

**ROSH HA-SHANAH MORNING 5783**  
**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2022**

## **THE CHILD SACRIFICE WE STILL PRACTICE**

**Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake, Westchester Reform Temple**

Eight years ago, a paper based on archaeological findings in Northern Africa, specifically Carthage, Tunisia, rocked the academic world. It concluded that the ancient Carthaginians in all likelihood practiced child sacrifice, and, even more shockingly, that the ritual sacrifice of children may have been fairly common throughout this part of the world—including ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The burial site in Carthage belongs to a specific type that archaeologists designate with the Hebrew word *tophet*, a location described in the Bible where people would sacrifice their children as burnt offerings to various gods. It's also a word for "hell."

Archaeologists discovered that the *tophet* of Carthage contained over 20,000 urns stuffed with the cremated ashes and bone fragments of young children, suggesting that the practice took place over several centuries. At its largest, this ritual burial

---

<sup>1</sup> "Ancient Carthaginians Really Did Sacrifice Their Children," published online, January 23, 2014, at <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2014-01-23-ancient-carthaginians-really-did-sacrifice-their-children>

ground covered over 64,000 square feet and spanned nine different levels.<sup>2</sup>

It looks increasingly credible that infants were sacrificed as burnt offerings to ancient Near-Eastern deities, including *Yahweh*, the god of the ancient Israelites. Our God.

Hi. Still with me? *Shanah tovah!* It's wonderful to be with you, this first day of a beautiful new year.

So. Child sacrifice. Year in and year out, we meet Abraham and Isaac at Moriah, the mountain of decision, where the fate of son and father (and ram) hang in the balance as precariously as the knife raised in the air. Year in, year out, we find new angles to explore, new meaning to be mined from ancient words. There are some texts, the Rabbis said, that cry out, *darsheini*, "Explain me!"

For the scholars who have examined the findings at the *tophet* of Carthage and other similar sites, the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, is a proof-text corroborating the practice of child sacrifice. It is far from the only one. In the Hebrew Bible alone, the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Kings, and Jeremiah all refer to child sacrifice in one way or another, often in the form of

---

<sup>2</sup> See "Tophet at Carthage," *Atlas Obscura*, published October 2, 2017 at <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/tophet-at-carthage>

laws and proclamations condemning and forbidding the practice—a fact that itself strengthens the conclusion that child sacrifice really did happen in ancient Israel.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, we recoil in horror at the thought of the sacrifice of a single child, let alone a cultural practice of this magnitude. It is, as Dr. Josephine Quinn, a Classics professor at Oxford University, has noted, “very difficult for us to recapture people’s motivations for carrying out this practice or why parents would agree to it, but it’s worth trying. Perhaps it was out of profound religious piety, or a sense that the good the sacrifice could bring the family or community as a whole outweighed the life of the child.... We think of it as a slander because we view it in our own terms. But people looked at it differently 2,500 years ago.”<sup>4</sup>

That’s a perspective worth affirming. We should always be careful before judging ancient Near-Eastern practices from our 21st-century American vantage point.

Even more, we should ask: *How far have we come?*

After all, *every* generation tells itself that it wants to build a better world, not for its own sake, but for the sake of “the children.”

---

<sup>3</sup> See Heath W. Dewrell, “Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel,” in *Friends of ASOR*, Vol. V, No. 12, December 2017, published online at <https://www.asor.org/onetoday/2017/12/child-sacrifice-ancient-israel/>

<sup>4</sup> “Ancient Carthaginians Really Did Sacrifice Their Children,” published online, January 23, 2014, at <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2014-01-23-ancient-carthaginians-really-did-sacrifice-their-children>

Every generation means it, too. Yet, in every generation, we practice some form of child sacrifice, whether we mean to or not.

The Greatest Generation bequeathed a legacy of having vanquished the Nazis and the Axis Powers. It also gave birth to a threat of nuclear annihilation that persists to this day.

The Boomer generation strove to provide a peaceful global order after the Cold War, to give their children unbridled economic prosperity and technological possibility. But each advance has produced unintended perils and problems.

You see, every generation, for all its noble aspirations, for all its hopes and dreams for its children, has practiced some form of child sacrifice. Many undesirable outcomes have arisen, despite best intentions, through plain old shortsightedness: an unfortunate, universal, human defect.

It is not hard to understand the cynicism about the present and the anxieties about the future that many Gen X'ers, Millennials, and Post-Millennials now feel. The growing gulf in resources between those who "have" and those who "have not" (or who "have less") has made it significantly harder for younger generations to attain the benchmarks of success that came earlier and easier to their parents.

On the altar of individual rights, we have sacrificed our children's willingness to give priority to the common good.

