

The Blood of Life: Priestly Sacrifice and September 11

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Memory comes in fragments and flashes. But some memories I mull over so many times that they seem to fill the big screen of memory. Whenever I pull them out, they seem to swell to fill my entire brain...

My first nightmare is such a memory. Over the skyline of Manhattan, everything is gray. Gray buildings, gray air. I am looking at the upper floors of the Empire State Building, at its city of windows. Gray smoke is slowly steaming out of the windows, bits of ash are floating on the smoke. Flames begin to lick lazily between the floors, almost flowing out of the building. Gray brick silently dissolves into soft gray ash, and the building starts to crumble. Ash by ash, it falls into a huge red and green dump truck. The truck is larger than life, ten stories high and proportionately wide. It's the only spot of color in the dream, and it is there to catch the ashes. Ashes rain down gently amid the smoke. Like a snowstorm, everything is gray and silent. And the dump truck waits, brightly colored.

For years the meaning of this dream has not been clear to me. For years I have asked myself the same questions about it. Why is it so terrifying? Does the Empire State Building symbolize security? Is the dream about the loss of security, so terrifying to a small child, who would have called out in the night to be comforted by an adult sitting at her side, barely visible in the darkness but warm and palpable, familiar in sound and touch? And what is the significance of the dump truck? Is it there, solid and large, to comfort the fallen ashes? Why is it in color?

Today, on November 21 2001, I don't have to tell any New Yorker or any American what this dream is about. When I was a tiny girl, the gracefully tapering art deco shape of the Empire State Building symbolized the New York skyline. By the time I became an adult, the twin glass and steel towers at the island's edge had replaced it. With a simple substitution of one building for another, the meaning of the dream is crystal clear. It depicts the destruction of the World Trade Center. But it does so in a childish way, or perhaps in dreamy abstraction, without screams, crashes, violent chunks of building material splashing down.

A dream that had seemed so misty, so hard to grasp hold of, suddenly has defined edges. Reflecting on years of unsatisfying interpretations, I imagine the dream as a line drawing on a balloon. Sometimes the balloon is filled with air and the drawing is stretched out to look one way; sometimes the balloon is emptied and the drawing is shriveled up, looking quite different. Now I can stretch the balloon of a dream over the sharp contours of September 11th. Now, each two-dimensional line of the drawing is matched by a sharp three-dimensional edge of reality. The events of September 11th need symbols to inhabit. Something so unexpected, felt in our shaken bodies, evoked in our powerful emotions, cries out for meanings. It attracts them, collects them, grabs any indistinct symbols it can, and tries them on, hoping to find a fit that will allay the terror.

Perhaps my dream *is* about security after all. One of the literal outcomes of the September 11th attack has been a loss of security. Terror inhabits our bodies. Every plane that flies overhead is a bomber. The man with the locked suitcase is a terrorist. The exhausted child desperately fights sleep because to sleep is to die unknowingly

during a sudden attack. Only it won't be silent, it isn't gentle, it's nothing like a snowstorm, and there is no red and green dump truck to catch the ashes.

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.

COME ON THURSDAY TO THE SPECIAL STATION WE WILL SET UP AT THE COLISEUM.

CONTACT YOUR FAVORITE MEGA-CORPORATION AND ATTEND THEIR SPECIALLY SCHEDULED BLOOD DRIVE.

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.

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has analyzed the impulse to respond to suffering. The impulse is evoked, he says, by "the Face of the Other." A face need not be familiar to move us to action. The face is a part of the body that is rarely covered. Taken by itself, it reveals nothing about a person's social standing, interests, or capacity to reciprocate with a good turn. Thus, it is naked, in more than one sense of the word, and its vulnerability calls us to care.¹

On September 11th, the faces of victims of all kinds paraded before us on television screens: bystanders running for cover, tattered survivors limping out of the building, dazed family members holding photos of missing children, shell-shocked police officers and firefighters refusing to answer reporters' questions. But I hesitate to tie this impulse to respond to the age of television. We do not need visual images of faces to

call forth our impulses to respond. Often we feel called to respond to suffering without seeing a single image. A more complex psychological process is at work here.

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.² 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."

Giving blood is a magical action that restores this balance. It is magical because it is both symbolic and effective.³ Symbolically, it establishes equality. Recognizing that one receives life through no particular skill or talent of their 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.

Before September 11th, the priestly sacrifices were as indistinct to me as my childish nightmare. The book of Leviticus, which describes the sacrifices, seemed like a shriveled up line drawing on an old dried-out balloon, so old I could not stretch it into a recognizable shape by blowing air into it. But now the drawing stretches nicely over the sharp contours of September 11th. 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 *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.⁴ Jacob Milgrom accounts for the variety of meanings by translating *zevach shelamim* as "well-being offering." 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.⁵

The person offering a *zevach shelamim* presents her chosen animal to the priest at the Temple or Tabernacle courtyard. In a ritual gesture, she places a hand upon the sacrificial animal to indicate that it is offered in her 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 11th 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 11th, 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 acknowledgement. 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.⁶ 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 11th and *zevach shelamim* breaks down over the issue of celebration. On September 11th, blood was not offered out of a sense of well-being, and a national celebration was not created. Instead, if Levinas's analysis of the call to respond to suffering is correct, blood was offered out of an indistinct shudder, a mixture of survivor guilt, relief, and responsibility.

