

PARASHAT VAYIKRA

Leviticus 1:1–5:26

Parashat Vayikra describes five different kinds of sacrifices to be offered in the sanctuary. They are the *olah*, or “burnt offering”; the *minchah*, or “meal offering”; the *zevach shelamim*, or “sacrifice of well-being”; the *chatat*, or “sin offering”; and the *asham*, or “guilt offering.” The manner in which each offering is made is described in detail.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

God speaks to Moses concerning the way in which the *olah*, or “burnt offering,” should be made by the people of Israel. It is to be a sheep, goat, or bull without a blemish, or a turtledove or pigeon. The person offering the sacrifice is to place a hand upon its head. The animal is then to be slaughtered, and the priests are to pour its blood against the sides of the altar. In the case of a sheep, goat, or bull, the animal is then to be cut up into sections and burned on the altar. If the sacrifice is a turtledove or pigeon, its head is to be removed and the blood is to be poured against the sides of the altar; it is to be torn open by its wings and placed upon the altar to be consumed by the fire.

· 2 ·

Concerning the *minchah*, or “meal offering,” Moses is told it shall consist of choice flour, and oil should be poured upon it, along with frankincense. When it is presented to Aaron and his sons, they are to scoop out a handful of it and place it upon the altar for burning. Afterwards they are to eat the remainder of the offering.

All of the *minchah* offerings are to be of unleavened flour or grain of the finest quality. If the offering is brought on a griddle or pan, it is to be mixed with oil and seasoned with salt. Then a piece of it is to be burned on the altar.

· 3 ·

The *zevach shelamim*, or “sacrifice of well-being,” is to be taken from the herd or flock. The animal offering should be without blemish, and the



priests are to cut it up and offer the entrails and all the fat upon the altar.

• 4 •

When a person accidentally fails to fulfill God's commandments, a *chatat*, or "sin offering," is to be made. If the person is a priest, the offering is to be an unblemished bull of the herd. It is to be brought to the entrance of the Tabernacle, where the priest is to lay his hands upon its head. Afterwards it is to be slaughtered, and the priest is to sprinkle its blood seven times inside the Tabernacle before the Ark of the Covenant. All the fat and entrails are to be offered on the altar; the rest of the sacrifice is to be taken outside the camp and burned.

If the community accidentally fails to fulfill

God's commandments, the elders of the community are to lay their hands upon the head of a bull. After the bull is slaughtered, the priest is to sprinkle some of its blood seven times in front of the curtain. Some of the blood is to be put on the horns of the altar in the Tabernacle, and some is to be poured at the altar base. The fat is to be burned on the altar, and the rest of the bull is to be burned outside the camp.

If the head of a tribe accidentally sins, that person is to offer a male goat without blemish. If an ordinary person sins, that person must bring a female goat without blemish. After the person's hands have been laid upon the head of the animal being sacrificed, it is to be slaughtered by the priests, and its fat is to be burned on the altar. In this way sins are forgiven.

.5.

If a person is guilty of a wrongdoing, an *asham*, or “guilt offering,” shall be made. For example, if a person withholds reporting on a matter seen or heard, touches an unclean carcass or an unclean person, or makes an oath and does not fulfill it, that person offers a “guilt offering.” If the person cannot afford a sheep for the offering, a turtledove or two pigeons may be offered. If the person cannot afford the turtledove or two pigeons, a tenth

of an *ephah* of choice flour will do for the “guilt offering.”

Furthermore, if one deals dishonestly with another in the matter of a loan or a pledge, through robbery or fraud, by finding something lost and lying about it, or by swearing falsely, one must first restore or repay that which has been wrongly taken, along with a fifth of its value. Afterwards one may offer a ram without blemish as a “guilt offering.” The priest is to sacrifice it, and the person’s wrongdoing shall be forgiven.

THEMES

Parashat Vayikra contains two important themes:

1. Sacrifice and prayer.
2. Sin and guilt.

PEREK ALEF: *The Meanings of Sacrifice and Prayer*

The third book of the Torah is named in Hebrew by its first word, *Vayikra*, “And [God] called.” In Latin the book is called Leviticus because the priests whose duties it describes were of the tribe of Levi. By the first century C.E., it was known among the early rabbis as *Torat Kohanim*, “Instruction of the Priests.”

Most of the book describes in detail how the *korbanot*, or “sacrifices,” of the people of Israel were to be offered in the ancient sanctuary. While the descriptions seem to be applicable to the time when Moses and the people were still wandering through the desert, many modern scholars believe this book was written by priests for the priests who presided over the sacrifices offered at the Jerusalem Temple.

In our modern society, the idea of sacrificing animals—of extracting their blood and spilling it on the side of an altar, of cutting out various organs and arranging them for burning—is both foreign and unpleasant. Some would describe it as disgusting and repugnant; others would call it “cruelty to animals,” protesting it as morally offensive.

