

HUMAN AGGRESSION AND ANIMAL SACRIFICE

BY SINA KAHEN

The practice of animal sacrifice in the Jewish tradition has long been a subject of debate and discussion. With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, animal sacrifices ceased to be a part of Jewish worship. As the Jewish people still await the rebuilding of the Temple, we will analyse animal sacrifices in light of our primal human nature. In this attempt, we are seeking to discover another taste – or “ta’am” – for this eternally relevant commandment.¹

The Nature of Aggression: Lessons from Konrad Lorenz

Konrad Lorenz, an esteemed ethologist, delved deep into the nature and origins of aggression in animals, including humans, in his book *“On Aggression.”* Lorenz proposed that aggression is an innate and essential aspect of animal behaviour, crucial for survival and reproduction.² He argued that aggression is not merely a reaction to external stimuli but a biologically driven mechanism for establishing social hierarchies, defending territories, and ensuring the survival of one’s offspring.³

Lorenz recognised the evolutionary benefits of aggression while also being acutely aware of its potentially destructive consequences, especially in human societies. He cautioned against suppressing natural aggression and advocated for a better understanding and management of our aggressive instincts to prevent large-scale conflict and destruction.⁴

Animal Sacrifice: A Historical and Spiritual Perspective

The roots of animal sacrifice in ancient Israelite culture and religion served as a means of worship, atonement, and thanksgiving. The Torah outlines various types of sacrifices, including burnt offerings (*ola*), sin offerings (*ḥatat*), guilt offerings (*asham*), and peace offerings (*shelamim*). These rituals were an integral part of Israelite religious life, performed by the *kohanim* in the Tabernacle and later, the Temple in Jerusalem.

Following the destruction of the Second Temple, the sacrificial system was no more. Structured prayer was introduced to correspond with the timings of the sacrificial system. Therefore, structured prayer was to correspond to - not replace - sacrifice.

1 In More HaNebukhim (3:26), HaRambam encourages us to seek “ta’ame hamisvot,” which, although often translated as “reasons for the commandments,” more aptly captures the notion of “tastes” of the commandments. The term “tastes” implies a subjective understanding of the purpose of the commandments, as opposed to an objective reason. In Hebrew, “ta’am” carries the dual meaning of both “taste” and “reason,” and HaRambam’s use of this term highlights the distinction between an experiential, personal understanding of the commandments and the pursuit of an ultimate, objective explanation. According to HaRambam, it is crucial for individuals to explore the commandments and develop personal connections and insights into their significance. This process of seeking the “tastes” of the commandments is akin to savouring the flavours of a dish, where each person may appreciate and relate to different aspects of the experience. By engaging with the commandments in this manner, we strive to deepen our appreciation for and connection with these Divinely ordained practices. It is important to note that this personal exploration should not be mistaken for an attempt to uncover the ultimate, objective reason behind the commandments. The true purpose of the commandments transcends human comprehension and is rooted in God’s command. By seeking the “tastes” of the commandments, we acknowledge the limitations of our understanding while nurturing our People’s remarkable ability to generate meaning.

