

Some Thoughts on the Passover Sacrifice¹

Leon R. Kass

The exodus from Egypt, accomplished in consequence of the tenth plague, is preceded among the children of Israel (a) by the communal *enactment* of a ritual sacrifice and meal, *here and now*, following divinely given orders, as well as (b) by clear instruction regarding two *commemorative practices* that they must follow in the *future*: the annual seven-day festival of Passover and the redemption of their first-born sons (and the sacrifice of the first-born of their animals). The one-time enactment is a pre-deliverance people-forming event, as each family declares its willingness to be delivered by killing a sheep (an animal sacred to the Egyptians), by marking the doorposts of the house with the blood, and by eating the prescribed meal of fire-roasted lamb, flatbread, and bitter herbs. The commandments about future annual celebrations of Passover and redeeming the first-born are the first national *Israelite* laws (beyond the paternal obligation of circumcision, which technically is the first paternal *Abrahamic* law, and beyond the Noahide rules about eating meat but not the blood and about retribution for manslaughter, the first *human* laws).² The first national Israelite law commemorates the

¹ A *dvar Torah*, given on the first day of Passover, 2017, at Ohev Sholom—The National Synagogue, Washington, DC.

² Formulaically, we might say that the Noahide law established (and instructed) the true *human* difference (alone among the animals, a creature that lives by law and not by might); that the law regarding circumcision established (and instructed) the true *paternal* difference (called in Israel to the work of perpetuation and transmission, not of gaining glory for manly prowess); and that the law regarding the Passover and the first-born established (and instructed) the true *communal* (or *political*) difference (distinguished from other communities by its gratitude for worldly blessings and by its moderate mores and ways—against the extremes of (a) the rational mastering will and (b) the chaos of

first step in the children-of-Israel's becoming the *people* Israel³: their deliverance, by the Lord and as the Lord's people, from the land of Egypt and the house of bondage. The Israelites, on the eve of their exodus and for seven days annually thereafter, are to celebrate, remember, and re-enact—family by family yet all at the same time and in the same way—their emergence as a united community, independent and out of Egypt, and grateful to the Lord who so delivered them. This is the big picture, and it is clear enough.

But attending to the details of these ceremonies will reveal that there is more to it than that. We expect that the *content* of the ritual enactments should be meaningful, and in several ways: (a) they should convey and inspire certain teachings and attitudes that embody the way of life for the sake of which Israel is to be constituted as the Lord's people; (b) they should simultaneously speak to what has been rejected as the alternative way of life that is Egypt; and (c) they should address those permanently dangerous aspects of the human soul that (1) when unchecked, gain disastrous expression in Egypt and elsewhere, but that (2) when regulated, carry the marks of God's new way for humankind. Not accidentally, the substance of the ritual and the law address the fundamental human matters of sacrificing, eating, and procreating: how we relate to the divine, how we relate to the rest of living nature, how we relate to our mortality and our future.

Let us think more about each of these matters, as they appear in human life *uninstructed*, which is to say, absent law and command.

nature's (and Dionysiac) wildness, which destroy rational boundaries and world-making distinctions).

³ God refers to them here for the first time as '*adath yisrael*, the "congregation" or "assemblage" of Israel" (12:3), perhaps not yet a people (*'am*).

The impulse to sacrifice has several conflicting roots in the human soul: on the one hand, a desire to unite with the primordial chaos, effacing all distinctions and order; on the other hand a desire to unite with the source and principle of order, by appealing to and acknowledging the rule and source of separation. And, again, on the one hand, a wish to assert human power against and over the whole, by trying to compel (through gifts) the highest power to do one's bidding; on the other hand, a wish to nullify one's own power before the whole, by demonstrating our willingness to do the bidding of the highest power.

Many peoples in the ancient world practiced animal sacrifice, some, even child sacrifice; but in opposition to them, the Torah is *to begin with* not at all keen on sacrifices. Indeed, until this moment, God has neither asked for any of the sacrifices that people (Cain, Noah) have offered nor, except with Abraham, has He asked anyone to bring a sacrifice. In fact, God rejects the sacrifice of Cain, the inventor of sacrifices; He makes a most negative comment on the animal sacrifice of Noah⁴; and He teaches Abraham that He does not really want child sacrifice but rather the father's dedicated awe-fear-of-the-Lord.

Eating, although an activity necessary to sustain all animal and human life, is also problematic, especially in the omnivorous human animal. Man's un-delimited appetite aspires in principle to nothing less than devouring all the edible world and, through digestion, to transform it into himself.⁵ Omnivorousness, an emblem of man's potentially

⁴ "Never again will I curse the ground for man's sake, *for the imagination of his heart is evil from his youth.*" (Genesis 8:21). The Noahide code and covenant follow immediately.

⁵ See my *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature*, chapter two: "*Omnivorosus Erectus: The Human Form.*"

tyrannical posture toward the world, extends also to cannibalism, just as the impulse to sacrifice extends also to human—and child—sacrifice.

