



Blood and Breath

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The unspoken drive towards human sacrifice lurks in the background of Sefer Vayikra.

That is what animal sacrifice is: a sublimation of the intuition that it is our blood and flesh that God demands. A feeling, however deeply concealed beneath the veneer of civilization, that if we really loved the Almighty we would reach into our chests to offer our own hearts on the altar.

The Midrash Aggadah¹ unearths an exhortation against this intuition towards human sacrifice in the seemingly benign opening words of Vayikra:

מדרש אגדה פרק כז

והלא כתוב בתורה: "אדם כי יקריב מכם קרבן לה' מן הבהמה וגו'" (ויקרא א ב), ולא מבני אדם!

Midrash Aggadah 27

Does it not say in the Torah: "When any of you presents an offering to God from an animal" (Vayikra 1:2)?—and not from humans!

¹ A midrashic collection from Medieval France found and published by Solomon Buber in the 19th century.



The *midrash* reads this at first pausing midway through the sentence and articulating an intuition we might find impossible: “When a person offers from yourselves a sacrifice for God.” According to this parsing, the verse suggests that we would be bringing a sacrifice from our very own selves. While the *midrash* goes on to assert that the words “from an animal” clearly outlaws human sacrifice, the very fact that we need such a reminder not to offer humans as sacrifices points to lurking suspicion which constantly needs to be quelled, that the only possible gift we can offer to God that is of any value is a human life itself.

While the Midrash Aggadah argues that the words that command animal sacrifice are meant to exclude the possibility of human sacrifice, the Ramban asserts that, when done correctly, animal sacrifice actually involves the psychic experience of human sacrifice:

רמב"ן ויקרא א:ט

כִּדִּי שִׁיחֹשֵׁב אָדָם בְּעִשׂוֹתוֹ כָּל אֵלֶּה כִּי חָטָא לֵאלֹהֵיוּ בְּגוֹפוֹ וּבְנַפְשׁוֹ וְרָאוּ לוֹ שִׁישְׁפֹּךְ דָּמוֹ וְיִשְׂרֹף גּוּפוֹ, לִזְלֹא חֶסֶד הַבּוֹרֵא שֶׁלֵּקַח מִמֶּנּוּ תַמְחָרָה וְכַפֵּר הַקָּרְבָן הַזֶּה, שִׁיְהֵא דָמוֹ תַחַת דָּמוֹ נֶפֶשׁ תַּחַת נֶפֶשׁ, וְרָא שִׁי אִיבְרֵי הַקָּרְבָן כְּנֶגֶד רָאשֵׁי אִיבְרָיו.

Ramban on Vayikra 1:9

All these acts are performed in order that when they are done, a person should realize that they have sinned against their God with their body and soul, and that “their” blood should really be spilled and “their” body burned, were it not for the grace of the Creator, Who took from them a substitute and a ransom, namely this offering, so that its blood should be in place of their blood, its life in place of their life, and that the major limbs of the offering should be in place of the major parts of their body.

In the Ramban’s reading, animal sacrifice is not a rejection of human sacrifice but its sublimation and substitution. By right, it is the person who sinned who should die on the altar, and it is only through God’s grace that we are granted an alternative. Watching their



sacrifice slaughtered, a person vicariously experiences their own death and their own body being offered. In the psychic experience of death through the medium of the animal, a person comes as close as they possibly can to offering their own life to God while still staying alive. In the same moment, they experience the drive to offer their life to God, the mediated experience of that offering and death, and God's grace in refusing it and accepting a substitute in their stead.

For both the *midrash* and the Ramban, animal sacrifices serve as a replacement or redirection of our instinctual response, to offer ourselves directly to God. Where, though, might the human impulse to offer one's life to God find a religious outlet when we no longer offer animal's lives in our stead?

If prayer replaces sacrifice,² we might look to the moment that serves as a paradigm for our own prayer lives: Hanah's prayer for a son at Shiloh.³

Hanah's prayer, offered in Shiloh, whose very purpose is to be a center of sacrifice, represents an active choice of a different religious mode. Sacrifice has proven inadequate for Hanah: each year, her family ascends to Shiloh and offers a *korban* there, but as her husband hands out portions to each of his children, Hanah's childlessness is highlighted, and what should be a joyous moment ends, inevitably, with her tears. In the moment that she prays, Hanah is seeking an alternative pathway to God.