The *asham* offering described in Leviticus 5:14-26 is not a good analogy either, but it is worth mentioning. *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 their crimes. Thus Milgrom translates it as "reparation offering."⁷ The *asham* is both symbolic and effective: actual financial restitution is made, and the seriousness of the event is marked with a sacrifice. *Asham* more obviously matches the literal exchange of resources on September 11th, but overemphasizes 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 11th, and guilt only appears as a strand in the complex feeling of having survived a brush with the uncanny when others fell.

The strongest analogy to blood donation, then, would be the *khatat* offering. The root *kh-t-a* is often translated into English as "sin" or "missing the mark." But Leviticus 4:1-35 and 5:1-13 prescribe the *khatat* 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 *khatat* corrects the life of the nation by purifying the public sanctuary.⁸ Dramatic versions of the *khatat* 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 *khatat* offerings after an uncanny brush with death, including accidental contact with a human or animal corpse, or a human with certain diseases. They bring *khatat* 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 *khatat* the offering purified the sanctuary, and the confession purified the individual, individuals must have experienced the *khatat* itself as a ritual releasing them from the hold of their fears of the uncanny, unknown, or uncontrollable.

All the variations on the *khatat* 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 *khatat* 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 them in danger.⁹ 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 *khatat* is both symbolic and effective.

By racing to give blood on and after September 11th, Americans performed a collective *khatat*. Americans recognized that the attack 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 their own bodies, Americans demonstrated that their collective energy would not be drained. The uncanny burst into their lives in every way: surprise, death, terror, randomness, meaninglessness, the discomfort of relief. Instinctively, they reached for a collective corrective in the symbolic and effective power of giving blood.

Ultimately offering a very different perspective, the book of Numbers recognizes the power with which a brush with human death can grip a human being. Numbers 19:1-22 describes a ritual designed to purify a person - not a sanctuary - from this grip. A red

cow, a perfect red cow who has never worked, is to be slaughtered by a priest outside the camp and burned to ashes (Num. 19:2-9). The ashes are to be kept outside the camp and saved for the following ritual. A person who comes into contact with a corpse is to complete a period of seclusion. At the end of the period, the person is to be sprinkled with the cow's ashes dissolved in water. The sprinkling is to be followed by a purifying bath (Num. 19:14-19).

This ritual seems to have little connection with the symbol of life-giving blood. It deals only in evidence of death, piles and piles of ashes. The dark red beast represents life. Every inch of its hide radiates the color of blood only moments after it leaves our bodies. But quickly, senselessly, not even in the dignifying presence of the altar, it is transformed into ashes. Ashes, calling forth the ashen skin of a corpse drained of its life power. Ashes, calling forth the dust covering the bleeding woman as she left the World Trade Center. Ashes, calling forth the silent gray buildings in my dream.

Annie Dillard closes her splendid book about the random mix of beauty and cruelty in nature, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, in protest of this ritual. A perfect animal, innocent and protected in every way, is burned to ashes. It committed no sin; it stands in for no other sinner. What bystander could fail to feel a silent scream of protest struggling for voice? In the end however, Dillard suggests, the only release from protest is the acceptance of death.¹⁰

The ashes of the red cow begin to make sense. Death is inevitable; if we live to adulthood we will encounter it many times before it takes us. Often we will protest its choices, shaken to our core by the senseless slaughter of innocents. Each time, however, we must come to terms with loss if we are to go on living. So the book of Numbers

suggests. When we encounter death, we are given seven days to recognize its reality. At the end of the seventh day, this recognition is sealed as we are brushed with the ashes of death.

And now my dream, my childish nightmare, finally begins to make sense. At the foot of the crumbling gray building, a dump truck collects the ashes of death. Yes, the presence of the truck is meant to comfort. Red and green, it displays the colors of animal and plant life. It holds the seeds of the ritual that will recognize my ability to come to terms with death. But the truck does not really comfort; it only seals the terror. For it can do nothing but collect the ashes and, perhaps, dump them somewhere outside the city. It cannot rebuild the tower; it is the wrong sort of tool.

My dream, it turns out, is certainly a nightmare, but it is hardly childish. Some dreams hold such powerful imagery that they do not ever fade from our minds. Instead, they weave themselves into other parts of our consciousness, finding expression in memories, emotions, interpretations of symbols. Like line drawings on faded balloons, they stretch to give definition to what is indistinct. These dreams, terrifying though they may be, are the sort C.G. Jung calls "numinous" dreams. Through their narratives, powerful symbols in the human collective unconscious find their way into consciousness.¹¹ The ashes of the red cow are one such symbol. So is the blood of the *khatat*.

I prefer the *khatat* to the ashes of the red cow. I much prefer the *khatat*, with its recognition of the power of life. And so, apparently, do the American people.

Notes

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¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 85-92.

² This response is described clearly in Bob Plant, "Resisting the Holocaust, Speaking the Unspeakable with Emmanuel Levinas," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 7:1 (Spring 2000).

³ Herbert J. Levine describes Temple sacrifices as both symbolic and effective throughout his book *Sing Unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁴ *Mikraot Gedolot for Leviticus* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Hamo'or, 1990), pp. 44-45.

⁵ For a thorough discussion of the well-being offering, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1991), pp. 217-255.

⁶ For an alternative and more detailed analysis of the burning of specific animal parts, see Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 66-86.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the reparation offering, see Milgrom, 339-345.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the purification offering, see Milgrom, 253-292.

⁹ For an exceptionally clear discussion of the connection between death and ritual impurity, see Judith Z. Abrams, *The Women of the Talmud* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), pp. 139-141.

¹⁰ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Reprint edition (New York: Harperperennial, 1998), 260-271.

¹¹ Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).