Beauty of the sacrifice

The author of Sirach, a book of the Apocrypha, provides the following description of the sacrifice service in the Jerusalem Temple:

How glorious he (Simon the High Priest) was when the people gathered round him as he came out of the inner sanctuary!

. . . When he put on his glorious robe and clothed himself with superb perfection and went up to the holy altar . . . when he received the portions from the hands of the priests, as he stood by the hearth of the altar with a garland of brethren around him . . . with the Lord’s offering in their hands, before the whole congregation of Israel. Finishing the service at the altars, and arranging the offering to the Most High, the Almighty, he reached out his hand to the cup and poured a libation of the blood of the grape; he poured it out at the foot of the altar, a pleasing odor to the Most High, the King of all. (50: 1–15)

In ancient society, however, sacrifices and offerings to God were considered not only appropriate

but necessary expressions of faith. The word *korban*, or "sacrifice," literally means "draw near" and reveals the purpose of the Temple offerings. They were meant to unite the worshiper with God. By offering sacrifices, a person said thanks to God or sought forgiveness for sins. The drama and beauty of the sacrificial service, along with the music, prayers, and strong odors of incense, created an atmosphere of awe. In presenting a sacrifice, one was giving something important of oneself to God. For the ancients, the smoke of a burning sacrifice on the altar was proof of a person's love and reverence for God and for God's commandments.

Those who misused the ritual sacrifices, however, were severely criticized. When the prophet Isaiah, for example, saw people ignore the poor and sick, cheat, and deal dishonestly with one another but take their offerings to the Jerusalem Temple, he scorned and denounced them. He told them that God did not want their sacrifices because their "hands were stained with crime." (Isaiah 1:11,15) Among ancient Jews, hypocrisy was ridiculed. Sacrifices were not considered a means of removing guilt for wrongdoing.

Acceptable sacrifices

Let no person say, "I will go and do ugly and immoral things. Then I will bring a bull with much meat and offer it as a sacrifice on the altar, and God will forgive me." God will not have mercy on such a person. (Leviticus Rabbah 2:12)

Let a person do good deeds, study Torah, and bring an offering. Then God will have mercy and extend repentance. (Eliyahu Rabbah, Friedman, editor, p. 36)

After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., Jews faced the question: "What shall be done with the institution of sacrifices?" The rabbis determined that, since sacrifices were to be offered only at the Jerusalem Temple, Jews would need to wait until the Temple was rebuilt before reintroducing them. Thus the reintroduction of animal sacrifices and offerings is unlikely.

Even before the last sacrifices were being offered in the Temple, *prayer* was already on the way to replacing sacrifice as the most acceptable means of worship for Jews. With the introduction of the synagogue in the third century B.C.E., words of prayer by both individuals and congregations often replaced journeying to Jerusalem. By the time the Temple was destroyed, there were many thousands of synagogues throughout the Land of Israel, with 480 in Jerusalem alone. Many of the prayers that form the basis of Jewish prayer books today were created long before the offering of sacrifices at the Temple ceased.

After the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis included prayers for its revival in the ritual of the synagogue. For example, the traditional version of the *Avodah* prayer of the *Amidah* includes: "Restore the worship [sacrificial] service of Your Temple, and receive in love and favor [the offerings and] the prayers of Israel. . . ." Recalling the "additional sacrifices" offered on Sabbaths and festivals, the rabbis added a special service called *Musaf*, meaning "Additional Service," to the Sabbath and festival celebrations of the synagogue as a way of praying for the day when the Temple would be rebuilt and the sacrifices of animals reintroduced.

In his time, poet-philosopher Yehudah Halevi dreamed of the day when he would awaken in Jerusalem and experience "the Levites' song and sacrificial service." Later, Zionist Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kalisher predicted that the Jewish people would be gathered from the four corners of the earth to the Land of Israel, rebuild the Temple, and "offer sacrifices upon the altar of God. . . ."



Leibowitz

In her commentary, modern interpreter Nehama Leibowitz explains that the sacrifices are a "positive means of promoting communion with the Divine" and "a symbol and expression of a person's desire to purify himself and become reconciled with God." (B. S. Jacobson, *Meditations on the Torah*, Sinai Publishing, Tel Aviv, 1956, pp. 137-142; Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Va-*

yikra, World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem, 1980, pp. 18, 22)

Despite the fact that rabbis and Jewish interpreters honored the tradition of Temple sacrifices, even praying for their reintroduction, many believed prayer was superior to sacrifice as a form of worship. They argued that, while the Temple offerings depended upon a particular place and altar, prayer could be offered anywhere and anytime. Prayer consisted of the quiet meditations of the heart or words of the mouth expressed in a whisper, a song, or simply spoken. "Prayer," the rabbis say, "is greater than all the sacrifices." (*Tanchuma, Vayera*, 31b)