It is not just the medium that Hanah chooses that departs from the model of sacrifice, but her message as well:

² See Bavli Berakhot 26b.

³ For Hazal, Hanah's prayer is a model for how we are to pray the Amidah, the core of contemporary Jewish prayer lives: "Said Rav Hamnuna: How many great laws is it possible to learn from these verses of Hanah!" (Berakhot 31a).



שמואל א א:יא

וַתִּדֹר נָדָר וַתֹּאמֶר ה' צְבָאוֹת אִם רָאָה תִּרְאֶה בְּעֵינֵי אִמָּתְךָ וּזְכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח אֶת אִמָּתְךָ וְנִתְּתָהּ לְאִמָּתְךָ
זָרַע אֲנָשִׁים וְנִתְּתִיו ה' כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּיו וּמוֹרָה לֹא יַעֲלֶה עַל רֹאשׁוֹ:

1 Shmuel 1:11

And she made this vow: “God of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to God for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.”

Interestingly, the language of “*tidor neder*,” associated with the offering of a child to God in life, is eerily reminiscent of the language Yiftah used to make his ill-fated vow to God that he would offer the first thing to come out of his home as a sacrifice:

שופטים יא:ל-לא

³⁰וַיִּדֹר יִפְתָּח נָדָר לַה' וַיֹּאמֶר אִם נָתַן תִּתֵּן אֶת בְּנִי עִמּוֹן בְּיָדִי: ³¹וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדֹּלְתִי בַיּוֹם לִקְרָאתִי
בְּשׁוּבִי בְּשָׁלוֹם מִבְּנֵי עִמּוֹן וְהָיָה לַה' וְהָעֲלִיתִהוּ עָלָה:

Shoftim 11:30-31

³⁰And Yiftah made the following vow (*va-yidor... neder*) to God: “If You deliver the Ammonites into my hands, ³¹then whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be God’s and shall be offered by me as a burnt offering.”

Hanah offers her child to God, but unlike other models of child-offering we have seen before, she offers the child’s life rather than his death. Unlike Yiftah, who similarly “vowed a vow” leading to his child’s sacrifice, Hanah sees a way to offer a life to God that does not involve death.

Hanah confounds our expectations. She offers her child as a sacrifice to God, but changes the terms of what sacrifice entails. Instead of offering her son's blood, she offers his living soul.

Hanah changes our understanding of what it means to give ourselves to God. She understands that a human being can be offered to God not only through his death but through his life. In this replacement of death with life, of sacrifice with prayer, Hanah offers a different model of what it might mean to approach God: not one that sees the ultimate but unachievable offering as a human death, appropriately sublimated through the offering of animal flesh, but one that understands the ultimate offering as dedicating each moment of one's life.

Bereishit Rabbah ties the offering of prayer to the offering of our soul and breath:

בראשית רבה יד:ט

רבי לוי בשם רבי חנינא אמר, על כל נשימה ונשימה שאדם נושם צריך לקלס לבורא, מה טעם (תהלים קנ, ו): כל הנשמה תהלל י-ה, כל הנשימה תהלל י-ה.

Bereishit Rabbah 14:9

R. Levi said in the name of R. Hanina: For each and every breath that a person takes, he must laud the Creator. What is the source? “Let every soul [*neshamah*] praise God” (Psalm 150:6)—[read instead]: Let every breath [*neshimah*] praise God.

Prayer is formed by our words, but it is also formed by our breath. If offering animal sacrifices, their blood, is a sort of way of poetically offering our death, maybe prayer, formed by our words, our breath, is a poetic way of offering our lives, every breath of them. In choosing prayer as a substitute for animal sacrifice Hanah makes a choice to replace blood with breath; to declare that the greatest gift we can give God is not death but, instead, the dedication of each and every breath of our lives.