

Moshe Halbertal

On Sacrifice.

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In this brief and clearly written book, Moshe Halbertal, a leading Israeli scholar of Jewish thought and philosophy, analyzes the concept of “sacrifice” as it is understood first in religious and later in secular contexts. A half of the book is devoted to each discussion.

Halbertal’s account of religious sacrifice is largely based on what might be called a conceptual analysis of Hebrew terms drawn from classical Jewish sources, both biblical and rabbinic. The methodology of this section may surprise some of his more academically-minded readers. Halbertal pays little attention to the results of biblical criticism, and he must surely set the teeth of Talmudic philologists on edge by neglecting to discuss the provenance of his rabbinic sources. The historical background of his account is highly schematic, marking off eras relative to three great developments: the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the rise of Christianity, and the invention of secular nationalism. One might say that Halbertal approaches his Jewish texts with the eyes of a native reader; there is almost nothing in the book to make a Modern Orthodox rabbi turn up his nose. Readers completely unfamiliar with the genre of *midrash* may benefit from spending a few minutes researching it on the Internet before starting to read the book.

Halbertal distinguishes between the religious notion of “sacrificing to” and the generally secular notion of “sacrificing for”. The item sacrificed *to* a god is a kind of *gift*, that is, it is freely given to the god while the god is not legally required to reciprocate. Furthermore, it is a gift which the god (being a god) does not at all really need, and as such it is easily rejected. Consequently, the offering of sacrifices is constantly accompanied by fears of their rejection; the availability of ritual rules to guide one’s sacrificial practices helps alleviate these anxieties. Halbertal examines Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his chosen son Isaac, whose continued existence was vital for the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham. This story exemplifies the idea that sacrifice should not be offered for the sake of divine reciprocation (if Isaac dies, reciprocation becomes impossible) but rather as an act expressing one’s connection with the divine. While humans often give each other gifts with the expectation of eventually gaining some benefit in return, sacrifice to God should transcend such considerations. The story ends when Abraham sacrifices a ram in his son’s stead. Halbertal concludes from this that “*the sacrifice that as a gift seems to be part of an exchange cycle* [i.e., the sacrifice of a mere ram] *is actually a symbol for a gift that cannot be reciprocated* [i.e., Isaac]” (25, italics in original).

Mention of Abraham’s sacrificial ram leads into a more general discussion of how sacrifices can serve as symbolic substitutes for human beings by taking on their sins and by suffering their punishments. The logic of substitution requires that the sacrificial victim be innocent; otherwise, it would die for its *own* sins. This presumption of the sacrificial victim’s innocence points towards the historically late use of the term “victim” to refer to innocents who have suffered from crime and injustice. Christianity could view Jesus as a victim in both senses.

Furthermore, when God *himself* offered Jesus as a sacrifice, there was no danger of the deity's rejecting *his own* offering, making ritual precautions unnecessary. Thus, for Christianity, the logic of sacrifice and its attending rituals was overthrown when the actual Son was killed instead of a symbolic animal substitute.

The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem brought the end of Jewish sacrificial rites, forcing the rabbis to seek substitutes, such as charity, prayer and a penitential attitude towards suffering. Alms-giving is of particular interest because, so to speak, it turns the tables on God. God cannot reject charity because, in effect, charity helps pay off God's *own* personal debt to the poor whom he is supposed to sustain.

The move from "sacrificing to" to "sacrificing for" was originally rooted in religious martyrdom. Martyrs do not give up their lives as gifts *to* God; rather they die *for the sake of* their religious faith. Transferred to a secular context, people who have suffered or lost their lives in the service of a nation or political cause can be said to have made sacrifices *for* that nation or cause.

In the second part of his book, which will likely be of interest to a broader audience than the first, Halbertal explores the notion of "sacrificing for" and the possible dangers involved in its application. He begins by pointing out that "self-transcendence is at the core of the human capacity for a moral life" (63), and, of course, self-sacrifice is a form of self-transcendence. In fact, the degrees of personal sacrifice demanded by various moral obligations can be used to rank their relative importance.

Halbertal claims that despite all its transcendent glory, adoption of the notion of "sacrifice for" can generate especially terrible consequences: "*misguided self-transcendence is morally more problematic and lethal than a disproportionate attachment to self-interest*" (78, italics in original). How does this work? First of all, people may think that "since it is the mark of the good that it deserves sacrifice, the reverse must be true too – namely, that sacrifice makes something into a good" (69). Now martyrdom can be motivated by the urge to *prove* the nobility of one's cause. Worse yet, willingness to *kill others* for one's cause may also be taken as a token of its righteousness; perpetrators of terrible acts of cruelty can come to see themselves as the true martyrs who sacrifice their very humanity for the sake of the cause, or they may hold the psychological burden of their guilt to outweigh the suffering of their victims. Similarly, as in the case of Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham, morality itself may be sacrificed for the sake of some greater value. Halbertal soberly comments that "when morality is depicted as a temptation to be surmounted in the name of a higher good, it is always someone else who pays the price" (74).

Analysis of self-sacrifice leads Halbertal into a discussion of the ethics of war. He argues against the symmetrical rights of soldiers in any conflict to kill each other, instead insisting that the soldiers of the offending army in an unjust war are obligated to surrender or withdraw from the field of battle rather than protect themselves with force. However, Halbertal complicates the application of his simple rule by pointing out the "associational obligations" born by soldiers towards their comrades in arms, as well as "the normative expectation that citizens voluntarily abide by the decisions of a democratically elected government, even if they deeply disagree"

(87). Such solidarity is important for the continued viability of “a shared political life as such”.

Next, Halbertal considers what could be called a further species of social solidarity, namely, solidarity with those who have made sacrifices in the past. Past sacrifices gain their full significance through future action; the sacrifices made to obtain a great military victory may become retroactively pointless if later generations squander the fruits of that victory. Problematically, the intuition that self-sacrifice for the sake of some project indicates its moral worth may lead us to make *additional* sacrifices for the sake of causes which were wrong-headed from the start. It would be convenient to say that only *just* causes deserve sacrifices, regardless of past history. Again, however, Halbertal complicates the situation by citing our obligations towards traditions and existing forms of life which are “neither just nor unjust” (101), such as religious traditions. Such obligations stem from one’s personal relation to a certain group, rather than to humanity in general; “It is not an obligation to humans qua humans; it is a manifestation of a more complex relationship”. Such particularistic obligations can also demand a degree of self-sacrifice.

The second part of Halbertal’s book concludes with a discussion of “The State and the Sacrificial Stage”. Here, Halbertal reminds us that while Hobbes and Locke, for whom a citizen’s membership in the social contract is motivated by her own self-interest, find it difficult to account for her duty to go to war for the state, Rousseau, for whom citizenship is a transformative relationship in which the citizen achieves self-transcendence through identification with the general will, has no difficulty explaining why a citizen should be prepared to risk her life in military service of the state. Halbertal appreciates the psychological richness of Rousseau’s account, but he also worries that it may lead to chauvinistic and idolatrous ideologies. Fortunately, Kant saved Rousseau’s insights by working them out in terms of an ideal and universal kingdom of ends, rather than an actual and limited historical political community.

I can only hope that this highly schematic overview conveys something of the richness of ideas which Moshe Halbertal has elegantly packed into his short book.

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