Finally, regarding procreation, the first-born son, as herald of the next generation, can be seen both as the strength of the father, extending his potency beyond the grave, and as a threat to the power of the father, living proof of his mortality and limited potency. (Recall Pharaoh's ambivalent relation to, and desire to control, child-birth, and not only among the Israelites.⁶)

In all these fundamental aspects of human life, absent the coming of moral instruction and law, there is the possibility—indeed the likelihood—of two extremely dangerous and wrong-headed tendencies: on the one hand, there is the danger of *imposing human reason and will* on the world—through manipulating sacrifices to the gods, through omnivorous transformation of nature (as food), and through denial of procreation. On the other hand, there is the danger of *surrendering human reason and will* to wildness and chaos, not only in the effacing of distinctions and the destroying of life involved in animal sacrifice, but also in yielding to the wildness and voracity in our souls in matters of food and child-sacrifice.

The emerging way of life that the Lord has in store for humankind addresses both of these dangerous tendencies. Yes, human life will be rationally ordered, but the order will not be man-made. At the same time, the wilder and chaotic passions will be given room for expression, but only within measure and under ritualized constraint. Yes, our animals, the produce of the earth, and the fruit of the human womb will be recognized as

⁶ See Exodus 1:27: “And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying: ‘Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save alive.’” In his exasperation with the midwives, Pharaoh's final anti-birth decree neglects to restrict his edict to the sons of Hebrews, thus revealing every tyrant's wish to deny that anyone will replace him.

ours, but ours no thanks to us. Rather, they embody and reflect an ordered world that we did not make and from which we profit largely as receivers of blessings bestowed. Our household “possessions”—its people (its family members and its servants), its livestock, and all of its “mere” things—we have as gifts; and recognizing that fact enables us to treat them as sanctifiable aspects of a life devoted to some higher purpose, not merely as materials for satisfying our indefinitely expanding desires for pleasure, control, and domination.

In Egypt, the supreme rule of one man as god, imposing his will on the world beginning with an assault on procreation, wound up destroying the fertile land, its produce and animal life, and even the regime’s own children, including the tyrant’s own. Refusing to see the image of God in—that is, the equal humanity of—other human beings and the more-than-human and more-than-natural source of *all* blessing, Pharaoh’s actions—first against Israel, eventually against his own people—resulted finally in his saying yes to massive child-sacrifice, arguably the true meaning of Egypt’s denial of time and chance and its pursuit of bodily immortality.

Against the way of Egypt, the way of Israel begins with modest and restrained animal sacrifice—animal, not human, and no more than can be eaten—with removal of the blood, the essence of life, which consecrates the entire household in dedication to the Lord’s command and which also represents a redemptive payment for the first-born lives in Israel that will be spared on the morrow. The animal is roasted—simply, totally, without adornments, in purifying fire—and eaten in its entirety: it is not offered in a shared meal to satisfy the appetites of a wild god believed to like meat and blood, but offered to remember the benevolence of a philanthropic God who bespeaks order. The

flatbread or matzah—modest, simple, uncorrupted human food, not too proudly transformed by human artfulness and made afresh each time as “mortal” bread—limits appetites, moderates our belief in our settled permanence and our conceit of self-sufficiency, and keeps in mind the fact that the bread of the earth, no less than the deliverance soon to be procured and always to be cherished, is a blessing, not a solely human achievement. It reminds at once both of the previous condition of enslavement and of the gracious gift of liberation: the bread of affliction is also the bread of emancipation, because it is commanded now by, and as a remembrance of, the Emancipator.

Under the new way, the first-born, including the human first-born, will be seen as belonging to the Lord, not to our prideful selves—neither to those who celebrate male potency nor to those who celebrate maternal creativity in the opening of the womb. Yet the way of Israel eschews sacrificing the human first-born, insisting squarely on reclaiming him from the Lord by an act of redemption. It is, as it were, for every household, a repetition of the teaching of the binding of Isaac: not only does God not want child sacrifice; he does not want his people to want to sacrifice their children. He wants instead their dedication to rearing their children in His ways, beginning with the recreation of the commemorative Exodus meal, in every household at every Passover, reinforced by telling the children the story “because of what the Eternal did for *me* when He took *me* out of the land of Egypt.”

At the same time, the practice of redeeming the first-born commemorates the common humanity of the lost sons of Egypt. They may have been justly taken, thanks to Pharaoh’s misdeeds and intransigence, and their deaths may have been necessary for

Israel's deliverance and for Egypt's acknowledgement that "I am the Lord." But there is pathos, not to say iniquity, in this massive destruction of life, some of it surely guiltless, facts that require on the part of Israel not so much atonement as acknowledgement. The Israelite lives that were saved and delivered, like the Egyptian lives that were destroyed, hand by a thread. And only by God's grace—and not solely for our own merit—do we ourselves still dangle.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהִחַיֵּנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה.