

MARCH 7, 2011

Parashat Vayikra

What Might Have Been

When any man of you brings an offering (Leviticus 1:2)

אדם כי יקריב מכם קרבן (ויקרא א:ב)

Many commentators discuss the purpose of animal sacrifices in Jewish law, a topic which comprises a sizable portion of our *parashah*. Nachmanides, in his commentary on Leviticus 1:9, rejects Maimonides' explanation that the sacrifices were a response to the idolatrous practices of ancient times. Instead he adopts a more cerebral approach, especially in regards to the sin offerings, explaining that the sacrifices allowed the sinner to consider what might have been: "...And he must throw the blood [of the animal] on the altar instead of his own lifeblood, so that a person will think when he does all this that he has sinned to his God with his body and soul, and in truth, his blood should be spilled and his body burned, were it not for the kindness of the Creator, who accepted from him this replacement."

According to this view, the sin offering forced the offender to contemplate what might have been—the different paths life could have taken. As we continue to watch the upheaval in Libya, we are forced to consider what might have been had Libya's pursuit of nuclear weapons been successful. Such reflection also compels us to redouble our efforts to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions.

In December 2003, [CNN](#) reported that when American officials toured Libya's nuclear weapons facilities, they were surprised to discover a program far more advanced than they had imagined—including centrifuges, a uranium-enhancement program, and even blueprints for a nuclear bomb. Today, as [The New York Times](#) put it, "the success of a joint American-British effort to eliminate Libya's capability to make nuclear and chemical weapons has never, in retrospect, looked more important." While we consider what Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi would be capable of if armed with the most dangerous weapons known to man, our attention is drawn to another country which has demonstrated the willingness to use violence against its own citizens and is pursuing nuclear weapons: Iran. As we think of the Israelite sin offering, and recognize that it was meant to make people consider the more positive outcomes that they could have achieved with different behavior, we must make sure that we do not place ourselves in a position to wonder what might have been had Iran not acquired nuclear weapons. One day our children and grandchildren will turn to us and wonder what might have been. Will they wonder how catastrophic a nuclear Iran would have been? Or will they wonder what kind of potential Israel could have achieved if our generation had done more to persuade Iran to change course. For more on Iran, visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

As the sin offering forced the transgressor to consider what might have been in his or her own life, in our modern world we must remember that what might have been in Libya still could be in Iran. With these lessons behind us, we must act today to create a better future. ■

A Burden and an Obligation

If the Anointed Priest shall sin (Leviticus 4:3)

אם הכהן המשיח יחטא (ויקרא ד:ג)

The Torah teaches us that a unique sacrifice was brought "if the Anointed [High] Priest shall sin so as to bring guilt on the people" (4:3). What type of sin would bring guilt on the people? While Ibn Ezra explains that this refers to a

situation where the High Priest taught the people improperly, and they acted upon his teachings, S'forno (on 4:3) opines that the blame for his mistakes actually laid in the shortcomings of the people that were led. With the inappropriate behavior of the nation affecting the behavior of the priest charged with leading them, he was caused to sin and required to bring an offering for the “guilt of the people.”

From the sacrifice of the High Priest we come to see the powerful impact that ordinary people can have on their leaders—and the burden it brings. Thousands of years later, we are still responsible for our leaders' actions.

When watching our television screens we are bombarded by images of people all over the world spilling out to the streets to protest their respective governments. These images offer a sharp reminder of the power and importance of political activism. Yet, while protests play an important role in expressing public will, personal involvement in the political process—building relationships with and educating members of Congress—is the most effective way that we as Americans can impact policy. Reinforcing this idea, House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) has said: “You have an important role to play and I'm here to ask you to continue to play that role and to educate the members of Congress that you work with.” Chief Deputy Whip of the Democratic Majority, Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA), has similarly said that “We have seen first hand how Americans who are active friends of Israel play a key role in maintaining strength and vitality of the U.S.-Israel relationship.” To learn more, go to www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

In ancient times, the High Priest's failures indirectly resulted from the mistakes of the people. In the complex world we live in today, if our elected officials fail to take action on the issues that we deem the most important, we can only blame ourselves. Our ability to affect our leaders is both a burden and an obligation. ■

Owning Our Mistakes

And if the whole congregation of Israel shall err (Leviticus 4:13) ואם כל עדת ישראל ישגו (ויקרא ד:יג)

The Torah describes an offering to atone for a national error; a sin committed by the entire population of Israel. How could the entire community come to sin? Why does the Torah describe this sin as a matter which was “hidden from the eyes of the congregation”? (4:13). Rashi quotes a Midrash (Torat Kohanim 241) explaining that this sin offering only atoned for a sin that stemmed from an erroneous ruling of the Sanhedrin—a judgment which would have prevented the nation from recognizing that they were in fact committing a sin. Therefore, if the Israelites acted on such a ruling, then the members of the Sanhedrin themselves had to bring an offering to atone for the sins they caused.

The moral authority of the Sanhedrin placed a tremendous responsibility upon them to use their power wisely. The United Nations Human Rights Council should recognize this lesson. This council has the great potential to make the world a better place, but instead myopically focuses on undermining Israel's legitimacy.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently called for the United Nations Human Rights Council to reform itself and stop its longstanding obsession with delegitimizing Israel, [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported. “The structural bias against Israel—including a standing agenda item for Israel, whereas all other countries are treated under a common item—is wrong,” said Clinton. “And it undermines the important work we are trying to do together.” Almost since its inception, in 2006, the council has been criticized for focusing on Israel to the exclusion of other human rights issues around the globe. Rather than maintaining this fixation with the Jewish state, the Human Rights Council might be better off focusing on some of its own members. After all, it was only recently that “192 U.N. member nations vote[d] by consensus on the council's recommendation to suspend Libya's membership on the U.N's top human rights body for committing ‘gross and systematic violations of human rights,’” [The Associated Press](#) reported. Other members of the Human Rights Council accused of major human rights abuses include China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Cuba.

When the Sanhedrin ruled incorrectly, its members had to bring a sin offering to atone for their mistake. The U.N. Human Rights Council should also acknowledge their failures in their dealings toward Israel, and take the necessary steps to ensure that rather than serving as a forum to criticize the Jewish state, it carries out its important function. ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.