YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Meir Shpiegelman**

**PARASHAT VAYIKRA**

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Dedicated to Rachel Roytberg z"l,   
whose yahrzeit falls on the first of Nissan,  
by Family Rueff.

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**Ascending and Descending Sacrifices**

*Parashat Vayikra* lists some of the different types of sacrifices, one of which is called an "ascending and descending sacrifice” because it depends on the financial situation of the individual who brings it:

And he shall bring his *asham* (guilt-offering) to the Lord for the sin which he sinned: a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a *chatat* (sin-offering), and the *kohen* shall make atonement for him regarding his sin.

And if his means do not suffice for a lamb, then he shall bring [as] his guilt-offering for having sinned: two turtledoves, or two young pigeons, to the Lord, one for a sin-offering and the other for a burnt offering…

And if his means do not suffice for two turtledoves or two young pigeons, then he shall bring [as] his sacrifice for having sinned: the tenth part of an *efa* of fine flour for a sin-offering; he shall put no oil upon it, neither shall he put frankincense upon it, for it is a sin-offering. (*Vayikra* 5:6-11)

However, if we look carefully at the rest of the sacrifices listed in our *parasha*, we see that in fact they could all be defined as "ascending and descending sacrifices." Not all of them vary in accordance with the individual's financial situation, but they all vary in accordance with some yardstick or other:

The sin-offering (*chatat*) is clearly an "ascending and descending" sacrifice, with the type of animal that is offered depending on the identity of the sinner (*Vayikra* 4): if the *kohen gadol* or the community as a whole commits a sin, they must bring an ox; the *nasi* (leader) brings a goat for his sin; and an individual who sinned brings a female goat or a female lamb.

The guilt-offering (*asham*) may similarly be regarded as an "ascending and descending" offering. The Torah stipulates that it must be "according to your valuation in silver by shekels, after the shekel of the Sanctuary, for a guilt-offering” (*Vayikra* 5:15). The meaning of this phrase is not entirely clear. *Chazal* explain that the term "*shekalim*" (in the plural) indicates the smallest number that is a plural – i.e., two. Hence, one cannot bring a guilt-offering that is worth less than two silver *shekalim* (as Rashi explains, ad loc.)

However, the phrase can also be understood differently. At the end of *Sefer* *Vayikra* (Chapter 27), the Torah teaches the laws of valuations (*arakhin*) and establishes that there are different monetary values attached people of different ages.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, it may be that the value of a guilt-offering also varies in accordance with the person’s age. If this is so, it is clear why the Torah does not state the amount of the guilt-offering explicitly – because there is no one amount for everybody.

We can find support for this comparison by comparing the phrasing in our *parasha* with that in *Parashat Korach*, concerning the redemption of the firstborn:

When a person commits a trespass and sin unintentionally, regarding any of the holy things of the Lord, then he shall bring his guilt-offering to the Lord – a blemish-less ram out of the flock, **according to your valuation in silver, [by] shekels, after the shekel of the Sanctuary**, for a guilt-offering. (*Vayikra* 5:15)

And their redemption [price] – you shall redeem [them] from a month old – shall be, **according to your valuation in silver, five shekels, after the shekel of the Sanctuary**; this is twenty *gera*. (*Bamidbar* 18:16)

The Torah uses the same expression in both places – except that the sum is not specified in our *parasha*, since it varies depending on the person involved.

It emerges from the above that there are actually three types of “ascending and descending” sacrifices: the sin-offering, which depends on the sinner’s identity; the “ascending and descending” sacrifice, which depends on the sinner’s financial situation; and the guilt-offering, which depends on the sinner’s age. Let us, then, try to understand the significance of the differences between the sacrifices.

**Sin-offering**

The sin-offering depends on the individual’s social standing. The reason for this seems obvious: the more important a person’s social position, the more serious the ramifications of his sin; therefore, it makes sense that different sacrifices are required for individuals holding different public positions. Regarding the *kohen gadol*, the Torah states explicitly: “If the anointed *kohen* sins, *bringing guilt upon the people*…” (*Vayikra* 4:3). A sin on the part of the general public is by definition a public matter (whether it originates with the public or with the Sanhedrin instructing the public how to act), and the sin of a *nasi* is likewise a public matter. We conclude, then, that particular sin-offerings are to be brought for sins that have particular ramifications for the collective.

The Torah does not list the sins for which a sin-offering is to be brought, but *Chazal* taught (Mishna *Keritot* 2a) that all transgressions that are punishable by *karet* if performed willfully (*be-meizid*) require a sin-offering if performed unintentionally (*be-shogeg*). In view of what we have said, this rule makes perfect sense: the punishment of “*karet*” is described in multiple places in the Torah as a severance of the individual from the framework of the Jewish People: “and that soul shall be cut off from its people.” If a transgression is performed by mistake (*shogeg*), it does not mean that the individual is completely blameless; rather, he bears partial responsibility (since he was not sufficiently careful, or some other reason). *Chazal* teach that even when a person performs, “*be-shogeg*,” a transgression whose punishment is *karet* – he is “severed” from the Jewish People: the sin creates a barrier between the individual and the nation, and the sin-offering repairs the spiritual effects of that sin and removes the barrier. Since the relationship between the individual and the nation varies depending on the nature of one’s public role, the sin-offering ascends and descends accordingly, in keeping with the sinner’s public status.

