

Shabbat Chag Sukkot 5787
Parashat Emot
Responding to Stella Lewin
September 26, 2026

Stella, what a beautiful d'var Torah. Many people are mystified by the animal sacrifices our ancestors performed, and you've managed to help us see what was beautiful and relatable about the practice. You started with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' idea that "We love what we are willing to make sacrifices for", that the act of making a sacrifice was an act that came out of love and fostered love between the people and G-d. As evidence for that idea, the word in Torah for sacrifice, *korban*, doesn't actually mean sacrifice. It means "drawing near, getting close." The people were trying to get closer to G-d, and the act made them feel closer to G-d. The idea in Judaism that emotion and action go together is something I want to come back to, but first I want to lift up a few other points you made.

You brought us the idea that rather than leading to external reward, the act of giving contains its own reward: as you said, "You get the feeling of satisfaction, which is a gift in itself." And you brought us the idea that the intangible benefits of prayer apply whether or not a person believes in G-d, in that anyone can benefit from taking moments for self-reflection. Then you extrapolated from the text to suggest that G-d would want us to not only give to G-d, but to apply the same practice of sacrifice or giving toward other human beings. As you concluded, we sacrifice because we love, but also because we want to be loved.

There is so much here that is beautiful and worthy of commentary, but today I want to focus on the idea of sacrifice as related to loving and being loved. Because if

you ask the person on the street to tell you the difference between Judaism and Christianity, most people who can answer that at all will tell you that Christianity is primarily about love and Judaism is primarily about law. They will likely say that Jesus is a figure of love, and the G-d of the Old Testament is angry, judging, law-giving, and often harsh. First of all let's talk about the "Old Testament." If you ever hear someone use "Old Testament" to refer to our Torah or the larger Hebrew Bible, which includes Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (things like Psalms and the Book of Esther), you should know that we don't like the term Old Testament. It's only an Old Testament if you think that something more up to date and improved came along, the New Testament. Progressive Christians now call ours the First Testament, which is just true and not pejorative. That's not my point, but news you can use.

The problem with this oft-portrayed contrast between Judaism and Christianity – that the Jewish G-d is always angry and only cares about laws, but that Jesus is loving – is that it's not true. Now we're just coming off of the High Holy Days, in which our liturgy describes G-d often as a judge. And the Torah is full of examples of G-d judging and being angry. But the New Testament has at least as much fire and brimstone. After all, Christianity has hell and original sin and the devil and divine wrath in the Book of Revelation – lots and lots of judgment and anger. And Judaism includes a lot about love. I think it's fair to say both religions have both love and anger in them. But when Christianity was distinguishing itself from Judaism and selling itself as the new and improved version, early Christians created this description of Judaism which actually became a form of antisemitism.

Rabbi Shai Held published a beautiful book in 2024 that I cannot recommend highly enough called *Judaism is About Love*. As the title indicates, he makes the case that love is the primary idea in Judaism. Our goal as Jews, he says, is to walk in G-d's ways, and this looks like living with compassion and loving in three directions. Loving G-d, loving the neighbor, and loving the stranger. Returning to what you talked about earlier, Stella, love is not primarily an emotion in Judaism. It is an act that can be done out of an emotion and that leads to an emotion. As Rabbi Sacks said, "We love what we are willing to make sacrifices for." If you're willing to make a sacrifice for someone it may be an indication you love them, and if you practice making sacrifices or giving to someone, you will come to love them. Rabbi Held says that rather than think about love as an emotion, "It's more accurate to understand love as a disposition... an existential posture, a life orientation...." You do these acts and they make you more loving. This is considered the highest good, or the ideal, for a life.

