

5780 - Leviticus 6-8 - Tzav (Command)

Parashat Tzav continues the laws of sacrifices begun in the previous *parasha*, this time from the perspective of the priests performing the ritual. Rules are set out for burnt and grain offerings, sin and guilt offerings, and peace offerings, each with its own specific procedures. Details are then set out for the induction of Aaron and his sons into office, prior to the inauguration of the service of the Sanctuary.

In the essays that follow the first looks at the place of sacrifices in human civilisation and the connection between religion and violence. The second is about the thanksgiving offering and the role of gratitude in the emotional life. The third asks **why the Torah is so emphatic in its prohibition against eating blood**. The fourth concerns the transformation of Jewish life after the destruction of the Temple. How was it that Judaism survived the loss of its most central institutions: the Temple, the priesthood, and the sacrificial service? The fifth is about a difficult passage in the *haftara* where Jeremiah says that God did not originally command the Israelites to offer sacrifices. What might this mean?

Blood, Idolatry and War¹

This *sedra* (*weekly Torah portion*), speaking about sacrifices, **prohibits the eating of blood**:

Wherever you live, you must not eat the blood of any bird or animal. If anyone eats blood, that person must be cut off from his people. (Lev. 7:26-27)

This is not just one prohibition among others. The ban on eating blood is fundamental to the Torah. For example, **it occupies a central place in the covenant God makes with Noah**—and through him, all humanity—after the Flood: “But **you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it**” (Gen. 9:4). So too, Moses returns to the subject in his great closing addresses in the book of Deuteronomy:

But be sure you do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat. You must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water. Do not eat it, so that it may go well with you and your children after you, **because you will be doing what is right** in the eyes of the Lord. (Deut. 12:23-25)

What is so wrong about eating blood? Maimonides² and Nahmanides³ offer conflicting interpretations. For Maimonides—consistent with his

programme throughout *The Guide for the Perplexed*—**it is part of the Torah's extended battle against idolatry**. He notes that **the Torah uses identical language about idolatry and eating blood**:

I will *set My face* against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. (Lev. 17:10)

I will *set My face* against that man [who engages in Moloch worship] and his family and will cut him off from his people. (Lev. 20:5)

In no context other than blood and idolatry is the expression “set My face against” used. Idolators, says Maimonides, believed that blood was the food of the spirits, and that by eating it, they would have “something in common with the spirits.” **Eating blood is forbidden because of its association with idolatry.**⁽⁴⁾

1. Acts 15:1-21

¹Certain people came down from Judea ... and were teaching the believers: **“Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses (i.e., unless you convert to Judaism), you cannot be saved.”**

a. Why? Because these “Judaizers” believed that Jews were “clean” by being Jews and Gentiles were “unclean” by being Gentiles.

1) Acts 10:28

²⁸(Peter) said to (Cornelius) ... **“it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.**

²This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³The (*k'hilah*) sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the (*k'hilah*) and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. ⁵Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, **“The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses” (i.e., in order to be saved [v. 1]).**

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might

and influential Torah scholars of the Middle Ages. He was also a preeminent astronomer and physician.

³ Moses ben Nachman (1194–1270), commonly known Nachmanides and also referred to by the acronym Ramban was a leading medieval Jewish scholar, Sephardic rabbi, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator.

1 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Leviticus*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 115-118.

2 Moses ben Maimon (c. 1135-1204), also referred to by the acronym Rambam, was a medieval Sephardic Jewish philosopher who became one of the most prolific

hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸**God**, who knows the heart, **showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He did not discriminate between us and them**, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹No! We believe **it is through the grace of our Lord Yeshua that we are saved, just as they are.**"

b. In other words, *"If Jews are not "saved" by being Jews, why should we compel Gentiles to convert to Judaism for salvation. It doesn't work that way for us, what makes us think it would work that way for them. We are both "saved" by "grace."*

¹²The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. ¹⁴Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵**The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ¹⁶"After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, ¹⁷that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things'—¹⁸things known from long ago** (Amos 9:11-12). ¹⁹"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰Instead we should write to them, telling them to **abstain from FOOD POLLUTED BY IDOLS, from SEXUAL IMMORALITY, from the MEAT of STRANGLED ANIMALS and FROM BLOOD.** ²¹For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

c. 1Corinthians 10:6-14

⁷**Do not be idolaters, as some of them were**; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in **revelry.**"

1) Exodus 32:1-6

¹"Come, **make us gods who will go before us** ... ³all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron ... ⁴and (he) made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf ... Then they said, **"(This is your God), Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."**

⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." ⁶So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to **indulge in revelry.**

⁸We should not commit **sexual immorality**, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died (Num 25:1ff).

1) Numbers 25:1-3

¹While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to **indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ²who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. ³So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.** And the LORD's anger burned against them.

⁹**We should not test Messiah, as some of them did**—and were killed by snakes (Num 21:5-6).

