VAYIKRA – DVAR TORAH
JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER VANCOUVER
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
TEMPLE SHOLOM
MARCH 7, 2022

This week's parasha is Vayikra – Leviticus, it is also Shabbat Zachor, the shabbat before Purim, where we are commanded to remember the evil of Amalek and to eradicate it from the face of the earth.

When the Israelites left Egypt, no nation dared pick a fight with them. Who would start up with a people whose G-d just smacked around the mighty Egypt with ten awesome plagues, and drowned the surviving few in the sea? Only Amalek, driven by profound hatred which defied logic, came to wage battle.

And so on the shabbat before Purim, when we retell the story of another tyrant, maniacal and filled with both rage and hubris attempted to destroy the Jewish people, our rabbis draw the lesson all the way back to the origins of the Jewish nation themselves.

The parallels for this moment in our world today with the war in Ukraine, another tyrant, driven by profound hatred and hubris which defies logic, are impossible to ignore.

On the one hand the lesson then of this week's parasha to the events of these past two weeks is painfully clear. Vehi Sheamda, as we read in the Passover Haggadah,

"For not only one (enemy) has risen up against us to destroy us, but in every generation, they rise up to destroy us."

The verse continues, "But the Holy One, Blessed be G-d, delivers us from their hands.

One reading of the moment is that this is part of a cycle of human history and viewed through the lens of our own experience, part of the cycle of Jewish history. So here we are again; good verses evil, light against darkness – we are called once more to stand in the breech; like our ancestors before us. Going back as far as the story of Amalek, through that of Esther, and now once again in Europe in a land, Ukraine, and more broadly eastern Europe that has been the place of so much suffering for the Jewish people and humanity in general.

But there is another lesson, and it too comes from this week's parasha.

Leviticus is where we are first introduced to the ancient ritual of sacrifice. The text lays our in gory detail the detailed procedures by which Israelites would bring animal sacrifices to the priest, who was then duty-bound to slaughter the beast, render its fat, sprinkle blood on the altar, turn portions of the carcass into smoke on the altar's fire, and then clean up the ashes.

The Hebrew word for sacrifice is korban. In Hebrew sacrifice doesn't imply giving something up. Rather, the word is based on the concept of coming close, of drawing near. Individual temple sacrifices drew ancient Israelites closer to God, raising up their lives to a higher purpose. And there were times when the community would offer a sacrifice, this too was a transformative moment, such communal sacrifices would unite the whole Jewish people through shared sacrifice; drawing not only closer to G-d but also closer to each other.

We know this from the experience of these past two years during the pandemic. When our community made sacrifices of so that we could all stay safe. Though I know we have all grown tired of being asked to mask, and vax and maintain social distance; we also know that when doing it together as a community, it brought us closer to each other, and for some; I'll offer for me in particular doing "my part to stop the spread" felt holy, sacred and drew me closer to G-d and what it means to be a Jew.

Like Purim follows the reminder of Amalek, we find ourselves in that moment of sacrifice for sacred purpose once again.

Many of us knew precious little about Ukraine, even though most Ashkenazic Jews can trace their ancestorial roots back to that place or at least the general area.

But most left it long ago, in the late 19th and early 20th century when hundreds of pogroms beset Jewish shtetls.

Those that didn't leave; so many were murdered in that very place where war rages again today during the shoah.

For the Jewish people our connection to Ukraine is complicated; but as a people that values human life, that knows the true horrors of tyranny and autocracy – we are drawn to this conflict with that same sense of sacred purpose, shlichot – to not stand idly by, to not allow darkness to extinguish the light of humanity.

The people of Ukraine are an inspiration to the world, led by their tireless, brave, fearless—and incidentally, Jewish—president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Calling his people to arms, to defend their independence and liberty, he has held off the infinitely larger and stronger invading army for longer than anybody imagined possible.

In doing so he has united NATO and the free world in a way that messy democracies typically do not. Those nations; who until only weeks ago seemed to be moving further apart have now drawn closer to together, uniting to impose crippling economic sanction on Russia and to issue a clear declaration that the alliance will respond to a Russian attack on any NATO member—including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, former Soviet republics—as if the Russians had attacked Paris or Berlin, London or New York. Even Switzerland, historically neutral to an amoral fault, is participating in the economic sanctions.

Economic sanctions bring terrible hardship to the Russian people, who are already suffering at the hands of a leader they must unite to reject as they did Communist rule decades ago. And those same sanctions may bring economic difficulties to us and the world. Beyond the economic sacrifice, it is quite possible that more will be ask of us, already our nation and community are working to open our hearts and borders to refugees running for their lives, Canada has said it will do its part; the Jewish community will meet this week to see what role we here in Vancouver can play.

Where Canada once said, “none is too many”. That is not the response thus far of Canada or the free world; rather we have learned from history, we understand the sacrifice and we are united in our sense of sacred purpose to save all we can.

And if more is asked of our Canadian Forces and maybe G-d forbid our sons and daughters; we will draw strength from the example of the greatest generation that secured the freedom we cherish today; maybe we cherish it a bit more today as we more fully understand their sacrifice.

And all of this, all of this is not only an echo of the horrors of the past, of Amalek, and Haman, and Hitler. It is also a reminder of the blessing that came from that collective sacrifice, the unity and drawing near to each other in *shlichut* sacred purpose that is are the heart of what our tradition means by the idea of korban, or sacrifice.

It shouldn’t take a war, let alone a potential world war to draw good people of the world together so that light can triumph over darkness. But if the alternative is darkness then we will draw near to each other, to our people, with sacred purpose and we will be an or la goyim a light amongst the nations. Because in every generation they have risen up to destroy us, and thus far we are still here; they have been defeated, light has beaten back the darkness and we will do it again.