

Justice Is Thicker Than Blood

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In his book *The Year of Living Biblically*, satirist A.J. Jacobs describes how he attempted to follow God's Passover instructions literally—by marking the doorposts of his NYC apartment with lamb's blood.

Since he didn't know where to get actual blood, he decided on the next best thing: the juice of a lamb chop from the supermarket. As you might imagine, his neighbors thought he was crazy.

Jacobs' stunt is funny because it exploits the difference between how modern people perceive the sight of blood and how the ancients understood it.

In today's world, we associate blood outside of a medical setting with violence, crime, and death.

But to our biblical ancestors, blood symbolized the exact opposite: It symbolized life.

As the Torah says, "The life of the flesh is in the blood. ...It is the blood, as the life-force, that effects atonement." (*Lev. 17:11*)

To put it simply, our ancestors saw blood as a spiritual cleanser that made a space pure and worthy of God.

So, when our parashah says, "Aaron's sons brought the blood to him; he dipped his finger in the blood and put it on the horns of the altar; and he poured out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar" (*Lev. 9:9*), we can make some sense of it:

To our modern ears, Aaron sounds like a demented character from a horror flick. But what he's doing, in effect, is spraying spiritual Lysol around the bimah to purify it of sin so that God's presence can dwell there.

The ritual of smearing blood on the doorposts of the house on the night of the Tenth Plague is similar. The blood on the Israelite homes marked those houses as purity zones for God, so the angel of death couldn't enter.

If an artist were to paint a detailed picture of Leviticus, it would show the priests standing at the altar with their hands and clothes drenched in blood. And if someone were to smear blood on their doorway on Erev Pesach, their neighbors would probably call the police.

The ancient Torah rituals don't translate well in modernity. And, for centuries, that's worked to our detriment.

Christians who know the Hebrew Bible have long been familiar with the bloody priestly rituals. They know that God says, "You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with anything leavened." (Ex. 23:18)

Is it any wonder, then, that they believed the blood libel—the accusation that Jews kidnap Christian children and use their blood to make matzah?

How many Jews have been killed because of that lie?

The blood libel has taken many forms over time. The most recent is the claim that the State of Israel takes perverse pleasure in slaughtering Palestinians.

Sadly, the bill passed by the Knesset on Tuesday mandating the death penalty for Palestinian terrorists only, while exempting Jewish ones, feeds that narrative.

But even before that vote, the online news site *Politico* ran a cartoon this week picturing Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Trump wearing *tallitot* splattered with blood, as the boat they're riding in heads off a cliff labeled "Iran."

(*Politico* pulled the cartoon after readers expressed outrage, but it's still circulating on the Internet.)

The cartoon is deeply antisemitic—not because it criticizes the Iran war, but because it conflates American and Israeli policy with the Jewish religion.

Remember, while our biblical ancestors saw blood as holy and purifying, it later came to be associated with crime and violence. The blood libel is so insidious because it misappropriates Leviticus' obsession with purity—and the means of attaining it—to portray Jews as bloodthirsty predators.

How can we combat this slander?

Fortunately, the answer is found in the Tanakh itself.

In the 8th century BCE, the prophet Isaiah came to see, as the Reform theologian Kaufmann Kohler put it, "that the sacrificial system was out of harmony with the true spirit of Judaism and led to all sorts of abuses, above all to a misconception of the worship of God..."¹ And Isaiah condemned the priests harshly for this:

*When you lift up your hands,
I will turn My eyes away from you;
Though you pray at length,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood.*
(Isaiah 1:15)

Well before the destruction of the Temple, Isaiah turned the sacrificial system on its head.

Until then, bloody hands had symbolized the priests' immersion in holiness, but Isaiah recast it as evidence of the priests' complicity with immorality and corruption.

What God really wants from us, he said, is to:

*Wash yourselves clean;
Put your evil doings
Away from My sight.
Cease to do evil;
Learn to do good.
Devote yourselves to justice;
Aid the "chamotz"—the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow.
(Isaiah 1:16-17)*

The priests were wrong: Justice—not blood—is what purifies and makes a place worthy of God. That's the prophetic message.

When Reform Judaism was born in the 19th century, it embraced this message as a core theological principle. Instead of ritual observance, we emphasized the prophets' call to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (*Micah* 6:8) as the essence of Judaism.

What if we recommitted ourselves to that proud tradition?

What if, instead of judging the *kashrut* (religious legitimacy) of our practice by how stringently we avoid *chametz*, we measured it by how scrupulous we are about standing up for people Isaiah calls "*chamotz*"—victims of cruelty and oppression?²

A.J. Jacobs was being cheeky when he painted his doorway with lamb's blood.

What if we were serious about girding our doorways with justice?

1 Kaufmann Kohler, *Jewish Theology, Systematically and Historically Considered*, 172.

2 With thanks to Rabbi Danya Rutenberg for her Facebook post (April 1, 2026) pointing out Isaiah's use of the word "*chamotz*" in 1:17 and its connection to *chametz*.