1) Numbers 21:4-6

⁴They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea ... But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵they spoke against God and against Moses ... ⁶Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.

¹⁰And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel (Num 14:2). ¹¹These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. ¹²So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

¹³No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful ...

¹⁴Therefore, my dear friends, **flee from idolatry.**

d. Galatians 5:19-21

¹⁹The acts of the flesh are obvious: **sexual immorality**, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰**idolatry** and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. **I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

1) Colossians 3:5-11

⁵Put to death, therefore, **whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.** ⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.

⁸But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

¹¹Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Messiah is all, and is in all.

2) 1Peter 4:1-6

³For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and **detestable idolatry** ...

e. Genesis 9:4

⁴"But **you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it.**

1) Understood to mean **"Do not eat the flesh of an animal while it is still alive."**

2) Leviticus 17:10-14

¹⁰"**I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood,** and I will cut them off from the people. ¹¹For **the life of a creature is in the blood,** and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

¹²Therefore I say to the Israelites, **"None of you may eat blood, nor may any foreigner residing among you eat blood."** ¹³"Any Israelite or any foreigner residing among you **who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth,**¹⁴because **the life of every creature is its blood.** That is why I have said to the Israelites, "You must not eat the blood of any creature, because **the life of every creature is its blood; anyone who eats it must be cut off.**"

3) Deuteronomy 12:20-28

²³**But be sure you do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat.** ²⁴**You must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water.**

²⁵Do not eat it, so that it may go well with you and your children after you, because you will be doing what is right in the eyes of the LORD ... ²⁷Present your burnt offerings on the altar of the LORD your God, both the meat and the blood. **The blood of your sacrifices must be poured beside the altar of the LORD your God,** but you may eat the meat. ²⁸Be careful to obey all these regulations I am giving you, so that it may always go well with you and your children after you, because you will be doing what is good and right in the eyes of the LORD your God.

Nahmaindes says, contrariwise, that the ban has to do with human nature. We are affected by what we eat:

If one were to eat the life of all flesh, and it would then attach itself to one's own blood, and they would become united in one's heart, and the result would be a thickening and coarseness of the human soul so that it would closely approach the nature of the animal soul which resided in what he ate ...

Eating blood, implies Nahmanides, makes us cruel, bestial, animal-like.⁽²⁾

Which explanation is correct? We now have copious evidence, through archaeology and anthropology, that **both are. Maimonides was quite right to see the eating of blood as an idolatrous rite.** Human sacrifice was widespread in the ancient world. Among the Greeks, for example, the god Kronos⁴ required human victims. The Maenads, female worshippers of Dionysus,⁵ were said to tear living victims apart with their hands and eat them. The Aztecs of South America practised human sacrifice on a vast scale, believing that without its meals of human blood, the sun would die: "Convinced that in order to avoid the final cataclysm it was necessary to fortify the sun, they undertook for themselves the mission of furnishing it with the vital energy found only in the precious liquid which keeps man alive."

Barbara Ehrenreich, from whose book *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*,⁽³⁾ these facts come, argues that one of the most formative experiences of the first human beings must have been the terror of being attacked by an animal predator. They knew that the likely outcome was that one of the group, usually an outsider, an invalid, a child, or perhaps an animal, would fall as prey, giving the others a chance to escape. It was this embedded memory that became the basis of subsequent sacrificial rites.

Ehrenreich's thesis is that "the sacrificial ritual in many ways mimics the crisis of a predator's attack. An animal or perhaps a human member of the group is singled out for slaughter, often in "a spectacularly bloody manner." The eating of the victim and his or its blood temporarily occupies the predator, allowing the rest of the group to escape in safety. That is why blood is offered to the gods. As Mircea Eliade noted, "the divine beings who play a part in initiation ceremonies are usually imagined as beasts of prey—lions and leopards (initiator animals par excellence) in Africa, jaguars in South America, crocodiles and marine monsters in Oceania."⁽⁴⁾⁽⁶⁾ **Blood sacrifice appears when human beings are sufficiently well organised in groups to make the transition from prey to predator. They then relive their fears of being attacked and eaten.**

4 In Greek mythology, Chronos was the leader and youngest of the first generation of Titans, the divine descendants of Uranus, the sky, and Gaia, the earth. He overthrew his father and ruled during the mythological Golden Age, until he was overthrown by his own son Zeus and imprisoned in Tartarus.

5 Dionysus is the god of the grape-harvest, winemaking and wine, of fertility, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, and theatre in ancient Greek religion and myth. Bacchus in ancient Roman religion and myth.

6 The collective name for the islands scattered throughout most of the Pacific Ocean. The term, in its widest sense, embraces the entire region between Asia and the Americas.

