THE BLOOD OF LIFE:
THE *HATAT* OFFERING AND SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

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To the modern mind, a "sacrifice" is concrete and instrumental; we give up something of value in order to bring about a specific result. Thus, the elaborate sacrificial rituals conducted at the Temple, accompanied by ceremonial sprinklings of blood, can seem baffling. What is the result of this shedding of blood, beyond mere reinforcement of the very religious belief that motivated the sacrifice? Finding an answer depends upon finding an analogy between sacrificial rituals and a contemporary practice that makes intuitive sense.

On September 11, 2001 many Americans found themselves in need of symbols to grasp. In New York City, shaken bodies, powerful emotions, and the first numbing shocks of lifelong grief cried out for meanings. All over the country, the destruction of the World Trade Center, the temple of material progress and success, was a blow to the American sense of self. Immediately, Americans rushed to do the most meaningful act they could conjure: give blood to the victims. In this mass outpouring of blood, I have found a contemporary key to understanding sacrificial rituals in the ancient Jerusalem Temple.

On September 12th, I saw blue lights down by the Red Cross building. Terror kicked in. Flashing blue lights. Crowds. Cars backed up as drivers found the street blocked off. An accident. An attack. A suspicious package, a phone call, a box of explosives. At the very least, a bicyclist knocked down and dismembered by a passing car. Afraid to approach, not wanting to know, I drove home. My memory jogged and conscience pricked by the sight, I visited the Red Cross website for instructions on how to give blood. Block letters appeared on the screen:

> DO NOT GIVE BLOOD TODAY.
> DO NOT SHOW UP.
> WE CANNOT HANDLE THE CROWDS.

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Americans had reacted to the tragedy by running to give blood. Surely blood was needed. My favorite moment of television coverage came when a reporter thrust his mike at a proud-looking woman emerging from a collapsing tower. Her hair was covered with debris and dust.

"Did you see anybody in there?' he asked eagerly.

"Lots of people are still in there," she replied.

"Did you see anybody bleeding?" he asked, clarifying his intention with great enthusiasm.

With a disgusted look on her face the woman lifted her skirt. Rivulets of blood ran down her leg like a great triangular delta pouring backwards into a single river.

"You want blood? I'll give you blood! We're all bleeding!"

She dropped her skirt and boarded the emergency bus to the hospital.

Surely blood was needed by the victims. To replace blood lost by the wounded. To provide transfusion support for surgeries. But the need to give blood seemed to exceed the capacity to receive it. Hundreds and thousands of miles away from Ground Zero, people felt the desire to respond, to give, to contribute, to make an offering, to make a difference. Although there *was* a practical need to receive blood, the contributions were driven by the need to give.

Our impulse to respond can be evoked by a substitution of our own faces for the victims' faces. Vulnerability is universal; any one of us could have fallen in their stead. Why do they suffer while I merely watch? Perhaps there is no reason. Perhaps it is a random falling of the dice of history, ethnicity, geography, personality. An uncanny feeling wells up, fear that my own survival, my own safety is an accident.[1] I need to demonstrate my grasp of this accidental fate. Somehow I need to atone for the fact that others were chosen for death or injury, them instead of me. Perhaps I can offer up a piece of my good fortune.

The best offering would be a gift that can make a tangible difference in the world, a gift that can help alleviate suffering, help repair a broken life. The

best offering would restore my own sense of balance, my belief that the burdens of life are more equally distributed. The best gift would announce, "I received life and now I give it; others gave, and now they will receive."

As Herbert Levine describes the Temple services: Giving blood is a magical action that restores this balance. It is magical because it is both symbolic and effective.[2] Symbolically, it establishes equality. Recognizing that one receives life through no particular skill or talent of one's own, a donor freely gives of life so that others can receive. Effectively, it is a real act of giving, in which a donor offers the material of his or her own body as a gift that actually helps injured bodies heal.

The language of this analysis is deeply evocative of ancient Jewish sacrificial rites. Giving back from our own gifts. Restoring a sense of balance. Believing in the efficacy of what we have done. Feeling the touch of the uncanny. Offering blood in atonement. Recognizing that the blood of a random victim was offered as a substitute for our own. Now the outlines of the ancient sacrificial rites begin to fill out in three dimensions. And our race to the Red Cross takes on a definable shape, appearing as a coherent psychological and spiritual response.

If our response mimics a sacrificial rite, which one does it most resemble? Perhaps it resembles the *asham* offering described in Leviticus 5:14-26. *Asham* can be translated as "guilt," and it evokes the English word "ashamed." Yet the *asham* offering is not connected with emotion but with legal process. One brings an *asham* offering to the sanctuary as part of a ritual of restitution for a crime. Thus, Jacob Milgrom translates it as "reparation offering."[3] The *asham* is both symbolic and effective: actual financial restitution is made, and the seriousness of the event is marked with a sacrifice. *Asham* matches the literal exchange of resources on September 11, but over-emphasizes the role of guilt. When an *asham* is brought, the crime committed must be defined so that the amount of restitution can be precisely determined (Lev. 5:16, 5:24). No crime was committed by the survivors of September 11, and guilt only appears as a strand in the complex feeling of having survived a brush with the uncanny when others fell.

Perhaps our mass rush to donate blood resembles the *zevach shelamim,* described in Leviticus 3:1-17. To make sense of the name of the offering, biblical commentators have played in various ways with the root *sh-l-m.* The

root connotes wholeness, completion, peace. Milgrom accounts for the variety of meanings by translating *zevach shelamim* as "well-being offering."[4] A person may make this offering after successfully completing an undertaking, in celebration of a special event, or as a prayer for continued peace of body and mind.

