

PARASHAT TZAV

Leviticus 6:1–8:36

Parashat Tzav repeats and enlarges upon the descriptions of the sacrifices already discussed in *Parashat Vayikra*. Included in this portion are details about how the ancient offerings of the *olah*, *minchah*, *chatat*, *asham*, and *zevach shelamim* were performed. We are also given a description of the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests in the sanctuary and of the dedication of the first sanctuary.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

Moses, as commanded by God, instructs Aaron and his sons concerning the presentation in the sanctuary of the *olah*, or “burnt offering.” The ashes from the offering are to be removed from the altar every morning, and the priests are to keep the fire of the altar burning continually.

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Aaron and his sons are told to bring a *minchah*, or “meal offering,” to present on the altar. Once the offering is presented, the priests spread a handful of the fine flour, together with the oil and frankincense, upon the altar and set it afire. The remains of the offering are to be eaten by the priests.

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The *chatat*, or “sin offering,” for unintentional wrongs is to be slaughtered by the priests. If it is cooked in an earthen pot, the pot is to be broken. If it is cooked in a copper pot, the pot is to be scrubbed clean and rinsed with water. The priests may eat of this sacrifice.

The *asham*, or “guilt offering,” is slaughtered, and its blood is poured on all sides of the altar. The priest is to burn all of the animal’s fat together with its entrails, kidneys, and parts of its liver. Only the sons of priests may eat of this sacrifice.

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The *zevach shelamim*, or “sacrifice of well-being or peace,” is offered as a gift of thanksgiving. It includes the sacrificial animal, along with unleavened cakes mixed with oil, unleavened wafers spread with oil, and cakes of fine flour with oil



mixed in and well soaked. After it is presented to the priest, blood from the sacrificial animal is sprinkled around the altar. The offering is to be eaten the day it is brought to the priest.

If the sacrifice offered is a freewill offering, it may be eaten on either the same day or the day after it is given to the priest. Such an offering may not be eaten by any priest who has been made ritually unclean by touching a dead human body.

Moses commands the people not to eat any fat

THEMES

Parashat Tzav contains two important themes:

1. Finding meaning in obsolete traditions.
2. The holiness of blood.

PEREK ALEF: *Finding Meaning in Obsolete Traditions*

Parashat Tzav presents a detailed description of the sacrifices offered in the first sanctuary of the Jewish people as they wandered through the Sinai desert. Most scholars believe that the description applies also to the sacrifices that were brought to

from an ox, sheep, goat, or animals killed by other animals. He also forbids the eating of any blood, warning that a person who eats blood shall be cut off from the people of Israel.

The *zevach shelamim* is offered by individuals for themselves. One part of the sacrifice is to be burned on the altar, another eaten by the priest who offers it, and a third part eaten by the person bringing it.

• 5 •

In a solemn ceremony before all the people of Israel, Moses ordains Aaron and his sons as priests. They are dressed in beautiful garments and sprinkled with oil. Aaron is given a robe, and the *ephod*, “breastpiece,” Urim and Thummim, along with a special headdress are placed upon him.

Afterwards Moses sprinkles oil throughout the sanctuary, upon the altar and all the utensils used for sacrifices, and upon Aaron’s head. Sacrifices are then offered by Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s sons. Moses touches the right ears, thumbs, and toes of each priest with some of the sacrificial blood. He then takes parts of the sacrificial animal, along with cakes of unleavened bread, and waves them as an offering to God.

Concluding the ceremony of consecrating Aaron and his sons as priests, Moses commands them to boil the sacrificial animal and eat it at the entrance of the sanctuary. Whatever is left over is to be consumed by fire. They are also told to remain at the entrance of the sanctuary for seven days and nights as a part of their celebration.

the Jerusalem Temple after it was built by King Solomon in the tenth century B.C.E.

During the period when thousands of people journeyed to Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices, the Torah’s instructions on how the priests were to prepare and receive these sacrifices must have been extremely important. If they were not prepared correctly or offered properly, they were unac-

ceptable. Therefore, knowing and following the directions of the Torah concerning sacrifices was a high priority for both the people and the priests. Studying the details for the presentation of each sacrifice had great importance.

After the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. and the offering of sacrifices was replaced by prayer, many must have asked: "Do these descriptions and commandments concerning the offering of sacrifices still have any meaning for us? Are they now obsolete? Is there anything for us to learn from these details about the *olah*, *minchah*, *chatat*, *asham*, and *zevach shelamim* offerings?"

