One People: Thoughts for Parashat Tsav

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Angel for Shabbat—Tzav/Parah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This week's Parasha opens with rules pertaining to a daily burnt-offering in the Mishkan, and later also in the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. Rabbi Joseph Hertz pointed out that this offering was regarded as an atoning sacrifice for the community. The whole Jewish People, not just a few wealthy donors, shared in the cost.

The underlying theme of this practice stresses the wholeness of the Jewish People. The daily atonement offerings were a national expression of commitment. We come before God as one People; we seek atonement as one People; we each share responsibility for the wellbeing of the whole People.

Although we may have different views on many topics, we are one People. Even if we have strong competing factions on various issues, this ultimate oneness must not come into question. When any one of us is attacked, all of us are attacked. When the Jewish People is in peril, we set aside all differences in order to stand in defense of our People.

The Passover Haggada includes a passage about a *rasha*, the wicked child. What is the essence of this person's wickedness? The *rasha* is so designated in the Haggada not for sins of violence or ritual infractions but for separating from the community. The *rasha,* although a Jew, does not identify with the destiny of the Jewish People. "What is this service of *yours*? It belongs to you, not to me. I cut myself off from the unity of the People." The Haggada offers a reply to the *rasha*: if you had been a slave in ancient Egypt you would not have been redeemed. You would not have proven worthy to be part of our People because you chose not to feel part of our destiny.

The message applies to all generations including our own. Those of Jewish ancestry who betray their People, especially at times of crisis, prove themselves unworthy of the future redemption of our People.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his “On Repentance,” offers a description of what it means for a Jew to identify with Kenesset Israel, the eternal Congregation of Israel:

“The Jew who believes in Kenesset Israel is the Jew who lives with Kenesset Israel where she may be and is prepared to die for her, who hurts with her pain and rejoices in her joy, who fights her wars, suffers in her defeats, and celebrates her victories. The Jew who believes in Kenesset Israel is the Jew who joins himself as an indestructible link not only to the Jewish people of this generation but to Kenesset Israel of all generations. How? Through Torah, which is and creates the continuity of all the generations of Israel for all time.”

This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Parah. Along with the regular Shabbat Torah reading, we read the passages relating to the red heifer. In ancient times, the ashes of the red heifer were used in a purification rite so that all Israelites would be ritually pure in time to celebrate Passover. Shabbat Parah is a reminder for all of us to purify ourselves so that we may be ready and worthy to celebrate the redemption that Passover represents. As we reaffirm our participation in the redemption of Kenesset Israel in olden days, we also reaffirm our commitment to Kenesset Israel today, tomorrow, and for all time.