

Tzav Chevrutah Study

B'nai Jeshurun Congregation, Shabbat Parah, 3.30.24

Part One: "Elevation"

The Sacrifices

We read about different types of sacrificial offering. Here are two:

1. The **עולה** - **olah**: burnt offering
 - a. Most common
 - b. Offered simply to connect with God
 - c. Completely burnt
 - d. Blood sprinkled on **lower half of the altar**

2. The **חטאת** - **hata'at**: sin offering
 - a. Offered when a person wants forgiveness
 - b. Is not completely burnt
 - c. Blood is sprinkled on the **upper half of the altar**

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner, the early 19th century Hasidic Rebbe from Izbica, Poland, teaches that the *olah*/עולה (the burnt offering) is offered up by the "truly righteous person." It is fully burnt, representing a person's complete devotion to God. But, why, then, does the blood of the *hata'at*/חטאת (sin offering) get to be sprinkled on the upper half of the altar, while the *olah*/עולה (the burnt offering) only gets the lower half?

The Ishbitzer Rebbe writes: "This is because the cry of a repentant person calling out to God to save them rises to the highest heights, a place a completely righteous person cannot reach." Quoting the Zohar, a foundational mystical text, Rabbi Leiner says: "Repenting people are closer to God - more than any others, they are drawn upwards by the will of their hearts and their great strength to be close to the Holy One."

Discussion Question:

- Do you agree? Is it better to sin and repent than never to have sinned at all?

Part Two: “Groundedness”

Linen Robes and Ashes

וְלִבְשׁ הַכֹּהֵן מְדוּ בַד וּמְכַנְסֵי־בַד יִלְבַּשׁ עַל־בְּשָׂרוֹ וְהָרִים אֶת־הַדָּשָׁן אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכַל הָאֵשׁ
אֶת־הָעֵלָה עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשָׂמוּ אֶצְלַי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ:

The priest shall dress in linen robes, with linen breeches next to his body; and he shall take up the ashes to which the fire has reduced the burnt offering on the altar and place them beside the altar. (Leviticus 6:3)

Rabbi Simhah Bunim of Peshischa, the 18th century Polish Rabbi instrumental in the mussar movement (which focuses on cultivating noble traits), writes: “This is the very first thing the high priest must do before he enters into the Holy of Holies, so that he will not forget, when entering this holy place, the everyday needs of the people. The Torah commands him to remove his elaborate clothes and put on simple clothes, to remind him to pray for the day-to-day needs of the Jewish people.”

Discussion Question:

- When you approach your own “Holy of Holies” - especially high moments of your life - do you have a “linen robe” and “ashes,” i.e. something that grounds you and reminds you of where you came from?

Part Three: “What’s With The Heifer?”

The Red Heifer

The red heifer rite is perplexing. Some say it is a קִּוּן/hok - an indecipherable divine ordinance that needs no explanation. Others, like modern scholar Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, argue that it can - and must - be understood rationally. He explains that the blood of the red heifer represents life. When one comes into contact with a dead body, the only thing that can cleanse that person from anti-life is life. He explains how this law is meant to remind us to “...choose life, and be a mature partner in the covenant of tikkun olam, of improving life and of the quality of life in the world. This clear rationale applies to every mitzvah in every society and culture. Each commandment must be articulated toward upholding life, and toward a greater human autonomy and partnership role. This is the way that mitzvot move us toward the goal of a final universal triumph over all the enemies of life—poverty, hunger, oppression, all forms of discrimination that deny the equality of the other, war, and sickness. An important part of religious instruction is to upgrade the individual human being to embrace life more, to be more loving, more helpful to others, more self-respectful, more patient and understanding, more capable of restraint, which gives room to others to develop and express themselves.

Discussion Question:

- In this time of darkness, death, and destruction, how can we “choose life,” in ways large or small?