One offering a *zevach shelamim* presents the chosen animal to the priest at the Temple or Tabernacle courtyard. In a ritual gesture, one places a hand upon the sacrificial animal to indicate that it is offered in one's place. The priest slaughters the animal, sprinkling some of its blood around the altar (Lev. 3:2). This is no ordinary taking of life, the sprinkling proclaims, but one dedicated to God. The priest burns the animal's entrails and their surrounding fat upon the altar (Lev. 3:3-5). The rest of the sacrificial animal is eaten.

The giving of blood on September 11 resembles the *zevach shelamim* in important ways. Both are offered in recognition of the fact that one's personal merits do not assure one's well-being. An accident of fate or an act of Divine grace is a necessary ingredient. One acknowledges this special ingredient by offering a gift in return. In both cases, blood appears as a substance with the magical power to transfer life energy. On September 11, donated blood replenished life energy leaking from the victims. In the *zevach shelamim,* a few drops of blood are symbolically returned to the source of life energy in grateful acknowledgment. To dramatize the return of energy to God, the thick fatty parts of the animal are burned to create a column of smoke wafting heavenward.[5] Like the donation of blood, *zevach shelamim* is psychologically effective. It is also literally effective. The *zevach shelamim* creates a complete celebration, including a ritual of dedication and food for the feast.

But the analogy between the mass donation of blood on September 11 and *zevach shelamim* breaks down over the issue of celebration. On September 11, blood was not offered out of a sense of well-being, and a national celebration was not created. Instead, blood was offered out of an indistinct shudder, a mixture of survivor guilt, relief, and responsibility.

The strongest analogy to blood donation, then, would be the *hatat* offering. The root "*h-t-a*" is often translated into English as "sin" or "missing the mark." But Leviticus 4:1-35 and 5:1-13 prescribe the *hatat* as a corrective for many different types of situations, some of which do not involve sin at all.

Milgrom translates the name of the offering as "purification offering," suggesting that the *hatat* corrects the life of the nation by purifying the public sanctuary.[6] Dramatic versions of the *hatat* that are mandated for collective sins or for the sins of leaders (Lev. 4:3-26) support Milgrom's interpretation. These sins are powerful enough and public enough to pollute the entire sanctuary and require its purification.

Individuals bring *hatat* offerings after an uncanny brush with death, including accidental contact with a human or animal corpse, or a human with certain diseases. They bring *hatat* offerings along with confessions to atone for the sins of withholding evidence, blurting out silly oaths, or unknowingly doing wrong (Lev. 5:1-4). Each of these sins seems to imply an encounter with the uncanny "dark side" of the psyche as well; carrying the burden of secret information, acting without conscious control. Even if in the official theology of *hatat* the offering purified the sanctuary, and the confession purified the individual, individuals must have experienced the *hatat* itself as a ritual releasing them from the hold of their fears of the uncanny, unknown, or uncontrollable.

All the variations on the *hatat* performance have one ritual action in common. Instead of merely sprinkling a bit of the blood of the sacrificial animal around the altar, the priest pours out all of the animal's blood at the base of the altar (Lev. 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34; 5:9). Situations that call for the *hatat* are drastic ones. Collective sin literally drains the life of a people. A brush with death can literally drain the emotional life of a person, and physically put him or her in danger.[7] The pouring out of blood symbolically recognizes what was lost, but it also symbolically recognizes what must be gained. Offering one's life energy to God allows it to be renewed. The pouring out of blood marks a resolution for the future, as the old is emptied out and the human vessel opens itself in expectation of the new. Like the other sacrificial forms, the *hatat* is both symbolic and effective.

Americans recognized that the attack on September 11 had the intention of draining the life energy of the nation, and that it had the very real potential for doing so. By offering the strength within our own bodies, Americans tried to demonstrate that our collective energy would not be drained. The uncanny burst into our lives in every way: surprise, death, terror, randomness, meaninglessness, the discomfort of relief. Instinctively, we reached for a collec-

tive corrective in the symbolic and effective power of giving blood. By racing to give blood on and after September 11, Americans performed a collective *hatat.*

NOTES

1. This response is described clearly in B. Plant, "Resisting the Holocaust, Speaking the Unspeakable with Emmanuel Levinas," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 7:1 (Spring 2000).
2. H. Levine, *Sing Unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).
3. For a detailed discussion of the reparation offering, see J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1991) pp. 339-345.
4. For a thorough discussion of the well-being offering, see Milgrom, pp. 217-255.
5. For an alternative and more detailed analysis of the burning of specific animal parts, see M. Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 66-86.
6. For a detailed discussion of the purification offering, see Milgrom, pp. 253-292.
7. For an exceptionally clear discussion of the connection between death and ritual impurity, see J. Abrams, *The Women of the Talmud* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995) pp. 139-141.

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RESPONSES from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book TORAH DIALOGUES

1. According to our sages, verse 12:2 implies the mitzvah of reckoning the months and years. *Tefillin* are referred to in 13:9, 16. Redemption of the first-born is mentioned in 13:13, 15.
2. Today's Torah ark parallels the Ark of the Testimony (25:16ff.) Also, the ark curtain (*Parochet* 26:31ff.) and the *Menorah* (25:31ff.) are reminders of similar objects in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle).
3. Anger (v. 16) - A sage in the Midrash lists this as one of the three instances of anger that led Moses to error. Respect - According to Rashi he turned on the sons out of respect for their father Aaron. Generosity and flexibility (v. 20) - The Talmud comments:

"He admitted his error and was not embarrassed to say, 'I heard and forgot'" (Zevachim 101b).