

Episode 24

Tsav

[thank you thank you and Welcome to the Schrift]

I've been thinking a lot about the phrase "thank you" lately. You know "thank you," right? We say it all the time. Thanks. Thanks a lot. Thanks so much. Thank you. We say "thank you" pretty much every chance we can get. If someone holds the door for us, we say "thank you." When respond to someone's e-mail, we start out by saying "thank you for your e-mail." Or if we really want to sound hip, "many thanks for your e-mail." Obviously when someone serves us a cup of coffee or helps us with directions, we say "thank you."

Why do we bother saying "thank you"? This is not a trivial question, actually. The way I see it, there are three reasons why we say "thank you." The first is that perhaps we care what others think of us, and we don't want someone to think we are a jerk. The second reason is that perhaps we genuinely want the other person to understand that we are grateful for whatever they did. The third reason is the most interesting. We say "thank you" because we feel that we have received a benefit and we should somehow acknowledge this. We understand that we have received something we didn't necessarily "deserve." When someone holds the door for us, we realize that this person could have just as easily not held the door. Because of this undeserved accession to a kind of wealth, no matter how small, we say "thank you"—not just to the other person but, in a way, to the universe.

The parsha for this week, Tsav, is more or less entirely devoted to making sacrifices to God. When we read these passages as moderns, it seems rather foreign to us indeed. It goes without saying that we don't bring animals or bread or incense to the Temple anymore to be burned up in homage to God. Yet, I would argue that these sacrifices are not as removed from our world as we might think. Each time we say "thank you," it is as though we are making a kind of mini-sacrifice. But this is true only if we are saying "thank you" for the third reason—as a kind of acknowledgement of a benefit we have received. It doesn't count if we say it for the first two reasons: because we want the other person to like us or the other person to feel good. While there's nothing inherently wrong with wanting other people to like us or with wanting to make others *feel* good, this type of "thanking" has nothing to do with sacrifice.

The Torah's laws about making sacrifices to God were not written in a vacuum. Rather, the Torah's stance on sacrifices is also a kind of reaction against barbaric sacrifices, namely, human sacrifices. This is a major theme of the Torah: we, the Hebrews, are going to move beyond our heathen neighbors. We are not going to engage any more in the barbarity of human sacrifices. We are going to make sacrifices more beautiful, enlightened, elevating.

The parsha of Tsav is intimately tied with the parsha of Vayeira from the Book of Genesis, Bereishit. In this earlier parsha of Vayeira, there is a section known as the *Akedah*. In the *Akedah*, God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son Isaac so that Abraham can show his faith and devotion to God. This is the same son which Abraham's wife Sarah had in her old age and which Abraham cherished more than anything in the world. Yet, Abraham agrees without dispute or objection. On the way up the mountain, Isaac asks his father all sorts of innocent questions: where is the lamb that we will sacrifice, Dad? I see the wood, I see the stone, but the one thing I don't see is the lamb. Where's the lamb? Little does Isaac know that *he* is to be the lamb. They get to the top of the mountain. Abraham binds his son and pulls out the knife to stab his son Isaac to death in sacrifice. Yet, at the last moment, an angel appears. The angel screams to Abraham: Don't do it! Now I know your faith is absolute. Sacrifice this goat instead.

When we as moderns read this story, we can't help but think to ourselves: why would Abraham so readily agree to murder his own son just to please God? Why would God ask this of him? Why didn't he protest? Yet, we only ask these questions because we are moderns. In the ancient world, human sacrifices were all-too-common. For many ancient cultures, human sacrifice was seen as the most dependable means of appeasing the gods. The sacrifice of a human life was *worth* more than the sacrifice of a mere animal, certainly worth more than saying "thank you." And so, when an ancient people really wanted something from the heavens, they killed a fellow human in a ceremonial ritual. In Ancient Japan and the Ancient Balkans, virgin women were buried alive in order to protect buildings against disaster or enemy attacks. As late as 1487, the Aztecs wanted to reconsecrate a pyramid in what is now Mexico City. Over the course of four days, they killed between 10,000 and 80,400 prisoners as part of the ceremony in sacrifice to the pagan gods. In Greek myth, we read of Iphigenia and her father Agamemnon. Agamemnon wished to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia in order to appease Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, so that the Greeks could win the Trojan War.