It is reported that the leader of the Jewish people at the time of the destruction of the Temple actually counseled his students by telling them not to mourn the fact that they could no longer offer sacrifices. Standing in the ruins of the Temple, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai told his students, "Do not grieve. We have a means of atonement that is equal to sacrifice. It is the doing of kind deeds. For God teaches us, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifices. . . .'" (*Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 4*; Hosea 6:6)

Citing the virtues of prayer as opposed to sacrifices, other rabbis also claimed that prayer was superior. "If the people of Israel say, 'We are poor and have no sacrifices to bring for offering,' God tells them, 'I need only words.'" Furthermore, say the rabbis, "even if they complain that they have no synagogue in their city, God tells them to pray in their fields and, if not there, on their beds and, if not on their beds, then in their hearts." The point is clear. Unlike sacrifices, which depend on an altar, an animal, or a gift, prayer is dependent only upon the hopes and honesty of one's heart. (*Exodus Rabbah, Tetzaveh*, 38:4; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 158a)

What is prayer?

Prayer is the heart . . . of significant living. . . .

Prayer is a step on which we rise from the self we are to the self we wish to be.

Prayer affirms the hope that no reality can crush, the aspiration that can never acknowledge defeat. . . .

Prayer seeks the power to do wisely, to act generously, to live helpfully. . . .

Prayer is the search for silence amidst noise. . . .

Prayer takes us beyond the self. . . our prayers are answered . . . when we are challenged to be what we can be. (Rabbi Morris Adler)



Rambam (Maimonides)

In his famous book *Guide for the Perplexed*, Moses Maimonides argues that sacrifices were an early form of worship given to the Jewish people so that they could learn how to serve God without feeling different from all other peoples surrounding them. Slowly, Maimonides says, the people learned that "the sacrificial service is not the primary objective of the commandments but that prayer is a better means of obtaining nearness to God." Agreeing with the early rabbis, Maimonides emphasizes that the superiority of prayer is that "it can be offered everywhere and by every person."

In his study of prayer, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel suggests that "prayer is not a substitute for sacrifice. Prayer *is* sacrifice." By that observation, Heschel means that in true prayer "we try to surrender our vanities, to burn our insolence, to abandon bias, dishonesty, envy." Prayer is the means through which we sacrifice our selfishness and greed and get in touch with our powers for truth, mercy, and love. (*Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*, Scribner, New York, 1954, pp. 70-71)

PEREK BET: Defining "Sin" in Jewish Tradition

Parashat Vayikra not only speaks of five different kinds of sacrifices to be offered by the people and their leaders, but it also identifies the reasons for offering sacrifices. Many were presented as gifts to bring the worshiper closer to God and to express thanks for harvests, festivals, personal celebrations, good fortune, healing in time of sick-

ness, or the achievement of peaceful relations between individuals and nations.

Among the many different kinds of sacrifices are those having to do with the "sins" of the people of Israel or of individuals. *Parashat Vayikra* speaks of the *olah* offering and the *chatat* and *asham* sacrifices as means of achieving relief from guilty feelings and forgiveness from God for wrongdoing. In identifying forms of behavior that require offerings at the Temple, the Torah and those who interpret it present us with a unique definition of "sin."

For example, the *olah*, or "burnt offering," the first sacrifice mentioned in our Torah portion, is to be given by all people. The Torah, however, does not provide a reason for the offering. It is Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai, a student of the famous Rabbi Akiba and a leader of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel just after the destruction of the Temple, who teaches that the *olah* offering is given for sinful thoughts and intentions even if they are not carried out. (*Leviticus Rabbah* 7:3)



Ramban (*Nachmanides*)

Nachmanides agrees, explaining that it is natural for human beings to have all kinds of evil thoughts. We think of cheating our neighbors, of twisting the truth to suit our selfish purposes, of secretly taking that which does not belong to us, of committing sexual offenses. Many different thoughts and intentions rise in our minds. For Nachmanides, these "secret thoughts," known only to God, are the first level of "sin." They are the first inclinations that lead to wrongdoing. For that reason, one offers the *olah* as a means of removing any guilt for such reflections or intentions. (Comment on *Leviticus* 1:4)

Sinful thoughts

Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, author of *Kad ha-Kemach*, commenting on the rabbinic observation that "sinful thoughts are more injurious than the sin itself," says: "It is more difficult to withdraw from sinful thoughts, for habitually

thinking about a sin will ultimately lead to its commission." He also notes the opinion of others that "when one plans to commit a sin, one actually prepares oneself to do more than one sin. For example, if one thinks of stealing or robbing, one prepares oneself even to kill in order to accomplish one's desire. . . ." (Charles B. Chavel, translator, *Shilo Publishing House, Inc., New York, 1980, p. 276*)

A second kind of "sin" defined in this Torah portion occurs when a person unintentionally breaks the law. Examples of this kind of "sin": one may harvest but forget to leave a portion for the poor and needy; one may neglect paying a worker at the end of the day; or one may accidentally eat a food prohibited by the Torah.