For Torah interpreters since the destruction of the Temple, such questions have constantly been asked and imaginatively answered. Sometimes a commentator will find a word or phrase describing a ritual of the sacrifice that calls to mind a significant moral lesson or symbolizes an important truth about human life. At other times, a command about an offering will remind a commentator of another statement or description in the biblical tradition, and, in exploring the meaning of both, new insights are born.

Several examples of finding, or even inventing, meanings from what seems like obsolete and irrelevant descriptions of ancient rituals are presented below.

Example One: Rabbi Levi, who lived during the third century, pointed out that the word *olah*, meaning "burnt offering," can also be read and translated as *alah*, meaning "behave boastfully." Therefore, he argued, the Torah's statements "This is the law concerning the *olah*. It shall go up upon its burning place on the altar . . ." can be understood to mean "This is the law concerning the *alah*, the boastful person. He shall be destroyed by fire."

To prove his point, Rabbi Levi cites several examples of insolence or pretentious behavior that were punished by fire. For instance, Noah's generation suffered the Flood; for their injustice and selfishness, however, they were also punished by fire. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah suffered destruction by fire for their cruel treatment of strangers and their snobbish and arrogant behavior toward one another. (Genesis 19:24) Pharaoh was punished by fire because he boastfully questioned God's power, saying: "Who is the God

that I should heed and let Israel go [from Egypt]?" (Exodus 5:2)

By reading the word *alah* for *olah*, Rabbi Levi avoids dealing with a discussion of the "burnt offering" and focuses instead upon the dangers of acting in a boastful, self-centered, and prideful way. The haughty or arrogant person, he declares, will ultimately end up as a burnt sacrifice on his or her own altar. (*Leviticus Rabbah* 7:6)

Example Two: Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, known as the "Lubavitcher Rebbe" (b.1902), teaches that the sanctuary built by the Jewish people in the desert symbolizes the sanctuary that is inside every Jew. Just as the sanctuary has an inner and outer altar, so each Jew, Schneerson writes, possesses a "surface personality" and an "essential core."

When the Torah says "The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out . . ." it is referring, not only to the duty of the priest to keep the altar of the sanctuary burning, but also to the way in which one practices Jewish tradition. "It is not a private possession to be cherished subconsciously," argues Rabbi Schneerson. "It must show in the face a person sets towards the world."

Using the symbol of the continually burning fire on the altar, Schneerson stresses that a Jew must be "involved," bringing life and fire to the three aspects of Jewish existence: (1) to the learning of Torah, (2) to prayer, and (3) to the practice of charity.

"Words of Torah," he comments, "should be spoken with fire. . . . They should penetrate every facet of a person's being." In other words, learning must not be dull exercise but a way of filling each person with a desire to practice the wisdom, ethics, and traditions of Torah. One's prayer must be done not as a routine but as an expression of love for God and appreciation of the world created by God. In practicing the mitzvah of *tzadakah*, or "charity," it is not enough to provide money and services for the poor and sick. One must do it "with an inner warmth that manifests itself outwardly," providing an example for others. In all these ways, "the fire on the altar will be kept burning." (*Likutei Sichot*, Vol. I, Lubavitch Foundation, London, 1975-1985, pp. 217-219)

Example Three: The Yiddish commentator Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi, author of *Tze'enah*

u-Re'elah, notes that the Torah commands that the *olah*, or "burnt offering," and the *chatat*, or "sin offering," be sacrificed on the same altar. "Why," he asks, "are these two sacrifices to be made at the same place?"

He answers his own question by declaring that "the Torah teaches us not to embarrass people."

The "burnt offering" is brought by one who is guilty of sinful thoughts. Perhaps that person coveted something belonging to someone else or thought about cheating or stealing from another person. A "sin offering" is a sacrifice brought by someone who has actually committed a wrongdoing.

The Torah, says Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi, commands that both should offer their sacrifices in the same place so no one will know the difference between the person who has sinned in thought and the person who has sinned in deed. In this way, embarrassment is avoided. No one can point an accusing finger and say, "There is a thief."

