

# ***Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World**

*Parashat Vayikra*, Leviticus, Chapters 1-5 | March 23, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

## **Abraham, Prometheus, and the Altar of *Olah***

Let us begin, as we so often do, with Rembrandt: with a work of his that is tiny but that packs a powerful emotional punch. It is an etching of a scene in the Book of Genesis:



Let us set the scene, for it is only with this image in mind that we can truly approach our own reading. We see here a single moment in the terrifying tale of the *Akeidah*, the Binding of Isaac. As Abraham brought his son up Mount Moriah, Isaac plaintively asked:

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*Hinei ha-esh v'ha-eitsim, v'ayeh ha-seh l'olah?*

Here is the fire and here is the wood, but where is the lamb for the *olah* [burnt offering]? (Genesis 22:7)

And Abraham answered, in a scene so movingly recreated by the artist:

*Elohim yir'eh lo ha-seh l'olah b'ni.*

God, my son, will allow us to see the sheep for the *olah*. (Genesis 22:8)

If we look carefully at the etching, we see that the drama of the image lies in the focus on Abraham's two hands. With one, he points above to the God of Whom he speaks. With the other, he clutches his heart, a hint to the silent prayer within, the desperate hope that God will provide an animal for the *olah*, for the burnt offering, in place of Isaac.

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**It is on Mount Moriah, at the very place that Abraham bound Isaac, that the Temple's altar stood.**

And in the end, that is indeed what occurred:

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

And Abraham called the name of that place *Hashem Yir'eh* [the Lord shall make seen], as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.

At the last moment, Isaac is saved, and a ram appears to be offered in Isaac's stead. It is Abraham's words that then provided the name for this sacred site where the altar of Israel ultimately sat; he named the place "*Hashem Yir'eh*," "God will allow us to see" the ram, a name that, for Jewish tradition, is linked to the name Jerusalem. It is on Mount Moriah, at the very place that Abraham bound Isaac, that the Temple's altar stood. It is at the very site of Abraham's offering where animal sacrifice took place; to offer an animal at this site is not merely to give a gift to God, but also to reenact the original offering of the ram—to reexperience, in a primal way, a ritual of redemption in the very same spot where, so many centuries before, Abraham's internal prayer was answered and a ram was revealed to replace Isaac. It was at this site that Abraham's desperate hope, hidden in his heart, was realized, and it is to this site that Jewish prayers, bursting from Jewish hearts, are to be poured out.

We bear this in mind as we approach our *parashah*, which describes in detail the various offerings to be brought in the Tabernacle, and ultimately in the Temple in Jerusalem—the site where the story of Isaac originally unfolded.



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It is with the *olah*—with the burnt offering—that Leviticus begins:

The Lord called Moses, and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, When any man of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of cattle from the herd or from the flock.

If his offering is an *olah* [a burnt offering] from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it at the door of the tent of meeting before the Lord. (Leviticus 1:1-3)

The *olah* is an offering in which the entire animal is burnt; it is just such an offering that was given by Abraham when he saw the ram. But it is not the only offering in Jewish law. The next chapter of Leviticus describes the *minhab*, or grain offering, in its various versions, made of fine flour:

And he shall take from it a handful of its fine flour and its oil, with all of its frankincense; and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion upon the altar, an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord. (Leviticus 2:3)

The third chapter discusses an entirely different offering: the *sh'lamim*, usually translated as “peace offering” or “offering of wellbeing.” With such an offering, only part of the animal is burnt on the altar, and part is eaten. It is a form of “dining with the Divine,” and it is central to ritual feasting on holy days.

Finally, the weekly reading describes in detail the *hatat*, often rendered as “sin offering,” but which, as Jacob Milgrom has written, is more correctly called a “purification offering.” Sin can bring impurity to the Temple, and this ritual is instituted in order to purify the Temple following inadvertent iniquity.

We have then an assortment of *korbanot*, offerings. And yet: while every one of these is offered on the altar, it is only the first kind for which the sacrificial site is named. Thus Exodus 35, which we read two weeks ago, describes the vessels of the Tabernacle, including:

the altar of the *olah* [burnt offering], with its grating of bronze, its poles, and all its utensils, the laver and its base, . . . (Exodus 35:16)

All types of offerings are to be brought on the *mizbah ha-olah*, the altar of the burnt offering, as if the altar is to be forever linked to the original *olah* of the anguishing Abrahamic episode in the Jewish past. Why should this be so?

