The following texts examine the subjects of martyrdom ("kiddush Hashem," literally meaning the "sanctification of God's name") and sacrifice. The texts engaged with martyrdom explore questions about martyrning oneself—when one is obligated to; when, lacking such obligation, one is permitted to; and when there is an inverse obligation to preserve one's own life. The primary text below on this topic comes from the Shulchan Aruch, a 16th-century legal compilation, emerging from more than a millennium of evolving tradition and debate situated within the diverse social contexts of different Jewish communities, and which persists today as the most widely accepted compendium of Jewish law. Several of the sources that follow are from commentators on this code, who expand upon or challenge particular points within the text. Additional texts—from commentators on the Hebrew Bible, the Babylonian Talmud, and the mishnah Torah (the legal code compiled by prominent medieval Torah scholar and philosopher Maimonides, also known as the Rambam)—offer varying perspectives about the appropriate contexts for martyrdom.

The primary text on sacrifice is by Nachmanides (known as the Ramban), a prominent medieval commentator, Talmudist, and Kabbalist from present-day Spain. While some rabbis view animal sacrifice as a ritual merely intended to wean Jews off of idolatry, the Ramban believes it to hold deep symbolic meaning. For him, the visceral process of animal sacrifice serves as a stand-in for our own embodiedness and culpability, whereby the atonement that should be wrought from our own bodies is transferred to the animal, and later to the vehicle of prayer.

Finally, the texts from the Talmudic tractate Ta'anit consider the generative possibility of a different embodied practice, exploring how communal fasts can inspire social and material change. Called in periods of distress such as drought, pestilence, and war, these fasts were at once forms of minor self-sacrifice and public spectacle, meant to prompt deep reflection for the individual, and communal repentance for whatever evil deeds were believed to have caused the disaster.

How much must we sacrifice for justice?
All of the transgressions which are in the Torah, with the exception of idolatry, sexual prohibitions, and murder: If someone is told to transgress them or he will be killed, so long as he is in private, he should transgress and not be killed. If he wants to be stringent upon himself and be killed, he may do so if the idolater intends to make him violate his religion.

Rema: If he can save himself using all he possesses, he must give everything up rather than transgress one of the negative commandments (Ran in Sukkah, Perek Lulav haGazul, and Rashba and Raavad and Rivash Siman 387). They [Chazal] said that anyone who has the ability to protest and does not is considered responsible for the same sin. But in this case, where there is a chance of danger, he does not need to give up his money for this.1 (Mahariv Siman 156).

If he is in public—that is, in front of ten Jews—he must allow himself to be killed rather than transgress, providing the idolater intends to make him violate his religion (even if this is over a minhag such as the way one ties one's shoes?) (Beit Yosef). But if he [the idolater] intends [to do this] only for his own benefit, he [the Jew] should transgress rather than be killed. If, however, it is a time of persecution (only against Jews) (Beit Yosef in the name of the Nimukei Yosef), one should be killed rather than transgress even if the matter is about the straps of one's shoes.

Rema: And this is only if they wish to make him violate a negative commandment; if they made a law that one should not fulfill positive commandments, however, he does not need to fulfill it if he will be killed (Ran Shabbat Perek BaMeh Tomnin and Nimukei Yosef Sanhedrin Perek Sorer uMoreh). Nonetheless, if the hour requires it and he wishes to fulfill it and be killed, he may do so (Maharik Shoresh 88) . . . Any place where it is said, “Be killed rather than transgress,” if he transgressed and was not killed, even though he has desanctified the Name, he is nonetheless considered to have been forced and is not liable [for having committed the transgression]. This is only where he could not have fled—if he could have fled, and did not do so, he is like a dog sitting on his vomit and is considered to have transgressed deliberately (Beit Yosef in the name of the Rambam Yesodei haTorah 5).

Intends2 . . . And the Bach wrote that even in public one is not permitted to give over their life in a case where the non-Jew is intending [to make the Jew transgress] only for their own benefit, but according to the Prisha it’s clear that in public one is permitted to give over their life in such a case, and it seems that if the time requires such an action, everyone would agree that it’s permitted to give oneself over. And the Beit Yosef also wrote that if the person is an important and pious figure who fears heaven, and sees that their generation is failing in this matter,4 they are permitted to sanctify God’s name and give over their life even for a minor mitzvah, in order that people understand the need to love and fear God with all their hearts.