By calling attention to the detail of how the two sacrifices were to be offered, Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi emphasizes a significant ethical lesson. It is forbidden to humiliate or shame another person. (*Tze'elah u-Re'elah: The Classic Anthology of Torah Lore and Midrashic Commentary, Tzav*, Miriam Stark Zakon, translator, Mesorah Publications Ltd. in conjunction with Hillel Press, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1983, p. 573)

Example Four: Rabbi Meir, a leading teacher in the Land of Israel during the second century, studied the Torah's command about offering sacrifices: "These are the rituals of the burnt offering, the meal offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the offering of ordination, and the peace offering." He pointed out that the peace offering is mentioned last and concluded that this was not by accident. By mentioning the *zevach shelamim*, or "peace offering," last, Rabbi Meir taught, the Torah emphasizes the importance of *shalom*, or "peace."

"Great is peace," he told his students. "For the sake [of peace] a person may suffer humiliation."

The story is told of a woman who was fond of listening to Rabbi Meir teach his students. Once, when the rabbi's lesson lasted a long time, she was late in returning to her home. Angrily her

husband asked, "Where have you been?" When she told him she had been listening to Rabbi Meir's lesson, he refused to believe her, saying: "I will not allow you into this house until you have spit in Rabbi Meir's face!"

Friends of the couple, who learned what had happened, suggested they go with her for counsel to Rabbi Meir.

When Rabbi Meir heard what happened, he said to the wife, "I have a favor to ask. Since the time you left my lesson, I have developed a serious eye infection that can be cured only with the spital of your mouth. Therefore, please spit in my eye seven times." After the woman had done as Rabbi Meir requested, he told her, "Now go and be reconciled with your husband. Say to him, 'I have spit in Rabbi Meir's eye.'"

After the woman left, Rabbi Meir said to his students, "Great is peace. You may suffer shame to make peace between friends, between a wife and husband." (*Leviticus Rabbah* 9:9)

Rabbi Meir, and other rabbis of his time, taught that "peace is the culmination of all blessings," the most important pursuit for human beings. For the rabbis, the fact that the Torah mentioned the *zevach shelamim*, or "peace-offering," after all the other sacrifices was proof of their claim.

Parashat Tzav, with all of its details of the sacrifices offered in the ancient sanctuary and in the Jerusalem Temple, presents Jewish teachers with a crucial challenge. How do you find meaning or relevant messages in obsolete ritual practices?

The challenge is a serious one. And, as we have seen from the examples above, it was answered with creative imagination and innovation. Sometimes in their study of the details of the sacrifices, the commentators suggest a new meaning by altering a word like *olah* to *alah* or by making an analogy between the altars of the sanctuary and those within each human being. Other interpreters suggest lessons by noting the coincidence of two offerings made in the identical place or by calling attention to the order in which the Torah lists the sacrifices.

All of these creative devices of interpretation were used to uncover significant ethical messages to be passed on from generation to generation. No part of the Torah was ever considered obsolete. Through imagination and inventiveness it

would yield important lessons. The challenge to commentators was to seek out the meanings of Torah and to reveal its gems.

PEREK BET: *The Holiness of Blood*

Jewish tradition forbids the eating of blood. *Parashat Tzav* contains the commandment: "And you must not consume any blood, either of bird or of animal, in any of your settlements." (Leviticus 7:26) This prohibition against eating blood also appears in Leviticus 3:17, in 17:14, and later in Deuteronomy 12:23.

Do not eat the blood

And if any Israelite or any stranger who resides among them hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life [soul] of all flesh—its blood is its life. Therefore, I say to the Israelite people: You shall not eat of the blood of any flesh, for the life [soul] of all flesh is its blood. (Leviticus 17:13–14)

The early rabbis who interpreted the Torah's prohibition against eating blood developed a number of methods for slaughtering and removing the blood of animals: The knife used is to be razor sharp and perfectly smooth without any nicks or dents so as to cause as little suffering to the animal as possible. The blood spilled at the moment of slaughter is to be poured on a bed of dust and to be covered with the dust and buried. After the slaughter, the blood is to be removed from the meat by soaking it for a half hour and by salting it for one hour. Then the meat is rinsed and ready for cooking. One may also remove the blood by broiling the meat. (Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot*, pp. 168–169)

Why this unusual attention to blood? Why does Jewish tradition forbid the eating of blood?

Most commentators agree there are two reasons for the Torah's prohibitions against eating blood. The first has to do with the common use of blood by pagan cults. In pagan ceremonies the blood of animals was eaten in the belief that it would provide strength or healing from sickness. At times

such ceremonies also included the offering of human blood in hope that it would satisfy thirsty demons who, it was believed, might cause harm. Early Jewish tradition rejected such ritual practices as dangerous and misleading.