On the altar of unregulated gun ownership, we have sacrificed our children's safety and emotional wellbeing in classrooms and offices, in parks and concert halls and supermarkets and movie theaters.

On the altar of partisan rancor, we have sacrificed our children's faith in democratic institutions and elected officials.

On the altar of technology, we have sacrificed our children's desire to engage in real, live community.

On the altar of fake news, we have sacrificed our children's ability to tell truth from lies. (And yes, sometimes, our parents' ability, too. And sometimes our own.)

And every day that we refuse to take bold action to curb climate change, reduce carbon emissions, and make the sacrifices necessary to invest in renewable energy on a global scale, is a day that we are making a burnt offering of our planet, a *tophet*, a hell on earth for our children and grandchildren to weather, or clean up—if they can.

Thirty years ago, more than 1,500 prominent scientists, including over half of the world's Nobel laureates, issued a manifesto titled "[World Scientists' Warning to Humanity](#)." They admonished: "A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated."

Author Anthony Doerr (whose recent book *Cloud Cuckoo Land* is a must-read, by the way) read that manifesto, and here's what happened.

"I wrote checks to some conservation organizations, replaced some incandescent bulbs and rode my bike to work," he says. "I also hurtled through the troposphere on hundreds of airplanes (each round trip from New York to London costs the Arctic another three square meters of ice), bought and sold multiple automobiles and helped my wife put two more Americans onto the planet.... I routinely walk up to a podium, open a brand new plastic bottle of water, take a sip and promptly forget that it exists."

One minute, Doerr will recognize what he calls "the insanity of our trajectory," and then, the next, he'll "get swamped by the tsunami of the day: One kid has strep throat, another needs to go to the dentist, I've forgotten six or seven internet passwords, the dog just pooped on the rug."

“Hour by hour, minute by minute,” he concludes, “I make decisions that seem like the right things to do at the time, but which prevent me from reflecting on the most significant, most critical fact in my life: Every day I participate in a system that is weaponizing our big, gorgeous planet against our kids.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Abraham was all too willing to go through with the sacrifice of his child not so much because he was a malignant parent but because it was the task-at-hand, a pressing matter, a test he could not afford to fail. In every generation, the demands of the urgent, the immediate, the here-and-now, always seem to override the needs of an abstract “future” years or decades or centuries hence.

“So, Rabbi,” I hear you asking, “ what do we do?”

The short answer is, I don’t know. It feels like we could be doing so much, but little will make any difference. How can we make sure that the long view matters as much to us as the demands of our daily lives?

---

<sup>5</sup> “Anthony Doerr: We Were Warned,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 2017, published online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/18/opinion/sunday/anthony-doerr-we-were-warned.html>

Judaism has some answers to that conundrum. By embracing our Judaism and teaching the next generation why it matters, we will do our part to unbind them from the sacrificial altars of our time.

What we have to offer, with the genius of the oldest living spiritual tradition, is a Jewish approach to living that provides enduring hope, long-range ethical vision, and transcendent purpose.

Three aspects of Judaism lead me to this conclusion. First, that Judaism has always been a tradition that demands *sacrifice*, not *of* others but *of oneself* for the *sake* of others.

Second, that Judaism has always been a tradition that affirms the possibility of *change*: that we can change, and that we can change our world.

And last, that Judaism has always been a tradition about *choice*: choosing joy in the face of suffering, life in the face of death, hope in the face of despair, and, above all, good in the face of evil.

### **Sacrifice for the Sake of Others**

What shall we teach our children about Judaism, and why it matters? Let us remind them that our tradition insists that we sacrifice of ourselves for the sake of others.

The Book of Esther that we read on Purim teaches this value. Upon learning the news of Haman's impending genocide, Esther, who has up until this point hidden her Jewish identity from the king, initially demurs. "I don't even have an audience with the king," she tells her uncle Mordechai, adding that to appear before the throne without an invitation was an offense punishable by death.

"Do not think that you will escape with your life just because you're in the king's palace," Mordechai warns, adding: "If you remain silent, someone else may come along to save the Jews, but you and your family line will perish. Perhaps it is for this very reason that you have attained your position of authority." So Esther steels her nerve and declares: "I shall go to the king, even though it's against the law; and if I am to be lost, then I will be lost."<sup>6</sup>

This is the true spirit of our heritage, this, the true meaning of Jewish sacrifice: the willingness to do the right thing even at great personal risk, the courage to make painful choices right here and now, not for ourselves, but for the future of our people and our world.

Judaism does not demand that we become martyrs or lawbreakers for our faith. But it does ask us to put our reputations on the line,

---

<sup>6</sup> *Esther* 4:12-14.

our popularity or public standing, to do what is right: to stand up for the vulnerable, to raise a voice in protest at injustice and cruelty, at falsehood and the abuse of power. It asks us to do the hard thing instead of the convenient thing, the counter-cultural thing instead of the fashionable thing, the charitable thing instead of the selfish thing, the holy thing instead of the ordinary thing.

