

This week's Torah reading is about sacrifice; sacrifices, to be more precise. God instructs that they be performed by Aaron and his sons on behalf of the people: the burnt offering, the meal offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, and the peace offering. The description is of the slaughter of animals; of the cutting and burning of their flesh; of the splashing and smearing of their blood on the altar and on the bodies of the high priests. When we read these passages, we are struck by the violence of this ritual which seems utterly alien to us. And not just to us today, but also to Jewish commentators going back at least 1000 years who tried to understand the reasons *particularly* for this bloody violence. Why even sacrifice animals, they asked? Our God, unlike the pagan gods, didn't need them for food. It was explained that sacrificing animals was a substitute for sacrificing our own bodies, our own lives, in atonement for our sins. This rationalization is still quite grim and it doesn't even begin to address the question which is not why does God need sacrifices but rather why do *we* need to sacrifice?

Still, we must accept that Judaism in Temple times was wholeheartedly a sacrificial religion, as were so many of the ancient pagan religions but with one very notable difference — an absolute prohibition against *human* sacrifice and in particular, child sacrifice to the god Molok, a pagan ritual that was so prevalent at that time. Even Abraham was unhesitatingly willing to sacrifice his son Isaac but it was God who intervened: "*Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him*". Abraham's test was not one of faith in God. Rather it was a test of his love: love of children and love of life; and he *failed*. The real test was to *not* sacrifice Isaac. And so with one bleat of a ram the old pagan ritual was abolished and replaced with a new moral code, *our* moral code, that we do *not* sacrifice our children; not for our sins, not for our God, not now, not ever.

But the animal sacrifices continued until the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. And that might have been the end of it — the sacrifices, the religion, the whole lot. Except for one thing — love. The Rabbis came up with a brilliant idea: that an act of kindness is a far more effective form of atonement than an act of sacrifice. And they recalled the words of the prophets Hosea and Isaiah: "For I desire lovingkindness, not sacrifice; an understanding of God, rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6); "What need have I of all your sacrifices? Says the Lord... Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice..." (Isaiah 1:11). Judaism survived and the ritual of animal sacrifice was simply replaced with prayer and love and laws — laws to safeguard an ethical and just society.

There is a law in the United States. This law is regarded as ethical. This law makes it illegal to have more than 3 shells in a shotgun. This law has a companion law that also makes it illegal to use semi-automatic rifles. This law applies to the hunting of ducks. This law does not apply when it comes to the hunting of people. Now, before you think me naïve, I *get* it — I know that hunting innocent people is illegal by definition. And I get it that in this country the second amendment

entitles one to a certain degree of armed self-protection. That's fine. But let's be honest and grown-up about this; private ownership of so-called assault-style rifles and high capacity magazines is not about self-defense — it's about having fun. An enormous amount of fun, if you like that sort of thing. If you don't believe me, just ask someone who's fired one. Yet guns, these guns, all guns are nevertheless used, every day, for the hunting and the killing of people in peacetime in this country. Either on purpose, or in error but rarely, very rarely, in self-defense. And, to quote the British comedian Eddie Izzard, I know the NRA says that guns don't kill people, people kill people; but I think the guns *help*. Right? I think they help. So, do we *really* need so many of them? Do they *really* need to be so powerful. Is their ownership really the defining character of a free society or are we, in reality, such fearful cowards that we simply hide behind them while people, including our children, are sacrificed every day?

From the Prophets to the present day, the Jewish view of owning a weapon is overwhelmingly dim. Sure there are provisions for self-defense but the Talmud makes it abundantly clear that the risk of a weapon falling into the hands of someone who may use it to cause harm outweighs any consideration of defense. Every British person around my age knows the name of a small town in Scotland — Dunblane. It was on the 13th of March 1996 when Thomas Hamilton shot and killed 16 five-year old children and one teacher in the local primary school. It remains the deadliest mass shooting in British history. The massive public outcry that followed led to an official inquiry and the rapid enactment of laws to completely ban the private ownership of assault-style rifles and all handguns regardless of caliber. The politicians initially showed some reticence in passing these laws; it was the public's outrage that forced the issue.

And the issue is this: if God no longer tolerates sacrifice, why should we?