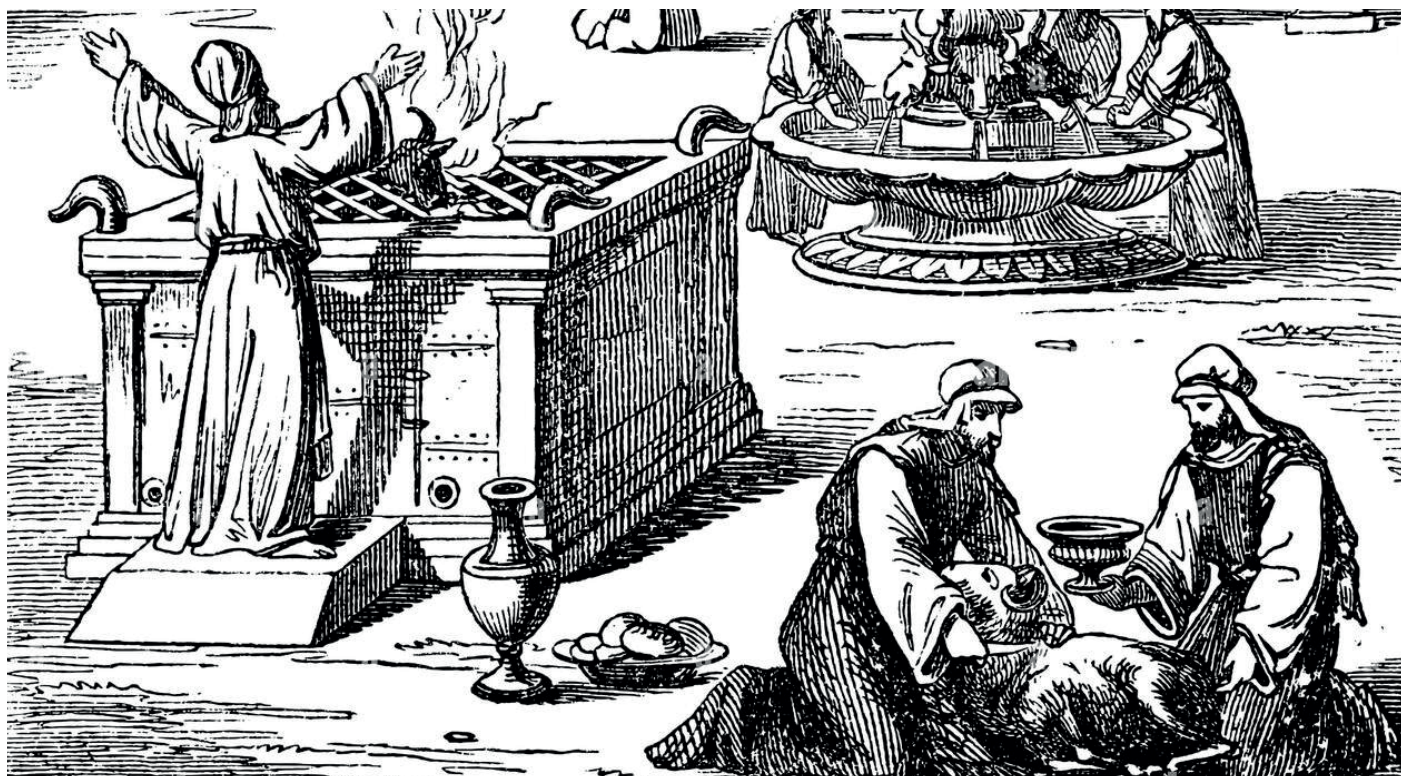
2 Lorenz, Konrad, *On Aggression*.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*



Sina Kahen works in the Medical Technology and AI industries as an Innovation Manager, and is the author of *Ideas* (a series of books on the weekly Torah portion). He studied Biomedical Sciences and has an MBA from Imperial College. Sina lives in London with his wife and two children. He is also the Co-Founder of *The Ḥabura*.



The Intersection of Aggression and Animal Sacrifice

When viewed through the lens of Lorenz's insights on aggression, the animal sacrifice system in Halakha can be seen as a means of channelling our primal aggressive nature into a controlled, sacred context. In this framework, the act of sacrificing an animal becomes a physical manifestation of one's innate aggressive instincts, enabling individuals to confront and manage these impulses constructively.

This idea is supported by our Sages' understanding of man's struggle against his "evil inclination" (*yeşer hara*), which encompasses aggressive behaviour:

*"Rabbi Shimon ben Levi said: Man's evil inclination gathers strength daily against him, as it is said: 'Only the wickedness of man was great in the earth' [Genesis 6:5], and were it not for the fact that the Holy One, blessed be He, helps him, he would be unable to withstand it, as it is said: 'But I am with him in trouble' [Psalms. 91:15]."*⁵

Another Talmudic passage, while apparently accepting the astrological concept of the period that someone born under the influence of the planet Mars will have a heightened tendency towards violence⁶, emphasises that this tendency can find its outlet in either destructive or constructive directions:

"Rabbi Hanina said, '... Someone born under Mars will be one who spills blood.' Rab Ashe said, 'Either a surgeon, or a thief, or

*a shoḥet, or a mohel."*⁷

In his commentary on Targum Onqelos, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Rabbi Nathan Marcus Adler, develops this concept with reference to Cain and Abel:

*Perhaps they disputed about the theory and practice of sacrifices to God, concerning whether He wishes to receive offerings of blood from living creatures: Cain believed that blood would not be acceptable and with his high-minded concern and sensitivity rejected the idea of animal offering and brought crop offerings, but Abel believed that loving his brother and slaughtering an ox would be better than beating another person. For all his delicacy and pacifism, Cain ended up killing his brother. As so often happens, the two extremes meet.*⁸

By engaging in the Divinely ordained act of animal sacrifice, individuals not only fulfil an obligation but also curb their aggressive nature. Additionally, the regulated nature of the sacrificial system may help to contain and mitigate the potentially destructive effects of aggression. The Torah prescribes specific guidelines for performing sacrifices, including the types of animals that may be offered, the required rituals for slaughter and preparation, and the proper disposition of the sacrificial remains.⁹ These detailed regulations ensure that the expression of aggression is both purposeful and constrained, reducing the likelihood of uncontrolled violence or harm to others.

