



Parashat Vayikra
Korbanot in Tanach
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The book of Vayikra begins with an in-depth excursion into the laws surrounding the *korbanot*, or ritual sacrifices. Without any words of transition or introduction, the book opens with an inventory of the various sacrifices and offerings that are brought by the priests in the Temple. The book of Vayikra begins:

And the Lord called unto Moses, and spoke unto him out of the tent of meeting, saying: Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them: When any man of you bring an offering unto the Lord, ye shall bring your offering of the cattle, even of the herd or of the flock. If his offering be an *olah* of the herd, he shall offer it a male without blemish; he shall bring it to the door of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord (1:1-3).

The notion of *korban* was extant in the Torah narrative long before Bnei Yisrael received God's laws at Har Sinai. The story of Kayin's feud with Hevel (Bereshit 4:3-5), Noach's leaving of the ark (ibid. 8:20), Avraham's journey through the land of Canaan (ibid. 12:7) and the binding of Isaac (ibid. 22:2) all make reference to the institution of *korban*. The Torah presents the notion of *korban* as something that is taken for granted and does not need to be explained. Over the centuries, commentators have grappled with the meaning and motivation behind the Torah's *korbanot* - an insight the Torah never seems to divulge.

The first three chapters of Parashat Vayikra are dedicated to the description of three different types of *korbanot* and the different procedural forms that each of these *korbanot* can take. The *korbanot* are the *olah*, *mincha* and the *zevach ha'shelamim*. At this juncture, the Torah says nothing about the circumstances that would require an individual to bring such a *korban*. With regard to the *olah*, the Torah teaches that it can be taken from sheep, goats or certain birds, the *mincha* (flour offering) can be prepared with the various recipes described, and the *zevach ha'shelamim* can take the form of a lamb or goat sacrifice. The specific circumstances that require each of these *korbanot* to be brought are scattered throughout the books of Vayikra and Devarim. In the first chapter of Hilchot Maaseh Hakorbanot, HaRambam gives a thorough list of all the circumstances that require a *korban* be brought in the Temple.

The tone and structure of this week's parasha undergo a dramatic shift in the fourth chapter:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: Speak unto the children of Israel, saying: If any one shall sin through error, in any of the things which the Lord hath commanded not to be done, and shall do any one of them: if the high priest shall sin so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer for his sin, which he hath sinned, a young bullock without blemish unto the Lord for a *chatat* (4:1-3).

For the first time, a *korban* is presented in the context of the reason for which the *korban* is brought. With regard to the *korban chatat* the Torah explains it is brought: "if any one shall sin through

error.” The Torah then goes on to enumerate different types of people who may sin and would be required to bring a *korban chatat*. The first example of a person who would be required to bring a *chatat* for an unintentional sin is the high priest (4:3).

The position of the high priest is the most exclusive and exalted position in Jewish society. Additionally, the high priest resides over the priestly administration as a whole, including all the sacrifices and rituals brought in the Temple. It is remarkable that the book of Vayikra, filled with the rituals of the Temple service, begins with an unequivocal recognition of the fallibility and culpability of the high priest. The possibility of his errancy is taken for granted and the circumstance of failing is taken into account. The case of the sinning high priest is followed with additional circumstances of unintentional sin:

And if the whole congregation of Israel shall err, the thing being hid from the eyes of the assembly, and do any of the things which the Lord hath commanded not to be done, and are guilty: when the sin wherein they have sinned is known, then the assembly shall offer a young bullock for a *chatat*, and bring it before the tent of meeting. (4:13-14).

And:

When a ruler sins, and doeth through error any one of all the things which the Lord his God hath commanded not to be done, and is guilty: if his sin, wherein he hath sinned, be known to him, he shall bring for his offering a goat, a male without blemish. (4:22-23).

In Tractate Horiyot, Chazal explain these two cases. The case of “the whole congregation” erring is the case of *bet din shetaah*, where the Jewish high court misleads the entire nation of Israel by making an incorrect ruling in halacha. The “ruler” described in verse twenty-two is none other than the king of Israel, also a fallible human being and also culpable before God. The Tractate of Horiyot is fully devoted to the explication of these cases of unintentional sin.

Horiyot is the last Tractate in the order of Tractates called Nezikin. In the introduction to his commentary on the Mishna, HaRambam addresses Horiyot's placement immediately after the Tractate Avot which (according to HaRambam) is devoted to the subject of how judges are expected to act:

And upon the conclusion of the instructions to judges [Tractate Avot], the sages then speak of their mistakes [Tractate Horiyot] because it is the nature of man that it is impossible that he won't sin. Therefore the Tractate Horiyot was established after the Tractate Avot...

