

## The Blood Offering of Our Children

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What do Judaism, Christianity, and Islam tell us about human redemption in light of sentencing youth to die in prison? For one Rabbi, Priest and Islamic leader who routinely visit children tried as adults at Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall in Sylmar, sentencing a child to life in prison is a vehement denial of how a child, despite the seriousness of the crime, is readily redeemable. As leaders of our respective faith traditions, our pastoral visits to juvenile hall converged in the life of a 16 year old named David.

David was tried as an adult and sentenced to 4 life sentences in prison. Although it was disclosed in his trial that David never fired a gun and had no prior felonies, David's life imprisonment, like many others, is a result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The victim suffered no serious injury and returned home from the hospital the same day he was admitted. As long as David spends the rest of his life locked away, he will forever be in the wrong place and do the wrong time.

Getting to know David forced us to reflect upon our faith traditions and reconsider how fundamentally common is our shared conviction that God does not want any of our children to perish. The Torah, the Old Testament and the Qur'an revere the story of Abraham not sacrificing his son; this story affirms our Abrahamic roots and conveys the consistency of this conviction that God does not require the sacrifice of our children.

Sentencing our children to life imprisonment is an idolatrous offering to the false spirit of punishment and to the evil spirit of society's indifference, which allows for simplistic policies that at best leave us with a false sense of security. Sacrificing our children is not the offering God wants. In light of our incarcerated children, our interfaith dialogue affirms that God does not require the blood offering of our children. Instead God does require our commitment to forgiveness and redemption.

The story recalls how God tested Abraham to offer his son as a burnt offering. In faith, Abraham follows God and builds an altar and set the wood on it binding his son. When Abraham seizes the knife to slay his son, God commands Abraham: "Do not lay your hand on the boy; do not harm him, for now I know that you fear God, and you have not held back from me your son."

Jews, Christians, and Muslims recognize the sacredness of this story where God commands that all our children, like Abraham's son, remain free of harm and regain an opportunity to grow. The criminal justice system has become the altar of sacrifice for youth. Life sentences have become the instrument of death that slays our youth. Life sentences for youth ignore God's command that we not harm our children. Life sentences for youth deny that our children have a greater capacity for rehabilitation. Sentencing youth to die in prison revokes our conviction in God's redemption.

. As our faiths converged in the life of David at juvenile hall, our interfaith dialogue has become a unison prophetic proclamation denouncing the sinful idolatrous worship of the prison industrial complex that profits from incapacitating youth. As this interfaith dialogue continues, we turn to our faith communities to accompany our youth sentenced to die in prison by advocating for the reform of unfair sentencing, the mechanism for sacrificing our youth on the altar of a broken justice system.

Juvenile Justice Sabbath will take place on the weekend of May 22 - 24, 2009 throughout California where Synagogues, Churches and Mosques, with close to 200 congregations participating, will pray together for an end to the unnecessary sacrifice of our youth. As God commanded Abraham to withdraw from the sacrifice of his son, we follow God's command to not let our children perish in prison. Senate Bill 399 seizes the justice system's sacrifice of our children by reviewing cases of youth under the age of 18 who are sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. SB399 would review these cases and require young people to work towards rehabilitation; they will have an opportunity to be resentenced.

The binding of the son in the Abrahamic narrative is a story we share and the message of God's command to save our children from unnecessary sacrifice is one we honor. The story of David is only one out of thousands of similar stories where our children are sentenced to die in prison. Like Isaac, the sacrifice of David is not necessary. Our faith communities celebrate God's redemption with the prophetic actions of advocating for our children, denouncing our criminal justice system's idolatrous worship of the punitive spirit, and dismantling the altar that unnecessarily sacrifices our children. The lives of our children are sacred and our faith traditions demand that we honor this truth.