After Abraham's aborted attempt to sacrifice Isaac, we never hear about human sacrifice again in the Torah. A significant portion of the remainder of the Torah is, instead, devoted to making animal sacrifices to God. After the *Akedah*, we basically understand that human sacrifices are no longer on the table, as it were. It's *verboden* in Judaism. It's over, finished. All of the energy is instead turned toward making animal sacrifices.

What is going on here? The Torah is taking a stand which was way ahead of its time. It is saying: human sacrifices are horrific, terrible, inhumane, ungodly. Stop doing them—now.

But the Torah does not say that sacrifice itself is horrible. Rather, it is the way in which we choose to sacrifice which must come under scrutiny. In short, the Torah sets up a dichotomy, a division, between sacrifices. There is a *right* way to sacrifice, and a *wrong* way. Sacrificing humans is the *wrong* way. But what is the *right* way?

In the parsha for this week, *Tsav*, we get a kind of behind-the-scenes look at how Judaism sacrificed to God. The Torah wanted these moments of sacrifice to be as majestic, loving, pure, and beautiful, as possible. The Torah wants to say: sure, sacrifice. But do so in a way that is elevating and ennobling.

Let's read an excerpt from *Tsav*. This is Leviticus, chapter eight, verses 26 to 29. "From the basket of unleavened bread that was before the Lord, Moses took one cake of unleavened bread, one cake of oil bread, and one wafer, and placed them on the fat parts and on the right thigh of the ram. He placed all these on the palms of Aaron and on the palms of his sons, and elevated them as an elevation before the Lord. Then Moses took them from their hands and turned them into smoke on the altar with the burnt offering. This as an ordination offering for a pleasing odor; it was an offering by fire to the Lord. Moses took the breast and elevated it as an elevation offering before the Lord; it was Moses' portion of the ram of ordination."

This sacrifice of the ram—a ram is a male goat, by the way—to God is clearly intended to be edifying, sanctifying, uplifting. The word "elevate" appears over and over again in this excerpt. The sacrifice is highly ritualistic in which the actors gallantly perform their roles. There is fire, pleasing scents, and delicious bread.

The Torah is, again, being ironic here. Cicero famously once defined irony as "when you say something which means something else." In *Tsav*, the point is not *just* to teach the Israelites how to properly sacrifice to God. There is also another point which the Torah does not state explicitly, but which is *implied* and *hinted at* throughout. The Torah's other point is to *contrast* this form of sacrifice with the pagan sacrifices going on at the time throughout the ancient world.

We can only imagine how revolting and disgusting and grotesque these sacrifices were when juxtaposed with the sacrifices of Moses and Aaron. These pagan sacrifices were often human and child sacrifices which tended to be bloody and gory affairs. Most significantly, Ancient Egypt, where the Hebrews had just escaped from, was notorious for human sacrifices made to the Gods.

Now, I'm not saying that the Israelite sacrifices were as pleasant and calming as Monet's paintings of *Water Lilies*. After all, there was an animal being slaughtered. And, the cause which is by far the most near and dear to my heart is that of animal rights and animal welfare. So, I'm not exactly pleased when I read these passages about Moses and Aaron cutting up a goat as a sacrifice. Yet, we should remember, first, that, in the Ancient World, vegetarianism and veganism simply did not exist. Second, for the last two-thousand years, Judaism has abolished animal sacrifice from its religion. It has been replaced, instead, by prayer—an even more enlightened and humane form of sacrifice. But leaving that aside, I would argue that, compared to our society, the Israelite's sacrifice of the ram is far more compassionate. Today, the animals that are consumed are treated as objects to be exploited for maximum profit. The factory farm conditions in which they must live are atrocious. I will spare you the nauseating details here, but let's just say that Moses and Aaron do not place their hands on the animals' heads and lovingly bless them before they are killed. Indeed, in our society, the consumer has no contact or interaction or even awareness of these animals until they arrive on their plates. In the time of Moshe and Aaron, while the animal was killed, it was done so in a way which dignified the animal and allowed for compassion and empathy with the animal. It is often the case that the way we treat others, including animals, is how we feel about ourselves. A society which exploits and commoditizes animals tends to treat humans as well as commodities. The Ancient Israel society, in its acknowledgement and elevation of the animal, sent the message that humans, too, should be so acknowledged and elevated.

Returning to the matter at hand, what we can surmise from *Tsav* is that there is a right way—an ennobling way—to sacrifice, and a wrong way, a degrading way.