And the Bach ruled like the Rambam, that anyone who, according to the law, should transgress rather than be killed, and instead chose to be killed, is held accountable for their life.

1 In other words, one is not obligated to give up the entirety of their possessions to prevent someone else from transgressing, even though rebuking your fellows is an obligation.

2 This is an example given in the Gemara Sanhedrin 75b, where Rashi explains that this is referring to a locale in which there’s a particular way Jews tie their sandals, and a particular way non-Jews tie their sandals; even though this detail has no inherent religious significance, if one is in public or it’s a time of widespread forced assimilation, one should be martyred rather than change even their dress to reflect the non-Jewish custom.

3 This is an expansion on the Shulchan Aruch’s statement that a person may choose martyrdom even when not obligated “if the idolater intends to make him violate his religion.”

4 In the matter that they are being forced to transgress.
A BURNT SACRIFICE . . . It is far more fitting to accept the reason for the offerings, namely that since man’s deeds are accomplished through thought, speech, and action, therefore God commanded that when man sins and brings an offering, he should lay his hands upon it corresponding to the [evil] deed [committed]. He should confess his sin verbally corresponding to his [evil] speech, and he should burn the innards and the kidneys [of the offering] in fire because they are the instruments of thought and desire in the human being. He should burn the legs [of the offering] since they correspond to the hands and feet of a person, which do all his work. He should sprinkle the blood upon the altar, which is analogous to the blood in his body. All these acts are performed in order that when they are done, a person should realize that he has sinned against his God with his body and his soul, and that “his” blood should really be spilt and “his” body burned, were it not for the loving-kindness of the Creator, Who took from him a substitute and a ransom, namely this offering, so that its blood should be in place of his blood, its life in place of his life, and that the chief limbs of the offering should be in place of the chief parts of his body.

[CULPABILITY

SHABBAT 54B

It was related that Rav, and Rabbi Hanina, and Rabbi Yohanan, and Rav Haviva taught the statement cited below . . .

Anyone who had the capability to effectively protest the sinful conduct of the members of his household and did not protest, he himself is apprehended for the sins of the members of his household and punished. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the people of his town, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the people of his town. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the whole world, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the whole world.

PUBLIC SPECTACLE

MISHNA TA’ANIT 2:1

What is the customary order of fast days? Normally the sacred ark in the synagogue, which was mobile, was kept in a locked room. However, on fast days they remove the ark to the main city square and place burnt ashes upon the ark, as a sign of mourning. And they also place ashes on the head of the Nasi [leader], and on the head of the deputy Nasi, and each and every member of the community likewise places ashes upon his head. The eldest member of the community says to the congregation statements of reproof, for example: Our brothers, it is not stated with regard to the people of Nineveh: And God saw their sackcloth and their fasting. Rather, the verse says: “And God saw their deeds, that they had turned from their evil way” (Jonah 3:10). And in the Prophets it says: “And rend your hearts and not your garments, and return to the Lord your God” (Joel 2:13). This teaches that prayer and fasting are insufficient, as one must also repent and amend his ways in practice.

MISHNEH TORAH,

FASTS, CHAPTER 1:17

Whenever there is a communal fast that was instituted for a distressing circumstance, the [community’s] court and elders sit in the synagogue and review the conduct of the city's inhabitants from the time the morning prayers were concluded until noon. They remove the stumbling blocks that lead to sin. They give warnings, enquire, and investigate all those who pursue violence and sin, and [encourage them] to depart [from these ways]. Similarly, [they investigate] people who coerce others and humble them. They also occupy themselves with other similar matters.
SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways do these texts pose challenges to the common dictum that Judaism values life above all else? In what ways do they bolster it?

2. How and why do questions about narrative and public influence shape rabbinic conceptions about when one is obligated to martyr themselves?

3. What forms and levels of transgression do the rabbis identify? What corresponding levels of sacrifice do they require?

4. How do the rabbis engage with the difference between committing transgression oneself and failing to prevent transgression by others?

5. Some rabbis, like the Beit Yosef, view accepting martyrdom when one is not obligated to as an act of piety, whereas others, like the Bach and the Rambam, view it as a transgression. What competing values are they weighing?

6. How does the Ramban understand the role of sacrifice? Where do you see this conception alive in the world today?

7. According to the Gemara in Ta’anit, what is the intended immediate impact of communal fasts? What does it suggest about the role of prayer and ritualized action?