

Feast of Sacrifice

by Cheryl Anne Groth

I think it was the blood. Pouring out on the deck of the *Mavi Marmara*. A Turkish-American boy of nineteen--one of the many young people who left İstanbul on a mission of mercy. Their goal: to get supplies to Palestinians, starving, in need of medicine--cut off from civilization by the Israeli blockade.

I read the account third-hand, from a collection of accounts from some editor who interviewed a writer who saw the blood pour out of the boy's chest, powerless to act, powerless even if the burly Israeli had not blocked her from trying to press the blood back into the gushing wound. There are some wounds too deadly to heal.

To make sense of this horror, my thoughts turned to ancient wisdom.

Kurban Bayramı. The feast of sacrifice in which Turks remember İbrahim's obedience--his willingness to sacrifice his first-born son, İsmail. Plenty of heroes in this one: the father whose unquestioning obedience took him to the brink, the son, whose complete trust in the God of his fathers compelled him to remain upon the altar when all of his instincts should have been screaming "Run!" Above all, God--Who sent a lamb just at the brink of time, caught in the thorns, the lamb becoming İsmail's stand-in on the altar.

Israel's holy book tells a similar tale.

This time, however, there was no lamb caught in the thicket, no mother's prayer answered, no exit but the grave.

I grieved for the boy's mother. Her tradition, like mine, taught her son unconditional love: to offer hospitality to strangers, not knowing if danger lies in the act.

Reload.

My brain does that at times. My imagination places me in the scene of the event. Sometimes as an observer. Sometimes as the one in the thick of things. Switch point of view. I became the one lying there, helpless.

How in the name of God did I get here--a child again, back home?

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It was Kurban Bayramı--the Feast of the Sacrifice--and my father had taken me for the first time to see. I had heard the story from childhood. The lamb, caught in the thorns. İsmail's relief, İbrahim's faith renewed. Every year, I had eaten. I had never thought about the lamb. Skewered, it was delicious.

The river of red stunned me. Lamb of God, blood pouring from his throat. A scarlet rain spurted from his neck. His young heart, so strong, struggled to beat. His eyes fixed on mine. Such innocence.

Its meat we shared with those not so fortunate. Drops of red dotted patches of snow turned grey as I tagged along the Ankara back streets behind my father, who, after carving out our portion, took the rest to our housekeeper's family. They were so grateful. They had just lost their son, I remember. Leukemia, I think.

When one has been blessed, one shares one's blessings. That is our way. Even in poverty, the grieving family shared with us. Their courage, their persistence, their faith. Glasses of tea to warm my belly, and a life lesson to warm my soul.

A lesson never forgotten. When I saw the blockade on CNN in my dorm, I caught the first flight I could to İstanbul. A flotilla was to set sail in two weeks. Thank God my calculus professor was Palestinian. He emailed me my homework. I shoved my laptop into my backpack.

I'd have gone even if I got F's for the entire two weeks. The homeless would have homes, the sick, medicine; the hungry would eat. They could not wait for the generosity of Kurban Bayramı. Now was the hour of relief. The children's eyes. Lambs whose blood would pulse no more without relief. Hope boarded the Mavi Marmara, along with other students, journalists, my laptop and Calc 101.

I never realized how long it took a ship to travel from Point A to Point B. Plenty of time for calculus. After five hours of it in our cramped quarters, I needed a break. Memorizing derivative formulas made me crazy.

I headed for the top deck.

I drank in the night air. Stars danced; the moon twirled in its dignified round—a stately baroque with those on the Turkish flag.

Mesmerized by the immensity of our mission and by the hum of the ships' engines, I did not hear the soldiers approach.

Out of the sky, a man appeared, then another. Shouts in a language I couldn't recognize. A crack, a flash. Someone ran into me, I think. I found myself on the deck. Maybe I had tripped, the deck slippery from the night air. Something wet and warm oozing. Then I saw his face, his gun. My chest heaved.

I watched the scene unfold. I gasped. The guy was younger than I. His gun, smoking, pointed right at my heart. I saw the Star of David on his uniform. Hope welled. Our shared tradition--God's mercy--letting the sacrifice live.

Yet he fired again. A crushing agony. My heart began a wild struggle as I stared up at the stars and the moon. Unbelief.

"Breathe, damn you, breathe," I told myself. I blacked out.

When I awoke, a woman handed me something. My mother's hands, I thought. When we lived in Turkey, Mom always handed me a glass of tea before Dad and I went out to the sacrifice. "How did I get home?" I wondered.

Blacked out again.

A familiar smell. Blood was heavy in the air. Was it already Kurban Bayramı?

Warm liquid ran down my throat. I shuddered to think how much homework I would have to make up if six months had passed.

Denial. Then reality.

The stars and the flag still floated above. Searing pain. Blackness. I stood but I could not feel my feet on the deck.

I looked down. There lay the lamb. His eyes, so much like mine. My eyes. Liquid poured out of his throat.

Fear gripped my heart. It was I who lay bleeding.

Soldiers cheered. The sacrifice shuddered and fell still. I flew--far and fast.

As a kid, I wanted to be a fighter pilot. Color-blind, rejected, I turned to physics.

Amazed at the speed at which I traveled, I lost my fear. Way better than my childhood dreams.

*Behind us, the soldiers, the Mavi Marmara, and finally the Earth
retreated, one-by one. A dot, then a point, then lost in a sea of stars.
I turned around. Beyond, the wonders of the universe beckoned.*

