tzedakah. Indeed, according to Jewish law, the poorest of the poor is obligated to participate in this beneficiary mitzvah, which some sages claim is the highest of all commandments.
Indeed, it is counted with tefillah (prayer) and teshuvah (repentance) in helping divert the divine punishment of individual sin (see m. Pe'ah 1:1, recited in Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur musaf service according to the Ashkenazi rite). To live in the image of God-the-Protector is the blueprint of korbanot and tzedakah. The evidence is in the doing. Also, in lieu of animal sacrifices, post-Second Temple rabbinic adaptation of suffering as a substitute for punishment and daily prayers of appeal, intervention, requests, and thanksgiving are enactments of atonement.

METHODOLOGY

Halbertal’s meditative philosophical approach sans biblical criticism or academic reading may explain some impropriety in biblical understanding. For example, Halbertal sees no peshat explanation in Genesis 4 regarding differences in the sacrificial offerings of Abel and Cain. Yet, the former is accepted and the reward is murder. To wit, Halbertal extracts/interprets (drash) a sacrificial fallout; that is, non-acceptable divine offerings may cause acts of violence and murder. Fair enough, but symbolically Cain (agriculture) and Abel (meat) represent contesting economic systems mirrored throughout the ages. We, thus, find an academic, etiological explanation to Halbertal’s observation that rejected sacrifices seed traumatic after-effects. Similarly, he questions what would Father Abraham have gained by sacrificing his beloved son, Isaac, in response to a divine decree? Here, a close examination of rabbinic notions of attributes, associated with the names Elokim (Justice) and HaShem (Mercy), may decipher the deeper structure of Genesis 22. Elokim requests the filial offering and the malakh HaShem rescinds it. ‘atah yad ‘ati (now I know) exonerates the willingness of Abraham to obey God’s command. What was the test of Abraham?—Unquestionable moral obedience (Gen. 22:11–12).

Sacrifice Dilemma: Preserving Life and Kiddush HaShem

Preserving life is a core teaching of Judaism. While Scripture contains no specific injunction against suicide, based on Genesis 9:5 (“For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning”), the sages taught that suicide is wrong and punishable by divine decree. In the community, it meant burial outside the sacred precincts of the cemetery and suspension of mourning laws and customs.

This strong edict was intended to discourage Jews who contemplated suicide, but it caused great grief and embarrassment for the family of those who did commit suicide. To mitigate this problem, the sages ruled that for a death to be treated as suicide under the law, it must be both voluntary and premeditated. The rabbinical presumption was that people who kill themselves—axiomatic in cases of child suicide—do so without the premeditation. So their death is not considered a suicide at all. This idea is founded on the suicide of King Saul, who is described as having been in great mental distress “lest these uncircumcised (Philistines) come and thrust me through and make a mock of me” (1 Sam. 3:14). His death by his own sword is used by many rabbis as a precedent for not stigmatizing a person who, in a situation of anguish, stress, and despair, takes his or her own life.

Thus, while in normal times, acts of suicide may be blameworthy, in stressful times—Masada, the Bar-Kokhba rebellion, the Crusades, Inquisitions, pogroms—letting oneself be killed or even killing oneself for “the sanctification of God’s name” is deemed by many to be praiseworthy. Maimonides, who codified Jewish attitudes toward martyrdom, taught that a Jew forced or intimidated to transgress the commandments in public or in a time of great religious persecution is expected to suffer death instead (Mishneh Torah, Yesode Ha-Torah 5.3). On the other hand, Maimonides made clear that a person who unnecessarily suffers death—for
example, in circumstances under which Jewish law should be set aside in the interest of saving a life—is an ordinary suicide. But medieval French and German commentators opposed this decision. They felt that all people who sacrificed themselves, even when not strictly required to do so, are worthy of admiration and respect.

Persecution and destruction of Jews and Jewish communities over the centuries have contributed to the importance in the Jewish tradition of the concept of kidudsh ha-Shem, sanctification of God’s name through martyrdom. The talmudic dictum “be killed and do not transgress” has been the unyielding spine of a martyred Jewish people whose limbs were torn in nearly every historical time and place. In the medieval period, many Sephardim responded to acts of isolation, vilification, and expulsion by a policy of outward adaptation to the host culture and belief, coupled with an inward turning to a messianic Jewish ideology. To combat relentless terror and forced apostasy, Ashkenazi Jews, on the other hand, demonstrated a very strong belief in resurrection of the dead. Whole communities of Ashkenazim, thus, embraced martyrdom, and accounts of righteous martyrs of the past became part of the everyday teaching and veneration of Central and Eastern European Jews. Indeed, a central focus on the commandment of martyrdom—to be preceded by its own benediction: “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has commanded us to sanctify His name publicly”—is found in the famous work Shenei Lukot ha-Berit, known by the acronym Shelah, or SHELaH, written by the Prague-born and Polish-educated legal decisor and mystic Isaiah ben Abraham ha-Levi Horowitz (circa 1565–1630), published in Amsterdam in 1649.

Nevertheless, the pietistic, quietistic, and pacifistic way to heaven represented by the traditional approach to martyrdom was challenged by individual religious Zionist rabbis and Hasidic rebbes alike, who responded to the unparalleled horrors of the Shoah by advocating spontaneous as well as planned acts of sanctifying life (kidudsh ha-hayyim) even to death. The pattern of spiritual resistance falls into three categories, each responding to a different stimulus but united by the intention to combat the enemy’s determined goal of total annihilation of the Jewish people: the Jew’s obligation (1) to fight and resist in order to preserve life (Rabbis Isaac Nissenbaum and Menahem Zamba, Warsaw Ghetto); (2) to observe Jewish belief, faith, rites of passage, and the sacred calendar, however minimally and symbolically (for they contribute to reconstruction [tikun] in the midst of Shoah (Rabbi Kaloni Kalmush Shapiro, Piaseczno); and (3) to return to Zion, rebuilding the Land of Promise so the souls in burnt bodies can be restored to life by a people reborn (Rabbi Issachar Schlomo Tischthal, from Piestany, in present-day Slovakia, murdered after the war in 1945 by Ukrainians).

**CONTEMPORARY “SACRIFICE FOR”**

Halbertal’s volume confronts the “sacrifice idea” on two fronts. The first discusses ancient and traditional understandings of sacrifice as a religious concept and the second delves into the political and moral aspects of “sacrifice for” as a cause but at a price. To fulfill an obligation, in Kantian terms, Halberthal hypothesizes misguided self-love/self-transcendence and violence, resulting in immeasurable moral conflict. Self-interest, however self-honorable, does not justify unjust undertakings. His exegesis on the morality and immorality of war reflects well on issues facing the contemporary state in times of war and peace. Turning self-sacrifice into justification for immorality is an insightful oxymoron. On the other hand, acts of self-sacrifice for the common good, prosperity, peace, and justice for all is acceptable and admirable.

**REFERENCES**

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