

# On Sacrifice

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Many years ago Rav Soloveitchik was asked by a young man who was getting ready to go to war what section of the Torah he should read in preparation. Rabbi Soloveitchik replied, "The section dealing with sacrifice." (See [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-doug-sagal/on-the-meaning-of-sacrifice\\_b\\_2939445.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-doug-sagal/on-the-meaning-of-sacrifice_b_2939445.html))

Sadly, sacrifice became a major theme for our community this past summer.

During the early weeks of the war in Gaza, our Jewish American community particularly mourned the deaths of two young IDF soldiers, Sean Carmeli, age 21, and Max Steinberg, age 24. Both Sean and Max were born in the United States and both died defending a homeland that was not their place of birth.

As *chaylim bodedim*, or lone-soldiers, these two young men captured our hearts and souls. Perhaps their story of self sacrifice embodied our own deep held desire to feel connected to Israelis at their time of need. Perhaps, for a short moment in time, Sean and Max became children of our entire Diaspora community – their family's loss became our loss, and their own sacrifice became our sacrifice, as it were.

Permit me to share a little bit about Max Steinberg.

Max was originally from San Fernando Valley. A number of years ago he attended a Birthright trip that changed the course of his life. Upon coming back to California from the trip, Max contacted the IDF and headed back to Israel soon after.

Initially the army was reluctant to grant Max his wish to join Golani's 13th Battalion, an elite unit, where knowledge of Hebrew was important. He was asked where else he wanted to serve and Max told them there was no other unit in which he wanted to serve. He said, "If it's not Golani, it is jail or it is home."

Max's parents were interviewed on several occasions during this very difficult period. Their words capture but a sliver of their son's worldview.

"I never thought I'd have to bury my child, it's not supposed to be that way," Max's mother, Evie Steinberg told NBC News. "But he wasn't afraid, he wasn't afraid for himself."

His father added: "We want to answer the question on the minds of many people: Do we have any regrets that Max enlisted in the IDF as a lone soldier?" The answer is an unequivocal no." Evie then added: "There is no doubt in our minds that our son was put on this earth for a mission." (See <http://www.jpost.com/Operation-Protective-Edge/Fallen-IDF-soldier-Max-Steinberg-A-Lion-of-Zion-368656>)

Max's funeral was held at the Mt. Herzl military cemetery and attracted over 30,000 mourners.

In commenting on the story of the binding of Isaac, our rabbis offer a startling insight on Isaac's worldview, personality, disposition, and actions. Until this summer, until I encountered the story of Sean and Max, the rabbinic commentary struck me as farfetched at best, at worst it seemed fantastical. According to rabbinic commentaries, Abraham did not sacrifice Isaac, but instead Isaac willingly sacrificed himself.

Let's take a closer look at the Torah.

The biblical account includes a critical exchange between father and son, between Abraham and Isaac, as they head up the mountain:

#### **בראשית פרשת וירא פרק כב**

(ז) וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל־אֲבִרָהֶם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי בְנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאֵימָה הִשָּׂה לְעֹלָה:

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרָהֶם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה־לוֹ הִשָּׂה לְעֹלָה בְנִי וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

**7.** And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and he said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

**8.** And Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And they both went together.

In this biblical version, Isaac is unaware of what is about to unfold. Indeed, in this original account, Abraham remains the sole active participant while Isaac is led passively and unknowingly to the altar.

Now listen closely to the rendering of this same verse by the *Targum Yerushlami*, the ancient rabbinic translation of the text into Aramaic:

#### תרגום ירושלמי בראשית פרשת וירא פרק כב

(ח) ואמר אברהם מימריה דיי יזדמן לי אימרא ואין לא את הוא לעלתא ברי והליכן תרוויהון כחדא בלב שפי :

8. And Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. And if not, you will be offered up, my son. And they both went together, with a singular heart.

In this rabbinic version, Abraham raises the possibility to Isaac that he himself will become the sacrifice. In an instant, this exegetical move transforms Isaac from victim, as it were, to coconspirator. Through this rabbinic lens, the biblical story of the sacrifice of a passive, unknowing Isaac now becomes the story of Isaac's heroic self sacrifice.

Not missing a beat, the midrash further inserts the words "with a singular heart" (בלב שפי) to a verse that already stated that the father and son "both went together" (וילכו שניהם יחדו). Abraham, who was ready to make the sacrifice, and Isaac, who in this version was totally prepared to be sacrificed, were of a single mind, both sharing the same intention.