Hirsch

Commenting on the seriousness of "unintentional sin," Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes: "The sinner through error is one who sins from carelessness. In other words, at the moment of omission, that person did not take full care, with whole heart and soul, that the act be in keeping with the Torah and commandments, because the person was not, in the words of the prophet Isaiah [66:2], 'concerned about My word.'" Because one has not been careful and thoughtful, but lackadaisical in carrying out God's commandments, one's actions are considered sinful, and one is required to bring a sacrifice and to offer it in order to gain forgiveness.

Agreeing with Hirsch, Nehama Leibowitz states that "it is no excuse that the sinner had no *evil intention* and that it was *merely* forgetfulness, *just* carelessness and irresponsibility. . . ." She also notes that the Torah clearly includes priests and other leaders in its concern for unintentional sins. Leibowitz argues that "the greater the person, the greater the responsibility. Each negligence, each slip of the mind, each indiscretion, each error borders on deliberate wrongdoing." (*Studies in Vayikra*, pp. 28-29)

Sins of a leader

An acknowledged leader must be even more careful than ordinary people not to fall into the trap of wrongdoing. Even sins committed unintentionally may lead others to do evil, for others are eager to point to such a person as their example when they sin. (Jacob ben Jacob Moses of Lissa)

In other words, wrongdoings, even those committed in error or by accident, have serious consequences. They are not to be whitewashed or treated lightly as if they had no impact on others. Jewish tradition does not permit one to run away from the responsibility for one's actions. The Torah commands those who unintentionally sin to bring a *chatat*, or "sin offering," to God.

In addition to defining sins committed in thought or by error, the Torah also specifies other wrongdoings for which one must present an *asham*, or "guilt offering." These sins include: (1) withholding evidence from a court by refusing to be a witness; (2) promising to do something, or making an oath, and then failing to keep it; (3) dealing falsely with another person in matters having to do with deposits, pledges, theft, unfair treatment, or lost articles. All of these are considered serious violations of Torah.

Commenting on the sin of withholding evidence from a court, Abraham Chill observes that "since justice is the foundation of society, anyone who deliberately impedes justice is thereby guilty of perpetrating an act of injustice. If one could give testimony that would help a court of justice come to a decision but fails to do so, that person has committed a sin." (*The Mitzvot: The Commandments and Their Rationale*, Bloch Publishing, New York, 1974, p.150)

Rabbi Hisda asks the question: "What does the Torah mean when it uses the terms unfair treatment and theft?" He answers by pointing out that a person must not say to a neighbor, "I have something belonging to you, but I will wait until tomorrow to return it." Hisda defines such behavior as the sin of "unfair treatment." And, if a person says to another, "I have something belonging to you, but I will not return it,"—that, says Hisda, is the sin of "theft." (*Baba Metziah* 111a)

For such wrongdoings, it is not enough for the

sinner to bring a sacrifice to the Temple. The Torah clearly states that the guilty person shall "repay the principal amount and add a fifth part to it" so the injured party will be fully compensated for any losses. Jewish tradition insists on appropriate repayment of stolen property *before* any offerings are acceptable to God.

This first Torah portion of Leviticus offers a significant definition of "sin" in Jewish tradition. It includes wrongdoings that result from thoughtlessness and careless error, from accidentally misleading others, from deliberately withholding evidence, lying, robbing, or treating others unfairly. This definition is important because it demonstrates the high ethical principles that form the basis of Jewish tradition.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Review *Perek Alef*. List the reasons Jewish tradition favors prayer over sacrifice. What other reasons would you add to that list? Why?
2. Maimonides and Rabbi Bachya ben Asher argue that sinful thoughts can lead to sinful deeds. Do you agree? Should a person feel guilty for such thoughts? How can prayer lead a person away from such sin?
3. The rabbis raise a significant question of who is responsible in society for sin? Is it the thief or the one who knowingly purchases stolen property? They say that a governor once put to death all those who knowingly had purchased stolen goods from thieves. When the people heard what the governor had done, they protested. "You have not acted justly," they told him. So he took them to a field and put out food for animals. The animals came and took the food to their holes in the ground. The next day he took the people to the field and again put out plates of food for the animals. This time, however, while the animals rushed to the food, the governor had his guards cover their holes. When the animals discovered they could not enter their holes, they returned the food to the plates. The governor did this to demonstrate that troubles are due to those who knowingly purchase stolen property (*Leviticus Rabbah* 6:2) Would you agree or disagree with the governor?