

# What Is So Sacred?

By Cantor Adam Davis



**We need to ask ourselves, what are we willing to sacrifice? What is so sacred to us that we are willing to put it on the line?**

Every Rosh Hashanah, we read the *Akedah*, or Binding of Isaac. It's one of the most dramatic, moving and even troubling passages in the Torah.

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his long-prayed-for beloved son raises many questions. While the blade never touches Abraham's offspring, he is prepared to give up the most precious thing in his life.

We can never imagine ourselves even considering such an act. Our sages teach that this is, indeed, one of this text's lessons—that human sacrifice is not acceptable.

The Torah does, however, outline dozens of different proscribed sacrifices for myriad purposes. Without a central temple in Jerusalem for them, they've been transformed and our worship has become internalized.

We, nevertheless, need to ask ourselves, what are we willing to sacrifice? What is so sacred to us that, like Abraham, we are willing to put it on the line?

The Hebrew word for sacred or holy, *kadosh*, also conveys something set apart. For our ancestors, that was made manifest through physical offerings, called *korbonot*. These offerings were elevated as they were burnt and rose into smoke, bringing the giver closer to the Eternal.

We effect this *tikkun* (repair) by tending more carefully to the people and ideas most sacred to us. At this time of year, when we make *tshuva* (repentance), it's done first by mending our relationships—only then can we mend ourselves.

Holding something too holy, though, carries a danger. We can set something

so apart that it lives more in our minds rather than before us. We can make something so precious that it consumes us. Thus, we potentially destroy the thing we love and deem sacred.

Abraham's near pedicide is no different. Following his binding, Isaac is obviously traumatized. While Abraham's blade never touches his beloved son Isaac, his commitment to give up the most precious thing in his life is remarkable.

We cannot imagine contemplating something like this, and our sages have taught us that human sacrifice is not accepted in Judaism.

The Torah outlines dozens of other sacrifices for countless purposes. Though, without a central temple, rabbinic Judaism has transformed them into *avodah sh'balev*, worship of the heart.

Today, and especially at this time of year, our sacrifices are likewise no longer physical nor given on altars but are an offering of our soul, or *korban nefesh*.

This sort of offering is one of repentance, reflection and redirection through prayer and action. It is an opportunity to come closer to the Eternal through repair of our inner world as well as the one around us. We effect that *tikkun* (repair) by tending to the relationships and ideas most sacred to us.

Each of us owes ourselves and the Eternal such a personal accounting. What is so holy to us that we have no choice but to offer it up to the universe and share it—even at the price of our keeping it ourselves?

This year, may we all find sanctity and share with one another that which is most sacred to each of us. ✪