

Ukraine: When Sacrifice Is Required

Shabbat Zachor – Parashat Vayikra 5782

March 11, 2022

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I am grateful to be a rabbi, not a priest in Jerusalem's ancient Temple. This week, we begin to read Leviticus, with its the detailed procedures by which Israelites would bring animal sacrifices to the priest, who was then duty-bound to slaughter the beast, render its fat, sprinkle blood on the altar, turn portions of the carcass into smoke on the altar's fire, and then clean up the ashes. Not my expertise.

I'm making light, but sacrifice was serious in ancient Israel. God was worshiped primarily through sacrifice, not prayer. By parting with the best of their herds, flocks and fields, our ancestors were depriving themselves for a higher purpose.

At one time, not as long ago, the American people did the same.

This point that is driven home in Steven Spielberg's 1998 film, *Saving Private Ryan*. The movie begins and ends with our American flag, fluttering in the wind at the American cemetery above Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. Between those two flag displays, our eyes are assaulted by countless images of death and suffering. Healthy young Americans appear on the screen. Then, by the hundreds and thousands, they become corpses, before our very eyes. Between scenes of death are threat of death and fear of death, with inestimable suffering for both the dying and their comrades-at-arms. The brilliance of the film is in its stark reality, acclaimed by World War II veterans. We absorb the horror of that war. We come to appreciate the extraordinary sacrifices tendered in that noble war.

Sacrifices were not confined to the battlefield. Americans on the Homefront willingly gave up luxuries and lived with quotas limiting what they could buy, from sugar to gasoline.

My mind keeps drifting back, though, to our flag, whipping in the wind at the beginning of the film and its conclusion. With all the death, with all the loss, with all the destruction, with all the rationing, the citizens of our nation knew that

they were struggling to preserve American freedom and establish justice around the globe. Together, the citizens of the United States sacrificed dearly to safeguard the world's future. At war's end, the flag flew high, the nation was revered, and the American people felt close to one another.

The Hebrew word for sacrifice helps to explain this phenomenon. That word, *korban*, doesn't imply giving up something. Rather, the word is based on the concept of coming close, of drawing near. Temple sacrifices drew ancient Israelites closer to God, raising our lives to higher purpose. Similarly, the "greatest generation" united the nation through shared sacrifice.

Tragically, though, sacrifice grew out of favor in America.

I have often wondered whether our country would have fared better in its war on terror had we all sacrificed to achieve that worthy goal. The world remains threatened by a nihilistic force that values extremist religious ideology over life itself. After 9/11, though, instead of asking every American to join in increased taxes to enable a robust effort, our leaders cut taxes and left the bill for future generations. Unwilling to pay more at the pump, Americans early in this century refused gasoline taxes that would have reduced consumption of oil, much of it produced by the forces that underwrite terrorism. Unwilling to sacrifice, we did a better job of paying for the other side of the war than our own. We turfed the battle to an all-volunteer force, with the result that many Americans knew nobody on the front lines. We expressed gratitude to those who served, an often-empty gesture that left our nation divided.

Sacrifice is frightening. We are asked to forfeit something of perhaps inestimable value, without first knowing the extent of the benefit. We would deprive ourselves of something material for a gain that may well be intangible. We must clearly identify our higher purpose, at the expense of something we dearly love.

When put to the test, our Israelite forebears demonstrated that their devotion to God was more important than their prized material possessions, the best of their flocks and herds. Each animal sacrificed was a *korban*, drawing them closer to God.

When put to the test, American families in the 1940s understood that the world's future was worth even the very lives of their dear ones. Their terrible losses were their *korban*, the sacrifice uniting Americans to assure life and liberty for future generations, here and around the globe.

I have preached versions of tonight's sermon more than once in the past—most recently, early in the pandemic, when we read *Parashat Vayikra*, this week's portion, in March 2020.

Now, in 2022, America's resolve, and that of the free world, is tested once again.

Most of us knew precious little about Ukraine, but were nonetheless concerned, as Russia and its autocratic dictator, Vladimir Putin, amassed troops on Ukraine's borders. We were horrified when President Putin declared parts of Ukraine to be, well, not parts of Ukraine—as he had done when conquering Crimea in 2014. We were reminded of 1939, when the Nazis insisted that Sudetenland, a portion of Czechoslovakia, was German, so they invaded and annexed it. Hitler told the world that Sudetenland was the last of his territorial ambitions, and the world credulously chose to believe and appease him at its peril. We were reminded of 1967, when Egypt and Syria amassed troops on Israel's borders, promising to annihilate the young Jewish State. Israel lives by the parable that, if people tell you they are going to kill you, believe them. With a surprise attack, Israel destroyed the air forces of Egypt and Syria on their runways, achieving an historic victory in six days.

Now, the people of Ukraine are an inspiration to the world, led by their tireless, brave, fearless—and incidentally, Jewish—president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Calling his people to arms, to defend their independence and liberty, he has held off the infinitely larger and stronger invading army for longer than anybody imagined possible. Meanwhile, NATO emerged from a Rip Van Winkle-like slumber, uniting in a way that messy democracies typically do not, to impose crippling economic sanction on Russia and to issue a clear declaration that the alliance will respond to a Russian attack on any NATO member—including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, former Soviet republics—as if the Russians had attacked Paris or Berlin, London or New York. Even Switzerland, historically neutral to an amoral fault, is participating in the economic sanctions.

Economic sanctions bring terrible hardship to the Russian people, suffering at the hands of a leader they must unite to reject as they did Communist rule decades ago. And those same sanctions bring economic difficulties to us and the world. When prices go up, or goods are unavailable, because of measures we are taking in support of the Ukrainian people, let us welcome the sacrifice. Even recognizing that the already-inflated price of gasoline will increase as a result, let us willingly shoulder the sacrifice of refusing to import Russian petroleum, lest we continue to pay for the forces imperiling Ukrainian freedom.

Posting a Ukrainian flag on Facebook or flying one on your house is a lovely gesture, like so many yellow ribbons after 9/11. Only by uniting in sacrifice, as our nation has done at the most glorious moments of its history, will we draw closer to our fellow Americans and to citizens of NATO allies who share our democratic values.

Our ancestors in the Jerusalem Temple approached God with sacrifice. Our predecessors in the greatest generation offered themselves to defeat the Nazis. Now, in a very different way, it's our turn. May our offerings, like theirs, be pleasing to God and humanity. And let our sacrifices bind us together in common purpose, for freedom.

Amen.