

Why Do Civilizations Die?



Two weeks ago the following verse was in the reading that accompanies the Torah portion for the week:

*“For when I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, **I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice.** 23 But this is what I*

commanded them: Do My bidding, that I may be your God and you may be My people; walk only in the way that I enjoin upon you, that it may go well with you.” (Jeremiah 7:21-23)

I was shocked when I read the bold print above. I thought God did command them concerning offerings and sacrifice. The book of Leviticus tells them how. So when I read the next verse, I realized that the real commandment, which is the word for command and not teaching, or instruction was to do exactly what He says. That is the command and the law in one word. Then our Father is free to tell us whatever He wants of us so that He has not put Himself in a corner. What we call commands are Torah teachings how to do things.

The first time God says that things may go well with the people is in Deuteronomy. *“Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. 40 Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may **go well with you** and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time.”* (Deuteronomy 4:39)

Therefore, Jeremiah is picking up on obeying God so it will go well and the emphasis is not the details, but on obeying the voice of God. As you read on in Jeremiah 7 you will see that the people were totally sinful and again through a prophet, God tells the people that the sacrifices are not what He wants, but for them to obey His voice so He can live among them.

Among the things that were so reprehensible to God was their sacrificing humans. *“And they have built the shrines of Topheth in the Valley of Ben-hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in fire—**which I never commanded, which never came to My mind.**”* (Jeremiah 7:30-31)

If sacrifices were never intended as a permanent way to approach God then a sacrifice of first-born children as a payment for sins was definitely not what God wanted. People have been doing this from time in memorial and since it was never what God had in mind, He taught Abraham



by illustration when He asked him to give his son as a burnt offering. I believe that Abraham really knew God didn't want him to sacrifice his son and that was why he told Isaac, "the LORD will provide."

Here is my summary of a short message that Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in a little pamphlet we get called Torah Tidbits. The title of his article is **Why Civilizations Die**. He starts out by telling an account of how civilizations die by Rebecca Costa. She states that when Societies reach what she calls a cognitive threshold they simply can't chart a path from the present to the future. Then she gives the Mayans for an example. They had developed over three and half thousands years an extraordinary civilization. She gives the complex culture of calendar, celestial charts, weather patterns, mathematical system, writing water supply infrastructure, and more. Then suddenly, for reasons we still don't fully understand the entire Mayan civilization collapsed

Rebecca gave all kinds of reasons why they disappeared, but has decided they fell like the Roman Empire, the Khmer Empire because as in those empires problems became too great and complicated for the people of the time to solve. The first sign of breakdown is a gridlock. They pass the problems on to the next generation; the people no longer can cope with the facts, and so take refuge in religious consolations. The Mayans did this by offering human sacrifices. Archeologists have uncovered gruesome evidence of human sacrifice on a vast scale. The same apparently happened with the Khmer.

Then Rabbi Sacks makes the case of the Jews and Judaism. They faced two centuries of crisis under Roman rule. They were hopelessly factionalized long before the Great Rebellion against Rome and the destruction of the Second Temple. Jews were expecting some major cataclysm.

What is remarkable is that they did not focus obsessively on sacrifices like the Mayans and Khmer. Instead they focused on finding substitutes for sacrifice. One was an act of kindness as seen in *“For I desire goodness, not sacrifice; Obedience to God, rather than burnt offerings.”* (Hosea 6:6 JPS). A second was Torah study as seen in *“For from where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name; for My name is honored among the nations—said the LORD of Hosts.”* (Malachi 1:11 JPS) “The sages interpreted Malachi’s words “In every place offerings presented to My Name” to refer to scholars who study the laws of sacrifice. (Menachot 100a. ‘One who recites the order of sacrifices is as if he had brought them’ (Taanit 27b). (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Why Civilizations Die*, Torah Tidbits, April 2017.) A third substitute is prayer as seen in *“Take words with you and return to the Lord...We will offer the fruit of our lips as sacrifices of bulls.”* (Hosea 14:2-3”. A fourth substitute for sacrifice is a contrite spirit seen in *“Then You will want sacrifices offered in righteousness, burnt and whole offerings; then bulls will be offered on Your altar.”* (Psalms 51:21 JPS). A fifth substitute for sacrifice is fasting. A sixth is hospitality.

In our Torah portion we could ask why the commandment to do sacrifices were given in the first place and how did Judaism survive without them?

The short answer is that overwhelmingly the prophets, the sages and the Jewish thinkers of the middle Ages realized that sacrifices were symbol enactments of the mind, heart and deed that could be expressed in other ways as well.

We did not abandon the past, but kept our rational through all the problems that were confronting us without forgetting the past. It was Divine Providence that he made a people with the foresight of people like Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai who resisted cognitive breakdown, created solutions today for the problems of tomorrow. He did not seek refuge in the irrational and quietly build the Jewish future.



Do we see signs of a breakdown today? Is this why so many lives (470 thousand) are being sacrificed in Syria? The Bashar al-Assad doesn’t have a rational way out of his dilemma. Could this be happening in

Korea, Iran and other places in the world?

God gave us rationality above the animals. All of the world and creation depend on survival from Mankind who must think through their problems rationally and humble themselves before the mighty God and King of the Universe, asking for the wisdom that He alone can give.

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