Franz Kafka's 1912 novella, *The Metamorphosis*, is also grappling with the question of sacrifice. In Kafka's famous story, Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect. Throughout the remainder of the story, Gregor must figure out how to now cope with life not as a human, but as a giant cockroach. He does his best, but after awhile, he becomes too burdensome for his family. One evening, his father, frustrated by the cockroach-state of his son, throws apples at Gregor. These apples wound Gregor and his body is badly injured. A few days later, Gregor dies from these wounds. His corpse is then swept up and disposed of. The happy family had been Gregor, his sister Grete, and his mother, Frau Samsa, and father, Herr Samsa. Now, of course, the family has been reduced to three—the mom, the dad, and the sister. But because Gregor is now dead and no longer a burden, the family decides to go for a Sunday walk in a kind of celebration of mutual relief. When the story began, Grete was Gregor's little sister, a kind of child. Yet now, as the mother and father travel on an electronic tram through the town together, they see their daughter Grete anew. She has become a young woman. And the parents, Herr and Frau Samsa, looking at their daughter's young and healthy body, decide that it is time to marry her off. This is how *The Metamorphosis* ends. Here is how the final sentence reads: "Despite all that had occurred in recent times, Frau and Herr Samsa noticed that their daughter was blooming into a beautiful and voluptuous young woman. The parents exchanged gazes and unconsciously knew that it was now time to find a good man for her. And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions that when the tram reached its destination, the daughter raised herself up and stretched out her young body."

The Metamorphosis begins, then, with Gregor's descent from man into bug, and ends with the daughter's ascent from girl into marriageable woman. But let's take a moment to think about the *backstory* of *The Metamorphosis*. Who had Gregor been *before* he was the cockroach? What is Gregor Samsa's backstory? Gregor had been a traveling salesman. And this was not an easy job. He used to wake up at 4 a.m. in order to catch the train at five. He lives in terror of his boss. He often must sleep in small hotel rooms on the road, with "moist" bedsheets. Why did Gregor take this oppressive job? He took it because he wanted to support his family. His father's business had collapsed five years before, and so Gregor took a job in order to pay for his family's expenses. Yet, his parents never thanked Gregor for this support. And moreover, after Gregor becomes a bug, it is discovered that the father still had money left over from his business that collapsed. Gregor's slave-like attitude toward his job can be witnessed in his first thoughts following his transformation into a bug. His first thought is not to reflect on how he has become a bug; rather, his first concern is how he will still be able to make the train, still be able to work, still be able to earn money for his parents and sister.

The opening sentence to *The Metamorphosis* reads: One morning, Gregor Samsa awoke from disturbing dreams, to find that he had been transformed into a monstrous insect. But we need to look at the phrase "monstrous insect" in its original German. The words are "ungeheueren Ungeziefer." This word "Ungeziefer" doesn't exactly translate perfectly into English. It can mean pest, insect, bug, or even *vermin*. What is *vermin*? According to the dictionary, vermin are "noxious, objectionable, or disgusting animals." But in German, the word has additional connotations. An *Ungeziefer* was also the word used for an unclean animal, unfit to be slaughtered. An *Ungeziefer* would have been strictly forbidden by the Torah as an animal which could be sacrificed.

I would argue that, in a certain sense, there are *two* sacrifices going on in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. In a sense, the family has sacrificed their son, Gregor. They have pressured him to work an exhausting, soul-sucking job, in order to pay for all of their expenses. This sacrifice has not been *elevating* but rather devitalizing and depleting. It does not allow their son Gregor to thrive in the world, but rather to slowly expire. This is an *unhealthy* and *sickening* sacrifice. This is, we might say, an *unkosher* sacrifice. And the depravity of this type of sacrifice is depicted within the bug which Gregor transforms into. Gregor has become an *Ungeziefer*, a vermin, an animal whose sacrifice would be degenerate. The sacrifice of Gregor is like the human sacrifices and other ungodly sacrifices which the Torah wishes to make us repulsed by. These sacrifices do not elevate a society, but rather degrade a society. The sacrifice of Gregor, by forcing him to work this slavish job, did not bring energy and enlightenment to the family, but rather a kind of degeneration.

At the end of *The Metamorphosis*, the parents turn their attention to their next child, their daughter Greta, as their next source of sacrifice. The closing to *The Metamorphosis* tells of how the parents exchanged glances and knew it was time to marry off their coming-of-age daughter. But the depiction of Grete is, in many ways, the opposite of that of Gregor. Gregor represented decay, overwork, and uncleanliness. When we meet Gregor, he is quite literally an exhausted beetle. The sister, by contrast, is depicted as vibrant and vivacious before she will be "sacrificed." The text describes her *blooming* and as a *maiden*, therefore as regenerative and innocent. Unlike Gregor's brittle bug body, Grete, we read, rises up from the tram and stretches out her young body. Grete, then, is the clean and holy animal to be sacrificed, the sacrifice which will not disgrace the family but will enliven and enrich it.