The midrash does not stop here. It goes even further by describing one more exchange between Isaac and Abraham just as the father prepares to lift the knife upon his child.

(י) עני יצחק ואמר לאברהם אבוי אבא כפות יתי יאות דלא בשעת צערי אפרכס ואערבבה יתך וישתכח קורבנך  
פסיל

Isaac turns to Abraham, his father, and pleads, "Father, bind my hands properly that I may not struggle in the time of my pain and disturb you and render your offering unfit."

This last comment seals the deal. Isaac is now a willing participant, equal, and perhaps even superior to Abraham his father, in his willingness to make a sacrifice for God.

I would like to suggest that this rabbinic approach is especially startling in light of our own modern sensibilities. Perhaps, as modern readers of Torah and as modern practitioners of our

faith, we wish to soften the blow. We somehow wish to diminish the centrality of religious sacrifice and the demands it makes upon our lives.

On one level, we've grown accustomed to the notion that religion provides for us, instead of us providing for the God of our religion. On another level, we've grown lax in our observance altogether and have become increasingly canny in our ability to excuse ourselves from the law through apathy or intellectual argumentation. We carelessly reject any notion of self-sacrifice and perhaps unknowingly worship the shrines of self-service and self-satisfaction.

In contrast, this rabbinic midrash consistently attempts to further dramatize Isaac's sacrifice. The midrash celebrates the absolute servitude of both Isaac and Abraham and further emphasizes their utter devotion to God's, seemingly, unreasonable command.

In his seminal work, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rav Soloveitchik powerfully captures this dissonance. The Rav argues: "The gesture of faith for [the modern Western man] is a give-and-take affair [...]—a philosophy which sees faith as a quid pro quo arrangement and expects compensation for each sacrifice one offers...." (R. Soloveitchik, *Lonely Man of Faith*, 71)

Still in another passage Rav Soloveitchik's description of sacrifice flies in the face of our modern sensibilities, undermining our commitment to autonomy, self fulfillment, and self expression. The Rav describes sacrifice as an "unrestricted offering of the whole self, the returning to God of body and soul, everything one possesses and cherishes." Rav Soloveitchik writes, "God the Almighty, sometimes wills man to place himself, like Isaac of old, on the altar, to light the fire and to be consumed as a burnt offering." (R. Soloveitchik, *Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah*, Tradition, Spring 1978, pp. 70-71)

The placement of the book of Leviticus (the book of sacrifice) at the heart of the Torah, the placement of the story of the binding of Isaac at the heart of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, as well as the placement of prayer, as an echo of ancient sacrificial offerings, at the heart of our daily service, all point to the centrality of sacrifice as a sacred tenet of our faith.

Indeed, in another critical passage Rav Soloveitchik insists that "the idea of sacrifice is a cornerstone of Judaism and the Akedah [the binding of Isaac] has inevitably introduced

sacrificial action as a part of our historical drama.” (R. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, ed. David Shatz, Joel Wolowelsky, Reuven Ziegler, pp. 10-12)

This centrality of sacrifice begs two critical questions. First, why sacrifice? And second, what sort of sacrifice is asked of us?

Why sacrifice?

In truth, there is no reason. If there was a reason, then the demand would not be absolute. In the very act of self-sacrifice we give truth to God's claim upon our lives; our absolute response is but an echo of God's absolute presence.

Allow me however to offer two other explanations. Though these are theologically less compelling, though they may even contradict or undermine my first explanation, they might still provide additional insight.

I believe that whenever we give to something that is greater than ourselves we too become greater than ourselves. That is true of each of us individually and it is also true of all of us collectively.

By joining the IDF, Max Steinberg bound himself to the destiny of the entire people of Israel. It is no surprise therefore that 30,000 mourners claimed him as their own at his funeral. I would add that in that very act of collective mourning those 30,000 mourners merited to become the actual embodiment of the entire House of Israel. Max became greater than he was and we too became greater than we were as a people.

In addition, I believe that in a world that makes many demands upon our schedule and our life, we are at a constant risk of blurring the lines between what is spiritually genuine and real and what is spiritually fake and phony; between what is primary and essential and what is secondary and elective. The act of self-sacrifice, of curbing our self-expression and limiting our self-fulfillment, can serve as a critical means of helping us sift through what is authentic and what is not, what is eternal and everlasting and what is temporary and ephemeral.

