



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TZAV · יצ

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

Violence and the Sacred

• The full essay written by Rabbi Sacks is available [on our website](#)

Why sacrifices? They have not been part of Judaism since the destruction of the Second Temple almost two thousand years ago. But why did God choose this as a way of serving Him? This is one of the deepest questions in Judaism. Here we will explore the answer given by Rabbi Joseph Albo.

Albo begins with two questions. First: Why, after the Flood, did God allow humans to eat meat? Originally, humans and animals were not meant to eat each other. Second: What was wrong with the first sacrifice in history, Kayin's offering? God rejected it, and this led to the first murder, when Kayin killed Hevel.

Albo suggests something surprising: killing animals for food is not ideal. It involves taking the life of another living being. Kayin believed that humans and animals were closely related. That is why he brought a plant offering. Hevel, however, believed there was a real difference between humans and animals, so he brought an animal sacrifice. When Kayin saw that Hevel's sacrifice was accepted and his was not, he made a tragic mistake. If God allows animals to be sacrificed, and if humans are no different from animals, then perhaps the highest offering would be a human being. According to this idea, Kayin saw Hevel as a human sacrifice.

This helps explain why God later allowed people to eat meat. Before the Flood, the world was "filled with violence." Human beings, it seems, have a natural tendency toward violence. **If humanity was to survive, God had to limit that violence.** Better that people direct it toward animals than toward other humans.

This idea appears in the Torah after the Flood. Noah offers animal sacrifices, and God then allows humans to eat meat, but adds a strict command: human life must never be taken, because humans are made "in the image of God."

According to Albo, sacrifices are a concession to human nature. They are a way of redirecting violence. Instead of harming other people, humans channel these instincts into

controlled, ritual acts. Sacrifices become a substitute for violence against human beings.

A similar idea was later developed by the thinker René Girard. He argued that societies are often filled with rivalry, jealousy, and conflict. Without some outlet, this can lead to endless cycles of revenge. Sacrifice helps prevent this by redirecting anger away from other people when they need an outlet. The greatest danger is vengeance. It creates an endless cycle: one act leads to another, and violence never ends. History and literature are full of examples of families or groups trapped in these cycles of revenge.

Today, we have a better system: the rule of law. Courts and justice systems take the place of personal revenge. Instead of individuals taking matters into their own hands, society creates fair systems to deal with wrongdoing. This helps break the cycle of violence.

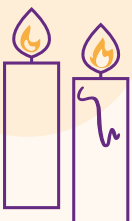
The prophets made this clear. **Sacrifices were never the ultimate goal. They were part of a larger vision: a world built on justice and compassion.** Sadly, violence has not disappeared. Even in modern times, conflicts driven by revenge continue around the world. This shows that the Torah's message is still relevant.

The laws of sacrifice teach us three important ideas. **First, violence is still part of human nature, never more dangerous than when combined with and ethic revenge. Second, we must find ways to redirect it so that it does not claim yet more human sacrifices. Third, the only ultimate alternative to sacrifices, animal or human, is the one first propounded millennia ago by the prophets of ancient Israel.**

As Amos said on behalf of God:

"Even though you bring Me burnt offerings and offerings of grain, I will not accept them... But let justice roll down like a river, And righteousness like a never-failing stream."

Around the Shabbat Table



1. How do sacrifices fulfill the instinct for human violence? Does this change your understanding of the meaning behind the korban?
2. Can you think of a modern-day example where revenge, not justice, is the driving force?
3. Amos says God desires justice over burnt offerings. What does it mean to prioritise justice in our own lives?

A Takeaway Thought

Violence is part of human nature, but Judaism teaches it must be redirected, not denied. The ultimate goal is to replace cycles of harm and revenge with justice, compassion, and moral responsibility.



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"אז



The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Tzav continues detailing the laws of the sacrifices (*korbanot*) that we began delving into in parshat Vayikra. It focuses on the specific duties of the priests (the *Kohanim*), in offering the *korbanot*.

Tzav also describes the details of the burnt offering, meal offering, sin offering, and guilt offering. The parsha also includes the commandment to keep the fire on the altar burning perpetually and describes the seven day ceremony for consecrating Aharon and his sons as priests.

Finally, the opening ceremony of the service of the Mishkan is described. All of Bnei Yisrael are commanded to gather together to witness the ceremony.



Parsha Activity

Playing Judge & Jury

One person sits in the Judge's Chair. Players take turns firing ridiculous disputes at the judge, like: "My brother ate my last chip and now I want his entire dessert for a week" or "My sister borrowed my skirt without asking and I have decided she owes me 10 skirts." The Judge has exactly ten seconds to deliver a ruling. The catch? Rulings must be just, not vengeful. The table votes quickly: thumbs up for justice, thumbs down for revenge. Rotate the Judge after every three cases. The faster and more absurd the cases, the better.



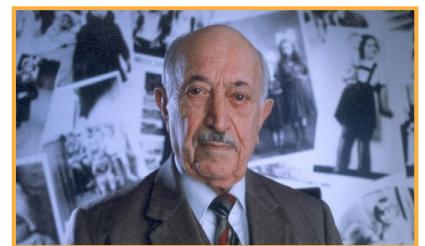
The Nazi Hunter

Simon Wiesenthal was born in 1908. He grew up in Austria, married Cyla Mueller in 1936, and became an architect. Then in 1939, he lost his job simply because he was Jewish. When World War II broke out, things went from bad to worse for him, and for all Jews in that part of the world.

Simon and Cyla miraculously survived the horrors of the Holocaust, but eighty-nine members of Simon's family did not. When he was liberated from Mauthausen concentration camp, it took a long time for him to find Cyla, as they each believed each other to be dead. They reunited in 1946, but there was still a long road to recovery, both physically and emotionally, from the grief and trauma.