⁵ Talmud Babli, Kiddushin 30b.

⁶ The question of the validity of astrology has been debated among Rabbanim for generations, and a good overview can be found at: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/astrology

⁷ Talmud Babli, Shabbat 156a.

⁸ Netina Lager on Genesis 4:8.

⁹ Leviticus 1-7.

¹⁰ Lorenz, Konrad. On Aggression.

¹¹ Talmud Babli, Sanhedrin 98a; HaRambam. Mishne Tora, Laws of Kings and Wars, 12:5.

Beyond the individual benefits of channelling aggression through animal sacrifice, the ritual may also serve a communal purpose by reinforcing social cohesion and order. In Lorenz's view, aggression is a mechanism for establishing social hierarchies and maintaining group stability.¹⁰ The sacrificial system, with its well-defined roles for the *kohanim* and the laity, provides a structured means of enacting and reinforcing these social dynamics.

Moreover, the collective participation in sacrificial rituals fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose among the Jewish people. As members of the community gather at the Temple to witness and partake in the sacrifices, they are reminded of their shared heritage, values, and commitment to the service of God. This collective experience helps to channel and redirect the community's aggressive instincts toward the maintenance and preservation of their identity.

The Future: Restoration of the Temple and the Return of Animal Sacrifice

Our conviction in the restoration of the Temple and the resumption of animal sacrifices is manifest in our law.¹¹ Indeed, the rebuilding of the Temple and the re-establishment of the sacrificial system will coincide with the arrival of the Messiah and the ushering in of a new era of peace, justice, and spiritual renewal.¹²

In this context, the return of animal sacrifice can be understood as a means of restoring the natural order of creation, in which human aggression is properly channelled and integrated into a Divine purpose. By re-establishing the sacrificial system, the Jewish people will once again have the opportunity to confront and manage their innate aggressive instincts in a spiritually constructive manner, ultimately contributing to the realisation of the Messianic vision.

What About Other Outlets of Aggression?

In contemporary society, we tend to channel our aggressive instincts through various means, such as playing sports, engaging in competitive games, or immersing ourselves in aggressive characters in movies and video games. While these activities offer temporary release, they may not entirely satisfy the complex needs of our primal instincts. This brings us to our intriguing proposal: the practice of Temple sacrifices offers a more profound and comprehensive outlet for human aggression.

Sports, for instance, are often lauded as effective channels for aggression. The physical exertion and competitive nature of sports seem to offer an ideal outlet for our aggressive

instincts. Psychologists have indeed shown that sports can facilitate the regulation of aggression and foster pro-social behaviours.¹⁴ Although sports and similar activities do indeed impact our emotional states, they primarily engage our *physical selves*. Further, the competitive nature of sports can inadvertently fuel aggression. Striving to win, dealing with defeat, and sometimes, the physical contact involved in some sports can provoke aggressive tendencies. Therefore, while sports can help regulate emotions and curb aggression to a certain extent, they may also stimulate aggressive behaviours.

On the other hand, the practice of animal sacrifice in the Temple merges physical, emotional, and spiritual domains, providing a holistic outlet for aggression. Here, aggression is not simply released but transformed and elevated into a sacred act. This process of "sublimation" — turning a socially unacceptable impulse into a socially acceptable or even beneficial act — is a well-known psychological concept, first elaborated upon by Sigmund Freud.¹³

The sacrificial ritual involves the physical act of offering an animal, a profound emotional connection in the act of giving, and a spiritual dimension in relating the act to the Divine. This multi-faceted engagement can offer a more satisfying release and transformation of aggressive instincts.

Moreover, the Temple sacrifice is a regulated activity, performed according to specific guidelines and within a defined community context. This characteristic gives it an advantage over activities like sports, which can sometimes spiral into uncontrolled aggression.¹⁴

Furthermore, the sacrificial ritual serves to reinforce societal norms and values, fostering unity and mutual understanding within the community. This communal aspect is absent in many contemporary outlets for aggression, which tend to focus on individual satisfaction. The return of the Temple sacrifices might appear as an archaic proposal in our modern world. However, by drawing on our historical and religious traditions, we may uncover wisdom that could guide our understanding and management of aggression.

¹² Soloveitchik, Joseph B. *The Halakhic Mind: An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought*.

¹³ I highly recommend researching this area of psychology.

¹⁴ See these two papers: Guivernau, M., & Duda, J. L. (2002). "Moral atmosphere and athletic aggressive tendencies in young soccer players". *Journal of Moral Education*, 31(1), 67-85. and Visek, A. J.,

Hurst, J. R., Maxwell, J. P., & Watson, J. C. (2016). "A crosscultural psychometric evaluation of the athletic identity measurement scale". *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 28(4), 449-468.

