

## Rosh haShana and the Abolition of Human Sacrifice

We are now approaching the famous song that introduces the equally heart-wrenching sound of the Shofar: “עַתָּה שְׁעָרֵי רִצּוֹן”; the poem about the Aqeda, the almost sacrifice of Isaac. Every year, and every time that we are reminded of this story, the question presents itself to us raw and fresh: How could Abraham -even for a second- believe that God wanted him to slaughter his son? How could he act upon this midnight-message? What went on in his mind?

In past years, we have brought up different approaches to the story, looked at it from different angles. A few approaches were:

- Perhaps Abraham was hoping and counting on God to interfere.
- Maybe Abraham had to learn that physical progeny was not the thing to hope for; not a passing on of genes and DNA, but instead his sole focus should be on the passing on of a spiritual legacy.
- Perhaps Abraham should have challenged the message of his Divine dream, and by going along with it without question, he may actually have *failed* the test.

Today I want to shed a different light on the story, by trying to place it in the context of history.

Even though, there is the overall impression that we are going through hard times right now, if we look back into history, we see a lot more violence, cruelty, murder and bloodshed. Let's zoom in on one particular aspect of violence: human sacrifice.

In probably every corner of the world, human sacrifice has been practiced at one point in time. We know of this practice among Germanic tribes in mainland Europe, Druids in Wales, Greeks and Romans, the Ashanti and the Dahomey in West Africa who sacrificed people by the tens of thousands. Indian worshippers of the god Kali, flower-donning Hawaiians, Dayaks on Borneo-Indonesia. The Aztec god Quetzalcoatl demanded so many victims that his worshippers went to

war solely to provide their god with sacrificial prisoners, and the Khonds in South-East India raised captured children for sacrificial purpose.

The Japanese, the Chinese, Tibetans, Egyptians, native Americans, you name it, all over the world, including Abraham's native Mesopotamia, and Middle Eastern people like the Phoenicians at one point all practiced human sacrifice.

Perhaps the pagan philosophy behind it was: Life is cruel. There is so much suffering, deceases, hunger, natural disasters, still-births, death in the world, that obviously the gods who are causing this must take pleasure in human suffering. If we voluntarily still this divine hunger for human suffering by offering human sacrifices, then perhaps the gods will leave the rest of us alone, or even reward us. In terms of the Middle Eastern custom to sacrifice one's child (and especially if it concerns one's only child), it was perceived that this was surely the greatest sacrifice one could make, and therefore certainly the most pleasing to God.

Given the widespread custom of human sacrifice in the ancient world, it shouldn't surprise us that Abraham went along with the assignment from his vision.

What *is* extremely remarkable is that *here* we have a main turning point in human history. Here, for the first time, a prophet, a spiritual innovator, comes to the point where he realizes that God is not pleased with the death of his creatures.

It is hard to realize the impact that this new insight has had on history; on our world. This was nothing short of a spiritual revolution. Of course, it is hard to change the way people think overnight, let alone the world. For centuries after Abraham, people have fallen back into this type of paganism. Even in the time of the prophets, there were Israelites who sacrificed children to the Molokh. But it was an important turning point nonetheless, and eventually, this revelation seeped in.

One might of course ask the question: If that was God's ultimate purpose, why would He initially tell Abraham to embark on the undertaking? This question is related to a theological problem as well: How could God have changed his initial instruction (to sacrifice Isaac) and later tell Abraham something else instead (namely to spare Isaac)? Does God change His commandments?

I believe that Abraham had to go through an existential process (the journey, the preparations) to fully understand such a radical, new idea, and to grasp this enlightened new insight. In other words: In the Torah, people learn from God, and receive their insights and revelations, not through unattached and objective instructions, but through deep, personal encounters and experiences. Therefore, Abraham and Isaac's revolutionary insight had to come forth from a personal journey and process.

There is at least one other example in the Bible where God seemingly changes His words. With the prophet Jonah, whose story will be read ten days from today, on Yom Kippur. First God said to Yonah: I will destroy the city of Nineveh because of their wickedness. But then, after the Nineveans repent, God retracts His punishment; a beautiful example of the possibility of forgiveness and the revoking of Divine punishment. In this story too, we see that Yonah had to go both through a physical journey and a deep inner process, to finally see an aspect of Divine empathy that he had not internalized yet.

God told him: "Yonah, if you are sad about this tree, into which you have put no effort to make it grow, would I not care about Nineveh, that big city with all its people, and besides... all these animals?"

In an age when all over the world, non-tribesmen were mostly seen as subhuman, and animals were not thought to have consciousness or pain, the new radical insight in this case was that God deeply cares about non-Israelite people just the same, and even cares about animals!

In both cases: Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, and Jonah in Nineveh, God jeopardized His credibility by changing His word, and in both cases, this changed the world. It introduced a radical new insight that would raise people's awareness. Awareness about child abuse, the suffering of people that are not part of our communities, and even of animals.

Here too, as we said before, it is extremely hard to change the way people think overnight. But from this point on, the new way of thinking started to settle into

the hearts and minds of more and more individuals. Not everyone, not in every place has this insight been fully applied. It has a long way to go before it touches every corner of the world, but it is still, slowly seeping in more and more. There are still people, perhaps even among our own Jewish communities (I hope not), who believe that -under certain circumstances- causing suffering *may* be the will of God. I believe that the *opposite* Jewish - ideal of a Messianic era, the dream of a world in peace without violence or bloodshed, is what we should be striving for.

Not to sound like New Age. Although in a literal sense, it *is* a New Age we are working towards; an age, not of infliction but of healing; a world not of hatred and revenge, but of compassion and justice. That world is in the making, and it started with Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. We must continue the process, starting within ourselves, within our families and communities through self-reflection and self-improvement. This is our task, especially today and in the days to come. And self-reflection, that is where the Shofar comes in.

May this New Year bring blessings to all of us; blessings of peace, health and happiness, and of growing compassion. Amen.