A true story. There I was, toward the end of my winter sabbatical, at a Talmud seminar for rabbis in the city, when a call came in from our UJA-Federation asking me to join a delegation of rabbis heading to Poland to meet Ukrainian refugees, three weeks into the Russian onslaught. Honestly, at first I felt conflicted. On the fence. I came back to the study hall and our teacher handed out this passage from the Book of Esther. Sometimes a text cries out *darsheini*, “explain me!”; sometimes a text speaks for itself. Esther spoke to me with uncommon lucidity and directness, reminding me that Jews do not remain silent in the face of suffering. An hour later, I booked my flight to Warsaw.

## **Change is Possible**

What else shall we teach our children about Judaism, and why it matters? Let us remind them that our tradition insists that change is always possible. In a world where so many of us feel stuck, helpless, powerless to make the changes that this moment

demands, to address its perils and evils, let us yet declare that change is possible.

Throughout these High Holidays, our prayers will feature litanies of confession. We will admit our faults and beat our breasts. Amid all this public self-flagellation we may miss the point, which is not simply “repentance.” I bristle at the word “repentance,” which comes from the Old French *repentir*, meaning, “to feel regret for sins or crimes.” The point is exactly *not* to paralyze ourselves in regret or shame or self-pity. The point is to begin *teshuvah*, a word meaning “to turn around.” To affirm that we can change. And that, beginning with ourselves, we can change the world.

Read any story in Torah; the lesson is always this. Take Jacob, who was an incorrigible schemer until he earned redemption through his love of his family. He discovered the meaning of giving of oneself, in love, to others. Greed gave way to generosity. After wrestling with a mysterious messenger in the dead of night, Jacob emerged injured but blessed. His transformation was complete. He became *Yisrael*, Israel: the one who strives with God and humanity and prevails. The limp was a small sacrifice for what he gained in insight and integrity. It was also a reminder that change is always possible, and often painful.

Judaism does not expect us to be Jacob or Moses or Esther or anyone other than ourselves, but, the most fully developed, vital selves we can be. It does not expect us to change overnight—not ourselves, and not the world. It does tell us that we *can* change, little by little, *mitzvah* by *mitzvah*, and leave the world a little better than we found it.

## **We Must Choose**

What, finally, must we teach our children about Judaism, and why it matters? Let us remind them, above all, that our tradition empowers us *to choose*: to choose joy in the face of suffering, life in the face of death, hope in the face of despair, goodness in the face of apathy and immorality.

*How* we choose to live this tradition matters. It sends a message to the next generation. We can choose to live our Judaism joyfully and vigorously or we can languish in complacency.

An essay published 36 years ago by historian Simon Rawidowicz famously described Jews, consumed by constant anxiety over antisemitism and extinction, as “the ever-dying people.” Why would the next generation embrace a tradition defined this way? Why light Shabbat candles, or join a synagogue, or observe *Pesach*, or give *tzedakah* to support the Jewish community, or raise children Jewishly, if we convey only that Judaism demands

the observance of empty rituals, the rote recitation of hollow prayers, the defensive instincts of a perpetually traumatized people?

Let us instead teach that Judaism is—at all times and in every generation—about courageously choosing joy, choosing hope, choosing life, and choosing goodness. For ourselves and our posterity.

In 1997, Boston Globe columnist Jeff Jacoby wrote a letter to his newborn son. I have held onto it and cherished it for twenty-five years. In it he writes: “You have made your appearance at the tail end of a century that has broken every record for evil and cruelty. Our era... has collapsed forever the illusion that there is a limit to the atrocities of which human beings are capable. And for human atrociousness there is no cure—except the cultivation of human goodness.”

“You are so tiny, little one. You have so much growing to do. As I cradle you in my arms or watch you sleep in your crib, I pray that life brings you vigor and health, delight and fortune. Like every parent, I want you to do well. But more than anything else, I want you to do good.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> “A message to my newborn son,” March 27, 1997, published online at [http://archive.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/1997/03/27/a\\_message\\_to\\_my\\_newborn\\_son/](http://archive.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/1997/03/27/a_message_to_my_newborn_son/)

In a reeling world of limitless choices—many of them harmful or just plain wrong—Judaism teaches us how to choose the good.

Is there any greater gift we can give our children?

Give thanks with me, then, that God has blessed us with a bright and promising new year.

Give thanks to God, for the strength to sacrifice, the courage to change, the wisdom to choose.

Give thanks to God that we can share our good, beautiful, and life-affirming tradition with a generation yet to come, a generation that will inherit the world we leave them.

*Shanah Tovah*