As I indicated, this is how we imitate G-d, because Judaism understands G-d to be first and foremost profoundly loving. G-d loves us not because of anything we have done to earn it, but simply because we exist. G-d loves us so much that G-d created us in G-d's own image, as is made clear in the first chapter of Genesis. Rabbi Akiva says that this announcement at the beginning of humanity, that we are made in G-d's image, is to let us know how beloved we are. The Maharal of Prague points out that you don't tell someone you love them unless you want to be in a relationship with them. G-d is saying to us, "you are beloved to Me." Rabbi Yitz Greenberg says that we are born with three intrinsic dignities – infinite worth, infinite equality, and infinite uniqueness — and all three are signs of G-d's love. You should never doubt that you are worthy of love, or

that you are equally worthy as every other human being, or that your uniqueness is a sign of G-d's love. That you would not be you if you didn't need to exist exactly as the person you are, and if you weren't loved for it. Rabbi Held says, "We are created *with* love *for* love." That's our purpose, to know we are loved, and to turn it into love through our actions.

Knowing this, then the goal is to live up to G-d's love. The idea we just talked about on the High Holy Days is that G-d can see all of our imperfections and also all of our potential, and G-d believes in us, knows that we are capable of rising to our potential. So the anger and judgment that we hear about on those days come out of love. That's why the metaphor is of a parent, because a parent loves us infinitely much and also can get angry when we fall short, *because* they love us infinitely much and want the very, very best for us. That's the Jewish G-d.

For some reason, it's really hard for human beings to believe that we are so worthy of love. We feel it sometimes, but we also doubt it sometimes, maybe even often. And when we doubt it, when we feel down on ourselves, it's really hard to remember how loved and worthy of love we are. That's one of the reasons why the *moadim*, the fixed times in our Torah reading today, are so important. They come around on our calendar – Shabbat, Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot – to take us out of our ordinary mindsets, shaped as they are by an often unloving world, and to remind us that in a deeper, truer, more existential way, we are loved. And we are worthy of it. You could even say that if that's all these holidays did – remind us of how loved and lovable we are – they have done their job. Our job is to live up to that love, by loving back through giving – to love G-d or the Oneness or the world;

to love the neighbor, the person we know, the person we think of us “like us”; and to love the stranger, whoever is on the outside, at the margins, neglected, in need, whoever we think of as different from us.

Here we are on the first day of Sukkot, and we have moved toward another metaphor for G-d. On this holiday we are commanded to be joyful, and that joy comes out of the knowledge of how loved we are. You see, the sukkah is a symbol of G-d's love. Our parasha tells us that throughout the ages, for ever and ever, at this time of year we are to sit in booths for seven days, “in order that future generations may know that I [G-d] caused the Israelite people to dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.” So first of all, the reason we dwell in the sukkah is to remember that G-d brought us out of Egypt, meaning G-d loved us so much that G-d liberated us, made us free. Second, after G-d made us free, G-d wanted us to be sheltered.

The Talmud (Sukkah 11b) likens the sukkah to Ananei Kavod, the clouds G-d provided for our travels through the wilderness. The Shulkhan Arukh tells us that these clouds were none other than G-d's own presence, and the Vilna Gaon tells us that these clouds were a symbol of the loving relationship between G-d and our ancestors. So G-d accompanies us in the wilderness as a soft, gentle, protective presence over our heads, intimately, lovingly. Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher even says that the clouds gave personal attention to every Israelite based on their individual needs. The sukkah, then, becomes a symbol of G-d's love.

Starting today, when the weather permits, we leave our human-made edifices and spend time in an intentionally flimsy booth to remember our connection to this amazing living system we're a part of, to remember the Oneness that is within and

beyond, that unites and loves all things. And remember all of the ways that we are provided for, loved with a bounty of sustenance. The lulav and etrog symbolize all the diversity of life that sustain our own, all of the ways we are dependent and interdependent and loved. Love is the source of our joy in this *z'man simchateinu*, in this season of our joy.

May we live up that love throughout our lives, by reminding ourselves at least on the holidays, maybe weekly on Shabbat, maybe even daily, of how loved we are, how worthy of that love we are, and how capable of sharing it with others. May we become ever clearer vessels, conduits of compassion, receiving and giving love, and for that reason, in this season, may we rejoice.

Chag Sameach, Shabbat Shalom.