

Edie and Molly,

Each of you shared insights for us as we try to better understand the sacrifices described in parashat Vayikra. And you did so by offering the wisdom of your own lived experiences. Not merely the sacrifices you made around Molly's skiing competitions. But deep wisdom informed by your priorities. Your values. And Jewish ritual as you understand it.

It's those things, actually...rituals and the values that inform them...that come closer to the biblical understanding of sacrifice than the way we think about the word in modern English. A sacrifice in the Torah isn't just something you give up, but it's something you give. It's an action you perform. There's a hint of this in the etymology of the English "sacrifice," from the Latin meaning to make something holy. A biblical sacrifice had to do with making something, or *doing* something, as a way of approaching sacredness.

Edie, you said that "although we no longer use the same rituals and practices that the ancient Jews did, the concept of sacrifice and the desire to connect with God still exist today." And this is absolutely true. At the risk of offering too much etymology here, I'll remind us that the Hebrew for sacrifice is "korban," which has the same root as "karov," meaning "close." The idea undergirding sacrifices, therefore, was to find some way of getting close to God. Performing an *external* action to represent an *internal* closeness to the divine. And even without animal sacrifices, that idea of performing an action to draw close to God remains at the heart of Judaism today.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it this way: "Judaism is about a community of action," he wrote. "It is about the way people interact in their dealings with one another. It is about bringing God into the shared spaces of our collective life. Just as we know God through what [God] *does*, so God asks *us* to bring [God] into what we *do*."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/yitro/deed-and-creed/>

But, we might wonder: how do we actually do that? How do we bring our deepest beliefs into our actions? How do we know if we're doing the right thing? And in our effort to do something meaningful...what if we make a mistake?

In your d'var Torah, Molly, you were curious about what happens when an Israelite performs a sacrifice incorrectly. You gave us many good answers from our tradition. And you drew us to consider the importance of at least *trying* to do things the right way. Having the right intentions as we determine how to behave. Above all you said: "the best outcomes will always happen when we show honor and respect through our actions." And as we know, all we can really do is try our best.

Taken together, I think we can say that while our tradition demands action, celebrating deed over creed, and encouraging us to *do* something in this world...sometimes it can be hard to know which action to prioritize – or how much action is enough. We might make mistakes. But still we have to try.

Over the past few months, many of you in this community have approached the clergy team to ask: what should we be *doing* right now? Coming to shul is one thing. Observing Jewish holidays, sure. But as our political system descends further into chaos, so many of our highest ideals disregarded, and norms abandoned...what do we do about it? We've tried to find ways for CBE members to get involved in protecting democracy, responding to this moment, living in the world as it is while keeping in mind what it could be. In most of our sermons since inauguration day, we've tried to offer practical lessons – about understanding the complexity of this time, about speaking out, showing up, and giving ourselves time to rest amidst it all.

And I've observed over these months...that despite all of the ways in which people have been mobilized here at CBE, many people feel like no matter what they do, they're not doing enough. Or that they wish they'd done something differently. And they wish there were a clearer set of instructions for how to respond. To resist. To make change.

Unlike turbulent times past, which included organized resistance movements, or proven theories of change, this time feels different – and diffuse. We know that this is part of how authoritarianism works – stretching thin our attention spans with too many crises for any of us to devote enough focus to each of them individually.

But knowing that, rationally, doesn't make us feel any better. Instead, many of us feel certain that we are not doing enough. Or that we don't know what to do. Many of us feel listless and impotent. And it crushes our spirit.

As I reflect on all this, it seems clear that at the very least, our feelings of inadequacy right now...are not serving us well. It's hard enough to feel bad about the state of the world. We don't *also* have to feel bad about feeling bad. And we probably shouldn't go down that road. Because if we allow those feelings to overwhelm us, we will give up.

Instead of succumbing, instead of crawling into a ball and feeling like we're already failing...I'd like to share a few other bits of Jewish wisdom that come to mind for rightsizing ourselves, and our self-expectations in a moment like this one.

For starters, I turn to the mishna. Our oldest collection of rabbinic insight. Referring to this week's parsha, the mishna comments, in Menachot 13:11, on the different kinds of sacrifices – like those which you described, Edie. It explains that this diversity of offerings is to teach you “that one who brings a substantial offering and one who brings a smaller offering have equal merit, provided that [the one who gives] directs their heart toward Heaven.”

In other words, whether we're giving a little or a lot. Whether we're doing something big or something small, what matters is that we're doing something *fully*...according to our ability. It may be that despite our desire to resist and protest in every way imaginable, that we are just limited in certain ways. With our time, with our finances, with our bodies. And

therefore we have to try our best to do whatever we can, with our deepest kavana, or sincerity, regardless of the comparative size of our contribution.

Moreover...just because we didn't do something or didn't stand up at a certain moment or didn't go to that action...doesn't mean that we can't start now. Maimonides explains in his code of law, in Hilchot Teshuva 7:3: "do not say, "I will be separated from the righteous because I have erred [or missed an opportunity]." Rather, just as one can make a misstep, one can course correct."

Sometimes we feel like because we haven't tried something yet, then we have already failed. But in truth, at any time, we can decide to do something differently.

For some of us, that might mean volunteering for a campaign or movement even if we haven't yet done so. It might mean making a donation to a cause we care about but haven't yet financially supported. Or maybe it looks like showing up at a protest for the first time. Protesting isn't for everyone, I know that well. But in case you're interested...it just so happens that today, literally right after services, Rabbi Kolin and others from the CBE Democracy team are meeting on the sanctuary steps to participate in the Hands Off! Day of Action this afternoon in Bryant Park. If you're curious to learn more, you can find them on your way out of shul.

Nonetheless, whether or not protesting will be your thing, following Maimonides, it's not too late to try on any new response...a new behavior to meet this moment.

This week's parsha makes the claim that we show our values, as Jews, by enacting them. By making real those abstract ideas that we otherwise just keep in our heads and our hearts. As we settle into Leviticus, Sefer Vayikra, we will read about how our ancestors brought their values into the physical world. It's been two thousand years since we, as Jews, offered the kinds of sacrifices that *they* did. And in every generation since, we've had to figure out for ourselves how to make real the ideals that we hold dear.

There is no guide book for this time. There is no silver bullet for restoring democracy and making our society whole, and kind, and just. On some level, each of us is going to have to figure this out on our own. But each of us must find our own calling toward trying.

Parashat Vayikra begins with a call. Vayikra el Moshe. And God called to Moses. And in the Torah scroll itself, the final letter of that word Vayikra, the aleph, is written in a font size smaller than the other letters. Our sages taught that this tiny aleph was a symbol of Moses' humility as he was called to receive these laws about how to enact holiness in the world. Instead of responding with arrogance, and instead of responding with fear, he allowed himself to listen. In a time when the noise around us is deafening, when the news is terrifying and we're not sure if we're ever *doing* enough, perhaps we should listen to that small aleph wherever we find it within ourselves. The humble voice within us that invites us to respond. To do something, however small...with sincerity. And with the belief that it will matter.

Shabbat Shalom.