Simon fought to rebuild his life. He and Cyla welcomed their daughter Pauline into the world. He also began working for the army, heading the Jewish Central Committee of the United States Zone of Austria, a relief and welfare organization.

Simon could have sought personal revenge on the men who had murdered his family and his people. It would have been an understandable response. Instead, he made a different choice. He decided to dedicate his life not to vengeance, but to justice. For the next sixty years, he became the world's most famous Nazi hunter. He did not lead a militia or a squad of assassins. He led an office of documentation. He meticulously gathered evidence, tracked



down witnesses, and located fugitive Nazi war criminals. His work was not about satisfying a personal desire for revenge. It was about bringing perpetrators to stand trial in a court of law.

Thanks to the efforts of Simon Wiesenthal, over one thousand one hundred Nazi criminals, including Adolf Eichmann, were brought to justice. Wiesenthal chose to break the cycle of violence not with more violence, but with the slow, patient, and impartial power of the law.



Cards & Conversation

"This is the law of the grain offering Aharon's sons shall bring ...in front of the altar." - Vayikra 6:7

We learn about the *korbanot* (offerings) people gave to God to draw closer to Him. But they didn't give just anything – they gave something that mattered.

QUESTION: What are you willing to sacrifice – and for whom would you be willing to do so?

Rabbi Sacks offers an answer in his commentary to Vayikra 6:7

"To love is to give. This is true in many aspects of life. A happily married couple is constantly making sacrifices for one another. Parents make huge sacrifices for their children. People drawn to a calling often sacrifice remunerative careers for the sake of their ideals. In ages of patriotism, people make sacrifices for their country. In strong communities people make sacrifices for one another when someone is in distress or needs help. Sacrifice is the superglue of relationship. It bonds us to one another. Sacrifice is the choreography of love."

Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition Each card holds an interesting question to think about and discuss, based on the Torah portion. Flip it over to discover an idea from Rabbi Sacks that shines a new light on the parsha. Find out more by visiting rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation



Parsha in Practice

Mitzva of the Week

Prohibition of Eating Blood
(Vayikra 7:26-27)

The Torah commands: "And you shall eat no blood, whether it be of fowl or of beast, in any of your dwellings." This is one of the most repeated prohibitions in the Torah, appearing across multiple books.

The reason is deeply connected to this week's theme. Blood represents life itself. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood," says the Torah. To consume blood is to blur the line between taking life and sustaining it. The prohibition is a constant, daily reminder that life is sacred and belongs to God. We may use animals for food, but we may not ingest their very life-force. It draws a firm boundary around our relationship with violence and death, insisting that even in eating, we acknowledge the sanctity of life.

Practically Speaking

How will you honour life?

This mitzva is not just about what we eat. It is about cultivating an awareness of the sanctity of life in everything we do. The Torah is asking us to pause, even in the most ordinary moments, and recognise that life is not ours to consume carelessly. In practice, this means treating others with the awareness that every person carries within them a life that belongs to God. It means resisting the impulse to diminish, hurt, or take from others, and instead asking, how do I honour the life in front of me?

"Honour the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of life, and the twin imperatives of justice and compassion." - Rabbi Sacks



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

Whenever you sit down to eat, take one moment to think about where your food came from. Who grew it, who prepared it, what living things were involved? Use that time to say thank you, to God, to a parent, or simply in your heart. Practise noticing that life is a gift, not something we are simply owed. After this, make a bracha!

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Identify a relationship/situation where you've been consuming more than giving, taking someone's time, energy, or patience without fully acknowledging it. Make the effort to give back: a thank you, an act of service, or showing up more fully. Reflect on what changes when you treat the life and energy of others as something sacred.



Learning in Layers

Guiding you through Torah step by step, with insights from the [Koren Sacks Humash with translation and commentary by Rabbi Sacks](#). Each step takes us a little deeper and invites 'Torah as Conversation,' just as Rabbi Sacks taught.

Gathering to Witness the Priestly Initiation

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: VAYIKRA 8:3

"וְאֵת כָּל-הָעֵדָה, הִקְהֵל, אֶל-פֶּתַח, אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"And assemble the whole community at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Why would it be important for the whole community attend the initiation of the priesthood?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"I suggest that it is because the priesthood plays an essential part in protecting a society's integrity. Religions help safeguard governments against corruption. They can do this in two distinct ways corresponding to the biblical realms of prophecy and priesthood. Prophecy has a critical function... giving warnings of impending catastrophe. But priesthood is about constructing communities where the life of faith is given tangible expression.

"Without prophecy, a society can become corrupt at the top. But without priesthood, it can erode from below. It can lose its structures of family and community life, within which the civic virtues are learned and enacted. Prophecy is dramatic; priesthood is not. Prophecy makes headlines; priesthood rarely does. But both are necessary to the civil order. Without the matrix of institutions within which individual responsibility and the moral sentiments are nurtured, no freedoms are secure for long. Here, the entire nation is called to witness the inauguration of the first priests. While their work will be contained in the Mishkan, it will be of the utmost significance to the community as a whole."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

Ritual, Rabbi Sacks teaches in perek 6, is not magic or superstition. It is the enactment of meaning. It binds us to Jews across all times and places, turning lonely individuals into members of a covenant. Without ritual, there is no community, no continuity, and no shared structure of meaning.

1. What was unique and important about the work of the kohanim in the Mishkan?
2. In what ways did the kohanim's service in the Mishkan give 'tangible expression' to a Jewish community of faith?
3. When you personally witness an event, rather than hearing about it second-hand, does it mean more to you?

- Find out more about the [Koren Sacks Humash](#) at rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash



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