Ehrenreich does not end there, however. Her view is that this emotional reaction—fear and guilt—survives to the present as part of our genetic endowment from earlier times. It leaves two legacies: one, the human tendency to band together in the face of an external threat; the other, the willingness to risk self-sacrifice for the sake of the group. These emotions appear at times of war. They are not the cause of war, but they invest it with “the profound feelings—dread, awe, and the willingness to sacrifice—that make it ‘sacred’ to us.” They help explain why it is so easy to mobilise people by conjuring up the spectre of an external enemy.

War is a destructive and self-destructive activity. Why then does it persist? Ehrenreich’s insight suggests an answer. It is the dysfunctional survival of instincts, profoundly necessary in an age of hunter-gatherers, into an era in which such responses are no longer necessary. Human beings still thrill at the prospect of shedding blood.

Maimonides was right to see in the blood sacrifice a central idolatrous practice. Nahmanides was equally correct to see it as a symptom of human cruelty. We now sense the profound wisdom of the law forbidding the eating of blood. Only thus could human beings be gradually cured of the deeply ingrained instinct, deriving from a world of predators and prey, in which the key choice is to kill or be killed.

Evolutionary psychology has taught us about these genetic residues from earlier times which—because they are not rational—cannot be cured by reason alone, but only by ritual, strict prohibition, and habituation. The contemporary world continues to be scarred by violence and terror. Sadly, the ban against blood sacrifice is still relevant. The instinct against which it is a protest—sacrificing life to exorcise fear—still lives on.

(1) Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:46.

(2) Nahmanides, Commentary to Leviticus 17:13.

(3) Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Metropolitan, 1997).

(4) Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1994).

2. Why Sacrifice?⁷

- a. The sacrificial service **was not primarily about the physical act of slaughtering an animal**; it was principally a spiritual service. On a basic level, if the sacrifice was being brought to atone for some inadvertent sin, one had to feel remorse over what had happened.⁽²¹⁾ To assist in reaching true repentance, he would bear in mind that what was being done to the animal essentially should have occurred to him (Maimonides).⁽²²⁾

Another way of understanding sacrifices is that the animal one brings as an offering to G-d is symbolic of our own inner animal, our instincts and primal desires that we must bring into alignment with G-d’s will (Nachmanides). We surrender that part of us to G-d and make it submissive to Him, so that it too may seek to do His will.⁽²³⁾

From the perspective of Kabbalah, the sacrifices were a way of elevating the matter and vitality of this world to a higher plane. In addition to elevating the various layers of the human soul, sacrifices in the Temple also elevated the actual animal being offered, thereby elevating the entire animal kingdom.⁽²⁴⁾

(21) Maimonides, Teshuvah 1:1.

(22) Nachmanides to Leviticus 1:9.

(23) See *Sefer Hamaamarim* (the Rebbe’s “Book of Discourses”) 5710, pp. 113–114.

(24) See Tanya, ch. 34.

3. Substitutionary Atonement

a. Deuteronomy 24:16

¹⁶Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin.

1) Ezekiel 18:20

²⁰**The one who sins is the one who will die ...**

2) Ecclesiastes 7:20

²⁰Indeed, **there is no one on earth who is righteous**, no one who does what is right and never sins.

b. Leviticus 1:4

⁴You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and **it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you.**

1) Leviticus 3:2

²**You are to lay your hand on the head of your offering and slaughter it** at the entrance to the tent of meeting ...

2) Isaiah 53:6

⁶**We all**, like sheep, **have gone astray**, each of us has turned ... away; and **the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

c. John 1:29

The next day John saw Yeshua coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, **who takes away the sin of the world!**”

1) John 3:14-16 (cf. John 12:32)

¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that **everyone who (trusts) him may have eternal life.**

⁷ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4440323/jewish/Korbanot-The-Biblical-Temple-Sacrifices.htm

2) John 10:11,15-18

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. **The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep** ... ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep ... ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸**No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.** This command I received from my Father."

3) John 17:19

... ¹⁹I sanctify myself, **that they too may be truly sanctified.**

4. Kosher slaughter does not involve stunning. Kosher meat must be slaughtered in a particular way so as to be "fit and proper" for people of the Jewish faith to consume, and **must not contain any blood**. The animals must be killed by a rabbi specially trained in religious slaughter. A sharp knife is used to cut the oesophagus, the trachea, carotid arteries and jugular veins in one action. Excessive pressure on the blade is forbidden. The animal is raised so blood flows out and this is then covered with dirt. Failure to do any of these acts correctly means the animal is considered unfit to eat.⁸
5. It is forbidden to cook meat that has not been koshered by salting it and drawing out the blood. However, before the meat is salted it must be thoroughly rinsed with water, and soaked entirely submerged in water for half an hour. All blood that is visible should be washed off the meat.⁹

⁸ <https://www.aussiefarms.org.au/kb/51-halal-kosher-slaughter>

⁹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/making-meat-kosher-between-slaughtering-and-cooking/>