Only after carefully outlining recourse for the sinning of the three highest positions of power in Jewish society, does the Torah outline the recourse for the individual who sins unintentionally:

And if any one of the common people sin through error, in doing any of the things which the Lord hath commanded not to be done, and be guilty: if his sin, which he hath sinned, be known to him, then he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his sin which he hath sinned (4:27-28).

Emerging from this presentation is a message that no individual in Jewish society is above the Jewish law, the halacha. All human beings are fallible and equally accountable before God. Living in a time when we are too often disappointed and disillusioned by the failings of our religious leaders, this message is both relevant and important.

The legal obligation to bring *korbanot* as presented in the Torah, sharply contrasts with the cultural significance they would attain later on in Tanach. The Torah requires the bringing of various individual *korbanot* for different reasons which include sins, holidays, the healing from certain maladies, etc. In addition to the catalog of individual sacrifices, the Torah also requires certain sacrifices be brought on behalf of the entire Jewish community. Of these, the *korban tamid* is brought twice a day, and additional *korbanot* are brought on particular days of the year including Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, holidays and Yom Kippur. The most sacrifices required by the Torah to be brought on behalf of the community on a single day are the two lambs and fourteen cows brought on the first day of the Sukkot Holiday. This sacrificial minimalism of the Torah contrasts with King Solomon's national ceremonies, as described in the book of Melachim I:

And Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father; only he sacrificed and offered in the high places [make shift altars]. And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there; for that was the great high place; a thousand *olot* did Solomon offer upon that altar (3:3-4).

And the king, and all Israel with him, offered sacrifices before the Lord. And Solomon offered for the sacrifice of *zevach hashelamim* which he offered unto the Lord, twenty-two thousand oxen, and a hundred-and-twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the children of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord. The same day did the king hallow the middle of the court that was before the house of the Lord; for there he offered the *olah* and the *mincha*, and the fat of the *shelamim*; because the brazen altar that was before the Lord was too little to receive the *olah*, and the *mincha*, and the fat of the *shelamim* (8:62-64).

Hundreds of years later, in the years leading up to the destruction of the first Temple, the prophets were highly critical of the *korbanot* that Bnei Yisrael were bringing:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me? saith the Lord; I am full of the *olot* of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats (Yeshayahu 1:11).

For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than *olot* (Hoshea 6:6).

The strongest language used by a prophet against the institution of *korbanot* is found in the book of Yirmiyahu:

Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your *olot* unto your sacrifices, and eat meat. For I spoke not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning *olot* or sacrifices; but this thing I commanded them, saying: 'Hearken unto My voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be My people; and walk ye in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.' (7:21-23)

Yirmiyahu goes so far as to say that our sacrifices are completely meaningless since God never commanded them of us. This passage in Yirmiyahu poses a substantial difficulty since the Torah tells us that God did command us of “*olot* and sacrifices” when we were brought out of the land of Egypt. In his Guide to the Perplexed, HaRambam address this question:

This passage has been found difficult in the opinions of all those whose words I heard or read. They ask, how can Yirmiyahu say that God did not command us about *olot* or sacrifices considering that so many Torah laws refer to them? The explanation of this passage is according to what I will now explain. Jeremiah states that the primary purpose of the precepts is what God says, "Hearken to my voice that I may be your God and you may be My people" (Vayikra 26:12).[In other words He is saying:] The commandments to bring sacrifices and visit the Temple are only for the purpose of leading to that goal; for that goal I transferred these modes of worship to My name, thus blotting out idolatry and firmly establishing the faith of Israel. You have ignored the goal and taken hold of the means... (3:32).

HaRambam explains that the sacrificial rites described in this week's parasha do not form the substance of our religious commitment, but rather embody a means toward the true knowledge of God and the establishment of a deep and authentic relationship with him. Multitudes of sacrifices are meaningless in the absence of sincere religious struggle and growth. The prophets' message about the *korbanot* should be understood as a metaphor for other ritual aspects of our religious lives. It teaches us that religious observance, fervor and obsessive stringency are worthless in the absence of sincerity, commitment and private devotion.

That the *korban* derives its significance from the individual's relationship with his or her creator and not from the ritual itself is implicit in the Torah's presentation of the *korbanot*. The Torah's silence about the philosophy of *korban* is indicative of the Torah's association with the institution of *korban* as a whole. The Torah's lack of justification for the sacrificial rite reminds us that the significance of *korban* isn't in the ritual alone but in the intangible relationship that we forge through the ritual. David Hamelech's simple prayer reminds us of this profound hope and aspiration:

For Thou do not delight in sacrifice, else would I give it and Thou have no pleasure in *olot*. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not disregard (Psalms 51:18-19).