In answering this question, we must distinguish between the classical pagan approach to sacrifice and that of Hebrew Scripture. One of the earliest accounts of Greek myth extant today comes from the poet Hesiod, who gives us what was, for Greeks, one of the most authoritative versions of the stories that we still read: Atlas holding the world aloft, Pandora’s box, and Prometheus, whose tale truly starts with a sacrifice. Prometheus has been seen as the defender of mankind from the gods, and according to Hesiod, Prometheus sought to ensure that when bringing animal sacrifices, humanity would keep most of the best parts of meat for themselves. Pro-



metheus therefore suggested that only the bones of the animal be given to Zeus, with the fat covering them and thereby disguising the fact that there was no meat being offered.

For when the gods and mortal men had a dispute at Mecone, even then Prometheus was forward to cut up a great ox and set portions before them, trying to befool the mind of Zeus. Before the rest he set flesh and inner parts thick with fat upon the hide, covering them with an ox paunch; but for Zeus he put the white bones dressed up with cunning art and covered with shining fat.

This was Prometheus' ruse. Interestingly, Hesiod himself writes that it was Prometheus' dubious sacrificial method that inspired the way offerings are always presented in Greece: the bones are covered with fat and placed on the fire, and the meat is eaten by human beings. As he adds, "because of this the tribes of men upon earth burn white bones to the deathless gods upon fragrant altars."

Sacrifice, in other words, was for pagan Greece an eternal remembrance of the attempt to outwit the gods. And these gods, in turn, are not very nice. Zeus, according to Hesiod, was angry at Prometheus' trick and in revenge took fire away from man. Prometheus, in turn, took the fire from Mount Olympus, hid it in a reed, and brought it back to humanity:

So spake Zeus in anger, whose wisdom is everlasting; and from that time he was always mindful of the trick, and would not give the power of unwearying fire to the Melian race of mortal men who live on the earth. But the noble son of Iapetus [Prometheus] outwitted him and stole the far-seen gleam of unwearying fire in a hollow fennel stalk.

As punishment, Zeus chains Prometheus, who has his liver pecked out every day by eagles. Prometheus was celebrated by the Greeks, most famously by the playwright Aeschylus in his *Prometheus Bound*. In the play, Prometheus is depicted as one who was persecuted by the gods because of his greatness and his actions against the gods on behalf of man.

What emerges from the story of Prometheus' sacrificial deception and his fiery theft is this: the gods are not just; they are propitiated because they are powerful; Prometheus is celebrated because for a moment he overcame their power. The tale tells us something about the way the Greeks saw their divinities: they were not necessarily good at all. As Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein put it, in Aeschylus,

There is conflict here between power and justice. The tragedy is that although these two values should work together in harmony, they are in fact in conflict here and ultimately it is power which prevails.

In contrast, Rabbi Lichtenstein added, when you look at the book of the Bible most like Aeschylus' play, the Book of Job, you realize that they are profoundly different. While the main character in the biblical book ponders suffering in the face of God's providence, at the same time, Job "knows his place in relation to the Holy One. It never enters his mind that he is engaging in battle against an 'equal opponent.'" The contrast indicates that Judaism balances its belief in the powers of man with its insistence on man's reliance on God, and on God's absolute goodness.



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We are therefore able to appreciate another contrast between Jewish texts and the tale of Prometheus. According to rabbinic tradition, when Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, darkness descended on the world. But in a great act of love, God took two stones, and instructed Adam in the art of creating fire. Thus, whereas the Greeks saw in fire a reminder of rebellion against the gods, Jews saw in it a sign of God's grace following man's rebellion. Fire, for the Talmud, commemorates two lonely, fallible human beings alone with God, outside of Eden for the first time, still experiencing God's goodness, benevolence, and grace.

Thus, the very notion of what an altar is, of what sacrifice is, and of what fire is, divided the Greeks from the Jews.

In the story of Prometheus, sacrifice to the gods was born in a trick, in a deception, in a rebellion. In contrast, in the Jewish story, as we see with Abraham, an animal offering is an acknowledgment of the grace of God, and of one's reliance on God. When the offering is burned in fire, the fire reflects the fact that even after man sins, one can experience the love of God and be partners with God in creation.

