

Sacrifice & Communal Responsibility

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A perpetual debate in Judaism concerns the purpose and value of the sacrificial system, to which much of the book of Leviticus is devoted. Was this system, per the understanding of Maimonides (the quintessential rationalist), a means of showing the other nations that the cows, goats and other animals that they worshipped were not gods at all? (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:46) Or, per his near contemporary, Nachmanides (the quintessential mystic), were the sacrifices both an imperfect means of offering oneself to God and a way of keeping the community sufficiently pure as to allow for the divine presence to dwell among the people? (comment to Leviticus 1:1) Or perhaps, per Rabbenu Bahya (Nachmanides' ideological successor), the sacrifices were a vehicle for the moral growth of humanity. (comment to Leviticus 1:2 and ff.)

Common to all of these interpretations of the sacrificial system is a sense of the sacrifices as simultaneously an individual and a communal practice. Even while atoning for individual sin, the sacrifices also serve a communal need. In Maimonides' formulation, the sacrifices define the Jews as monotheists; for Nachmanides, the sacrifices cause the divine presence to dwell among the community; and for Bahya, the sacrifices improve the morality of the entire people.

This tension between individual practice and communal meaning is evident even in the verse that first introduces the Jewish people to the sacrificial system:

When a person (*adam*) presents an offering from among you (*mikem*) of cattle to the Lord, you (plural) shall choose your offerings from the herd or from the flock (Leviticus 1:2)

A few elements of this verse spark the interest of commentators. First, the word "*adam*" here is an unusual choice. The Torah is more likely to refer to a person as "*ish*" (man). The word "*adam*" is reminiscent both of the first human being (Adam) and of the word *adamah* (earth) from which Adam's name is derived. The use of the word "*adam*" here suggests a more universalistic interpretation than "*ish*" might suggest.

Second, the verse is confusing in its transition from singular to plural. Is one person (*adam*) offering one sacrifice, or are the entire people (your plural) offering many sacrifices?

Noticing the transition between the singular and the plural, Moshe Alshich (a sixteenth century rabbi who lived in Tzfat, in northern Israel) comments:

All of Israel is responsible one for the other, and therefore the sin of one is considered to be the sin of the whole, for it is on everyone to warn [the person committing the sin] and to set that person straight. . . This

is the meaning of “a person who presents an offering,” for the sin is on the one who has sinned, but the word “*mikem*” also connects this person, on whom the responsibility to bring an offering rests, to those who did not warn this person. For if others did not warn this person, then everyone is responsible, and are not expiated by virtue of one sacrifice that this one person brings. But, it is as though God says, “because of my loving kindness, one sacrifice to God suffices. . . I will accept it as though the whole community had offered your sacrifices, for you did not warn this person in such a way as to stop him/her from committing the sin.” The sacrifice brought by one person therefore makes things better for everyone. (comment to Leviticus 1:2)

Alshich here speaks to the concept, much discussed in contemporary times, of the responsibility of bystanders. His, rather surprising, suggestion here is that the bystander who does nothing is as responsible for a sinful act as the person who directly commits the act.

While Alshich understands communal responsibility to extend only to members of the Jewish community, others understand the word “*adam*” to designate a more extensive sphere of responsibility. Hizkuni, a thirteenth century commentator, argues that the word “*adam*” certainly includes *gerim*—non-Jews living among the Jewish people—and may include other non-Jews as well. Reading Hizkuni and Alshich together, we can suggest that all of us are responsible for all of the sins committed by anyone in our community, as long as we have some ability to stop this sin from happening.

History has taught us that there is no such thing as an innocent bystander. But it is easy to tell ourselves that we would act if asked to be complicit in a government-sponsored genocide. It is much more difficult to hold ourselves responsible for the less obvious and everyday acts of economic or social violence committed daily against immigrants, low-wage workers, the poor, the elderly, the residents of the Gulf Coast, and others who lack power in our society. The emphasis on the sacrifices as being simultaneously an individual and a communal responsibility reminds us that all of these actions, are, in fact, our responsibility to stop; as such, we absorb some of the guilt for the perpetuation of these actions.

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