Why is the parents' sacrifice of Grete different from the sacrifice of Gregor? Because with Gregor, the parents sent him to a work a grueling and wearying job which would slowly kill him. Gregor's job would not enable him to marry and have children, but rather to ensure that he remain a miserable bachelor. The sacrifice of Grete, by contrast, is a sacrifice which will allow Grete to expand and to multiply her existence. Even though she will be "given" to a man, this marriage will not diminish her but will presumably magnify her, as she and her husband have children and raise a family. Now, I recognize that it is possible to view Grete's eventual marriage also as a negative sacrifice. She now will no longer be able to fulfill her personal dreams—she had wanted to become a musician—but instead will be saddled with a household to manage. After all, in those days, marriage usually meant the end of a woman's personal freedom and dreams. Perhaps Kafka wishes to say that both Gregor and Grete are negative sacrifices. But, assuming that Grete *wants* to get married and will have a happy and fruitful marriage, then, at least on the surface level, this seems to be an example of a positive, life-bringing sacrifice.

The Torah and *The Metamorphosis*, then, are perhaps both saying the same thing. There are two types of sacrifices. There are sacrifices which bring us down and degrade us, and then there are sacrifices which elevate us.

As I've mentioned in several previous episodes, Western culture has inherited the culture of Puritan Christians. Within Puritanical Christianity, there is a belief that this world is supposed to be filled with hardship and suffering and pain, and that the next world, the afterlife, is where we will be recompensed and rewarded for this suffering. Even if we are not Christian, and have different conceptions of the afterlife, the culture of Puritan Christianity has still left its mark on us. Its effects have been wide-ranging and significant. There still seems to be this misguided belief that, if we suffer, if we make our lives miserable and ugly, then we will be rewarded for it *later*. I will give a very short anecdote here. I remember when I was in law school, we had final exams coming up. All of the students were quite nervous about them. I remember speaking with one student. She said, "I love exercising and working out. But I decided I'm not going to work out at all until after exams." Meanwhile, the exams were still six weeks away. On one hand, perhaps she just wanted to be strategic and save time so she could study. But on the other hand, I wonder if, subconsciously, she thought that the more she suffered and was miserable in the time leading up to the exam, the better grade she would get.

In many ways, we still have this conception that if we are enjoying ourselves and thriving, that it's somehow "unfair" or "unjust" if this leads to more success, as though we don't deserve to be *rewarded* for *enjoying life*.

The Torah and *The Metamorphosis* wish to express to us that we should avoid those sacrifices which *decrease* us and to lean into those sacrifices which *regenerate* us and allow us to thrive.

When we say "thank you," it represents a kind of mini-sacrifice. For a moment, we give something up—our time, our breath—in acknowledgement of our fortune in life. But even though we give something up when we say "thank you," it actually enriches us. Paradoxically, saying "thank you" and expressing gratitude is a *giving up* which allows us to receive back *tenfold* what we gave. But like any sacrifice, it can sometimes be difficult to be grateful and appreciative. When you are dealing with a problem or have stress, it's hard to step back and say, "thank you that I have running water, or electricity, or a roof over my head." It can almost be a struggle to say and express. And yet, once you make that sacrifice, you immediately feel better and stronger. Before I sit down to eat, I like to express things in life for which I am grateful. If I am very hungry, and the food is sitting right in front of me, then this really can feel like a

sacrifice, as I just want to eat and not list things I am thankful for. But by expressing gratitude, the energy I give up immediately comes back in multitudes. Gratitude meditations are an extremely powerful practice to bring, ironically, more prosperity into your life.

In addition to the commandments on sacrificing, the Torah also has a law regarding fire. In chapter six, verse thirteen, the Torah reads that “a perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out” / *אש תמיד תוקד על המזבח לא תכבה.*

Fire is one of the few things in nature which, when it gives, does not subtract from itself but rather expands. When fire takes in energy, it glows and brightens and dances. In the Hebrew Temple, this fire was always lit, was always kept burning. This eternal fire is the symbol and metaphor for how our sacrifices should be. Each time we give something of ourselves we should not feel ourselves diminished but rather more vibrant, more radiant.