This debate over the meaning of sacrifice is reflected in actual differences in cultic procedure. In contrast to the Torah, which sets out the rules of offerings in our readings, Greek literature, as writers and scholars note, took it for granted that everyone knew what a sacrifice was, and never really explained how one was performed. But as some point out, there is one book that gives us a glimpse—one of the most famous of all Greek works, and that is Homer's *Odyssey*, which describes, as part of the story, a sacrifice offered to Neptune:

But as the sun was rising from the fair sea into the firmament of heaven to shed light on mortals and immortals, they reached Pylos, the city of Neleus. Now the people of Pylos were gathered on the sea shore to offer sacrifice of black bulls to Neptune lord of the Earthquake. There were nine guilds with five hundred men in each, and there were nine bulls to each guild. As they were eating the inward meats and burning the thigh bones [on the embers] in the name of Neptune, Telemachus and his crew arrived, furled their sails, brought their ship to anchor, and went ashore.

This is a Greek sacrifice. The thigh bones were burnt, and the meat was eaten by those bringing the sacrifice. This, of course, is exactly what was done by Prometheus in his tricky ritual; the bones were given to the gods, and all the meat preserved for man.

Now, our own *parashah* also describes offerings that are eaten. But as we mentioned, the altar is always known as the "*mizbah ha'olah*," "the altar of the *olah*," the burnt offering of an animal given entirely to God. It is known by this name because on the very spot where the altar sat, the most important *olah* of all took place: Abraham's sacrifice of the ram in place of Isaac.

To link the altar to this event is to acknowledge the grace of God, and one's reliance on God. Let us, for a moment, imagine a Jew entering the Temple. The site has been altered since the *Akeidah*. Abraham ascended with Isaac all alone, whereas this Jew would join the throngs of thousands. But he is imitating his ancestor's ascent all the same. And when he stands before the altar with an animal as an offering, he stands existentially alone, and remembers again Abraham's prayer: "may God show us the lamb for an *olah*, my son." Every offering on the altar is a memory of God's grace, and therefore of the fragility and preciousness of human life; every visit to the Jerusalem altar is a



reminder of the *Akeidah*, and that is why the altar is eternally known as the altar of the *olah*, of the original ram offered entirely to God, reminding us of our complete dependence on Him.

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## Leviticus thus poses a question to all of us: whose altar do we celebrate—that of Abraham, or that of Prometheus?

Leviticus thus poses a question to all of us: whose altar do we celebrate—that of Abraham, or that of Prometheus? What is our guiding light? The tale of the fire stolen from the gods, or the story of the fire given by the grace of God? The ancient Greek celebration of Prometheus inspired the Greeks to attempt to become akin to

the gods, and there is no denying that this drive for divinity produced many accomplishments. But a society that celebrates gods for their power, rather than their goodness, is a society that can ultimately embrace the most terrible notions and actions in the name of power.

As I noted in a column in *Commentary*, it was in Nuremberg that Albert Speer built the “Hall of Honor,” an enormous structure towering over the Nazi rally grounds. Architecturally celebrated in Germany, the edifice was inspired by the ancient altar of Pergamon, in Greece. To watch footage of the Nuremberg rallies in a pagan structure reborn is to see the prophecy pronounced by the poet Heinrich Heine terrifyingly fulfilled:

... the ancient stony gods will rise from the forgotten debris and rub the dust of a thousand years from their eyes. ... And when you hear a crashing such as never before has been heard in the history of the world, then you will know that the German thunderbolt has fallen. ... A play will be performed in Germany which will make the French Revolution look like an innocent idyll.

The teaching that human life is itself a gift of God lies at the heart of the story of the redemption of Isaac, and of the offering of the first *olah* on Mount Moriah; and the Jewish polity in Jerusalem is crowned with an altar of *olah* in order to ensure that this will never be forgotten.

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## **Additional Resources**

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein's Hanukkah Address, "God and Man According to Judaism and Hellenism," December 16, 1987. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik on Nuremberg, "Nuremberg, 75 Years After," *Commentary*, December 2020. [Click here to read.](#)