Reconciling Seemingly Contradictory Views

A famous perspective on the role of animal sacrifice comes from HaRaMBa"m in his *More HaNebukhim*. He explains that the reason for animal sacrifice was to wean the Israelites away from idolatry, prevalent among the surrounding pagan nations:

"It is impossible to go from one extreme to the other suddenly. Therefore man - according to his nature - is not capable of suddenly abandoning that to which he was deeply accustomed.... As it was then the deeply ingrained and universal practice with which people were brought up to conduct religious worship with animal sacrifices in temples... G-d in His wisdom did not see fit to command us to completely reject all these practices - something that man could not conceive of accepting, according to human nature which inclines to habit. It would have been comparable to a prophet appearing today, calling for the service of G-d, declaring that G-d now commands you not to pray to Him, not to fast and not to seek His help in time of distress, but your service of Him should be in meditation without any deeds whatsoever. He therefore allowed these practices to continue but transformed them from idolatrous associations... that their purpose should be directed toward Him. Thus, He commanded us to build a sanctuary for Him with an altar to His name and offer sacrifices to Him.... In this way idolatry was blotted out and the great foundation of our faith - the existence and oneness of G-d - was established. This was accomplished without confusing people's minds by prohibiting the worship they were accustomed to and with which alone they were familiar.... G-d does not choose to change man's nature with a miracle.... As sacrificial worship is not a primary intention... only one Temple has been ordained... and in no other place is it allowed to sacrifice... to limit such worship within bounds that G-d did not deem it necessary to abolish it... because of this the prophets often declared that the object of sacrifices is not very essential, and that G-d can dispense with them..."¹⁵

This understanding of animal sacrifice as a transitional practice has led some scholars to suggest that HaRaMBa"m viewed animal sacrifice as a temporary concept or law.¹⁶ However, in his *Mishne Tora*, HaRaMBa"m restates the law that animal sacrifices will return as a law for the people of Israel once the Temple is rebuilt:

"In the future, the Messianic king will arise and return the Kingdom of the House of David to its former place as ruler, and will build the Temple and gather the Jewish exiles, and in his days, all the laws will be reinstated as they were before: sacrifices will be offered, and [the people] will keep the sabbatical and jubilee years in the form they are described in the Torah."¹⁷

At first glance, this may seem contradictory to his view in the *More HaNebukhim*. Nevertheless, when examined in the context of the points we have explored above, this apparent contradiction can be resolved.

Understanding the sacrificial system as a means to channel our primal aggressive nature provides a unifying perspective that reconciles HaRambam's seemingly conflicting views. As a response to the idolatrous practices of pagan culture, the institution of animal sacrifice allowed the Israelites to redirect their aggressive instincts away from a morally reprehensible act and toward a more controlled and spiritually constructive practice. In this context, animal sacrifice was both a means of distancing the Israelites from idolatry and a way to manage their innate aggression.

When the Temple is rebuilt and animal sacrifices are reinstated, this practice will continue to serve as a healthy outlet for our primal aggressive instincts, as explored earlier. In this sense, the sacrificial system remains relevant and necessary, even after the initial purpose of distancing the Israelites from pagan notions has been achieved. Thus, HaRaMBa"m's views on animal sacrifice can be harmoniously integrated when considered through an understanding of the sacrificial system as a means of channelling and managing human aggression.

The Primal Wisdom of Torah

The return of the animal sacrifice system, as viewed through the lens of aggression, offers another compelling value of this primal ritual in channelling and managing mammalian aggression. By providing a controlled, sacred outlet for the expression of aggression, animal sacrifices serve both individual and communal functions, contributing to personal growth, social cohesion, and spiritual development.

As we await the rebuilding of the Temple, we must continue to consciously and actively seek to understand the wisdom of a Torah framework that has sustained our eternal people for millennia. In doing so, we can prepare ourselves for the restoration of the sacrificial system, and the profound realisation that it provides us with about life itself.

"Sacrificial Judaism brings the truth of human existence into the Temple. It does not leave it outside its portals. It does not reserve sacred ground only for silent worship. Instead, the bruting, bleeding, dying animal is brought and shown to God. This is what our fate is."¹⁸

¹⁵ HaRaMBa"m, *More HaNebukhim*, 3:32

¹⁶ Kellner, Menachem. *Maimonides on Human Perfection*.

¹⁷ HaRaMBa"m, *Mishne Tora*, *Laws of Kings and Their Wars*, 11:1

¹⁸ Wyschogrod, Michael. *The Body of Faith*. Page 19