Moments of great sacrifice are moments of great authenticity, and moments of great authenticity are often also moments of continuity. More than anything else, we often remember the sacrifices of our ancestors, the sacrifices made by our parents, or by members of our community. It is those very moments that communicated to each one of us some of our deepest held beliefs and some of the core values that guided the lives of those people.

In short, self-sacrifice challenges us to lead an authentic life and by doing so, self-sacrifice also simultaneously communicates our deepest held beliefs to future generations.

Seen through this lens, the binding of Isaac bears witness to Abraham's absolute faith in an absolute God. It simultaneously transformed Isaac from a mere child to the father of a great nation, making him greater than he ever was. Finally, the very preserved memory of Abraham's utter willingness to sacrifice Isaac, or of Isaac's willingness to sacrifice his own self, bore the very ethos that preserved our people for so many generations. Perhaps ironically, often sacrifice itself guaranteed the survival, vitality, and continuity of our very people.

With that in mind, we come to the second question. What sort of sacrifice is being asked of us?

Rav Soloveitchik begins to address this question by first pointing out that ultimately Isaac was not physically sacrificed. Instead, Isaac's sacrifice was internal, emotional and or psychological.

Rav Soloveitchik writes, "Whether the sacrifice consists in physical agony, pain, and extinction of life or in spiritual surrender, humility, and resignation is man's affair. God wills man to choose the altar and the sacrifice." (R. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, ed. David Shatz, Joel Wolowelsky, Reuven Ziegler, pp. 10-12)

The Rav goes on, "Abraham implemented the sacrifice of Isaac not on Mount Moriah but in the depths of his heart..."

According to this approach, an actual physical sacrifice is not asked of us. Instead, we are called to cultivate a religious personality with a sacrificial disposition; to humble our heart, to curb our ego, to limit our need for self expression. In this sense, the sacrifice of the self is not an action,

but forms the basis of a religious personality that is always ready to give, and is always ready for action.

Imagine what would happen if each of us were ready to make this sort of sacrifice, for each other and or for God.

Imagine what would happen if we were ready to cede a little bit of ourselves and to humble our heart in our relationships with our parents, our siblings, our spouses, or our loved ones.

Imagine what would happen if we were ready to curb our ego or limit our need for self expression in our dealings with others, at school, at work, or at home.

In a similar vein, imagine the sort of a religiously inspired life we could lead if we were truly ready to cede a little bit of ourselves and humble our heart in our relationship with God.

Imagine what would happen if we were truly ready to curb our ego or limit our need for self expression in our encounter with Torah and mitzvot.

The Lubavitcher rebbe once shared this story about the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak. “During [his] younger years, when the czars still ruled the Russian empire, a new decree against the Jewish community was in the works [...]. Rabbi Sholom Dov Ber (the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe) dispatched his son, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, to the Russian capital of Petersburg to prevent the decree from being enacted. When Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak asked how long he was to stay in Petersburg, his father replied, “To the point of self-sacrifice.”

([http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/108196/jewish/To-the-Point-of-Self-Sacrifice.htm/mobile/false](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/108196/jewish/To-the-Point-of-Self-Sacrifice.htm/mobile/false))

Friends, we are seldom called to act “to the point of self-sacrifice.” We are not Abraham or Isaac, we are not R. Yosef Yitzchak, nor are we Max Steinberg or Nissim Sean Carmeli (of blessed memory).

And yet still, on Rosh Hashanah a call goes out to each of us. It is not the call of the binding of Isaac. Instead, it is a quieter call. It is the call of the ram’s horn – a call for small sacrifices.

If we wish to encounter God's absolute presence...If we desire to become somewhat greater than ourselves...and if we long to lead an authentic religious life that inspires emulation for future generations...then we must begin to heed that very call today.

This Rosh Hashanah, as we hear the call of the ram's horn, the horn of the smaller sacrifice, let each of us reflect on small and simple ways that might allow each of us to cultivate a religious personality with a sacrificial disposition.

This Rosh Hashanah let us seek ways to humble our heart, to curb our ego, to limit our need for constant self expression. Let us choose self-sacrifice instead of self-service or self-satisfaction.

This Rosh Hashanah let us truly join the path of Abraham and the path of Isaac as we too seek our place on the journey to that ancient holy mountain.