Rambam (Maimonides)

Philosopher and commentator Moses Maimonides discusses the Torah's prohibition against eating blood in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. He explains that pagans believed that, by collecting the blood of animals and placing it in pots and bowls, the spirits would come and dine with them. These spirits would even appear to them in dreams revealing the future or reward them with good luck.

Maimonides argues that the Torah "seeks to cure humanity of such idolatry . . . and to do away with such misconceptions." For that reason, it forbids the eating of blood.



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides disagrees with Maimonides and offers a second reason for the rule against eating blood. Pointing to the Torah's statement that "the soul of all life is its blood," Nachmanides argues that, while God permits human beings to eat the flesh of other creatures for nourishment and to use the blood of specified creatures for atonement, all blood is forbidden for eating because "all souls belong to God." In other words, one must consider blood as sacred because it contains the soul given by God to all creatures.

Having made the point that human beings are forbidden to eat blood because it is a "sacred container of the soul," Nachmanides adds a curious observation out of the medieval medicine of his times. "It is well known," he writes, "that the food that one takes into the body becomes a part of the flesh." Therefore, if one eats the blood of a lower animal, "the result would be a thickening

and coarseness of the human soul . . . thus combining the human soul with the animal soul.” (Comments on Leviticus 17:11)

Nachmanides’ belief that eating the blood of animals might have the effect of making a person more “animallike,” of decreasing human sensitivity, intellect, and powers of understanding, was common in his day. While modern science rejects such a view, there are many vegetarians who maintain that the eating of blood does have psychological significance. They refuse to eat meat, not only because they are opposed to slaughtering animals, but also because they believe that such “slaughter” has a brutalizing effect upon human beings.

A vegetarian speaks

Early in my life I came to the conclusion that there was no basic difference between man and animals. If a man has the heart to cut the throat of a chicken or a calf, there’s no reason he should not be willing to cut the throat of a man. (Isaac Bashevis Singer)



Leibowitz

According to Nehama Leibowitz, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the famed Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel just before the establishment of the Jewish state, held such a view. He taught that the eating of meat was “a temporary dispensation given to humanity, which has not yet reached the stage of overcoming its murderous instincts.” For Rabbi Kook, eating meat or blood was a sign of human cruelty, proof that human beings were still primitive. Commenting on Kook’s view, Leibowitz writes that the rabbi believed “human beings must slowly be trained to show mercy to their own kind and ultimately to the rest of the animal creation.” Refusing to eat blood or meat was a means of furthering such an education in sensitivity and reverence for life. (*Studies in Vayikra*, p.55)

Rabbi Kook’s view as presented by Nehama Leibowitz is close to the opinions of Rabbis Sam-

uel H. Dresner and Seymour Siegel in their discussion in *The Jewish Dietary Laws* (Burning Bush Press, New York, 1959). Commenting on the prohibition against eating blood, they write: “There is no clearer visible symbol of life than blood. To spill blood is to bring death. To inject blood is often to save life. The removal of blood . . . *kashrut* (the laws of slaughtering animals for food) teaches is one of the most powerful means of making us constantly aware of the concession and compromise that the whole act of eating meat, in reality, is. Again, it teaches us reverence for life.” (p. 29)

The Torah’s rule against eating blood because it contains the sacred essence of life—the soul—demonstrates the high value Jewish tradition places upon each human and animal life. When blood is spilled, either at the altar as part of the ritual of atonement or in the process of slaughtering for food, the blood is gathered and buried. It is treated with respect. Through such practices, human beings were to learn that blood is synonymous with life, and life, like blood, is sacred.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Interpreters of Torah sought to find new meanings in ancient and obsolete rituals and even in the language used by the Torah. For example, Rashi notes that the words “And God spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Command Aaron and his sons . . .’” (Leviticus 6:1,2) might also be understood as “*Urge* Aaron and his sons. . . .” What is the distinction between “command” and “urge”? Which word do you believe is the more effective in getting something accomplished? Why?
2. Many interpreters of Torah notice that the duties of the priests are very ordinary and menial. The priests clean the altar every morning. They carry the ashes to a special place outside the camp. Some commentators have asked if there is an important lesson here. Could it be that the most important religious deeds are to be found in the most ordinary and even menial tasks? What are some other examples?

3. Author Isaac Bashevis Singer was once asked why he was a vegetarian. He answered, "Because it's good for the animals." Is it also *good* for human beings? For the global environment?
4. Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz stresses that the rule against consuming blood teaches human beings to curb their violent instincts and tames their tendency toward bloodshed. Do you agree? Why?