**Sprinkling the blood of the sin-offering on the altar**

The sin-offering is unique among all the sacrifices in terms of the procedure for its blood. For all other sacrifices, the procedure for placing the blood on the altar is the same: generally, it is placed on the altar all around; for sacrifices of the firstborn, tithes, and the *korban pesach*, it need only touch the altar, not surround it.[[2]](#footnote-2) What is interesting about the sin-offerings in our *parasha* is that they involve a double placing of blood on the altar: their blood is to be sprinkled on the horns of the altar, but it must also be poured on the base of the altar (*Vayikra* 4:34). Reading further in the text, we find that other sin-offerings also involve a dual placing of blood: the blood of the internal sin-offerings (*Vayikra* 8:15) is sprinkled inside the Sanctuary, but must also be poured at the base of the altar. And so too when the sin-offering is a bird (*Vayikra* 5:9), some of its blood is to be sprinkled on the wall of the altar, and the rest is to be poured on the base of the altar.

The only sin-offerings that do not include an explicit command to pour the blood at the base of the altar are the internal sin-offerings brought on Yom Kippur (*Vayikra* 16:15, 19). In fact, their blood is also poured at the base of the altar, since it is sanctified and therefore cannot be disposed of like refuse; however, the fact that the Torah does not mention this explicitly shows that pouring the blood of these sacrifices on the base of the altar is a purely technical solution, not a matter of principle as in the other cases. We shall therefore try to resolve the two questions that have arisen: first, why the sin-offering is uniquely characterized by a dual placing of blood, and second, why there is no need for this on Yom Kippur.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In general, the Torah does not explain the purpose of each instance of sprinkling blood. Only once is an explanation given: as part of the consecration of the altar for the sacrificial service, during the seven days of “*miluim*,” the Torah offers the following dual explanation:

And when [the bull of the sin-offering] was slain, Moshe took the blood and put it upon the horns of the altar round about with his finger, and **purified the altar**; and he poured the blood at the base of the altar and **sanctified it, to make atonement for it**.” (*Vayikra* 8:15)

The placing of the blood upon the horns of the altar is meant to *purify* the altar; pouring the blood at the base is meant to *sanctify* the altar, to make atonement for it.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The significance of the sin-offering (*chatat*)**

What is the meaning of the word *chatat*? Contrary to popular belief (and despite the translation used throughout this *shiur*), it cannot be a derivation of the word *chet* (sin), since there is a *dagesh forte* in the letter *tet*. It seems more likely that the word is related to the concept of *chitui*, meaning purification or cleansing. Indeed, there are “*chatat*” offerings that are not necessarily related to sin. Examples include all those that are part of the purification process for someone who is in a state of *tum’a* (ritual impurity), such as a woman who has recently given birth, or even the sacrifice brought by someone who has been afflicted with *tzara’at*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It seems that the purpose of the *chatat* sacrifice is to purify and to make ready. Anything that enters a certain framework must first be purified and made ready. The *chatat* is not necessarily related to sin; rather, it concerns the fact that the person is entering a new framework that requires a certain process of preparation.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this sense, “*chatat*” and “*chitui*” are closer to the concept of consecration than to the erasing of a specific sin. When the altar is prepared so that sacrifices can be brought upon it, a *chatat* must be offered on it. When a certain sin has caused a negative situation, and a person wants to extricate himself from that situation, he must bring a *chatat* (which extracts him from his negative state, but does not address the sin).[[7]](#footnote-7) Hence, who became ritually impure and was removed from the camp must bring a *chatat* (even though he committed no sin), in order to deal with his negative state (impurity) and prepare him to return to the camp. This is the meaning of the pouring of the blood at the base of the altar (which is common to all *chatat* sacrifices): it makes atonement for the person by addressing his negative state.

The special *chatat* sacrifices on Yom Kippur have a different role: on Yom Kippur, the *chatat* sacrifices repair the Sanctuary, which has become “impure” or “defiled” through the sins of Bnei Yisrael:

And he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of Bnei Yisrael, and because of their transgressions, for all of their sins; and so shall he do for the Tent of Meeting which dwells with them in the midst of their impurities… And he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord, and make atonement for it… and he shall purify it, and sanctify it from the impurities of Bnei Yisrael.” (*Vayikra* 16:16-19)

The Torah emphasizes explicitly that the role of the *chatat* offerings on Yom Kippur is to make atonement for the *Mishkan* and the *Ohel Moed*, which have become defiled because of the sins of Bnei Yisrael. The atonement for Bnei Yisrael is not achieved by means of the internal *chatat* offerings, but rather through the goat that is sent to Azazel. There is therefore no need for the blood of the internal *chatat* offerings of Yom Kippur to be poured at the base of the altar, since they atone not for people but for the altar itself.

The purpose of placing the blood on the horns of the altar is to purify/cleanse it. As we have seen, this role is similar to the role of the *chatat* offerings on Yom Kippur – except that on Yom Kippur, the emphasis is on the *Mishkan* and the altar, while in the *chatat* offerings in our *parasha*, the emphasis is on the individual who has sinned. The main purpose of these *chatat* offerings is to repair damage to the *Mishkan*: when a person sins, the Divine Presence in the *Mishkan* is impaired; to repair it, the altar must be purified by placing the blood upon its horns. Clearly, God’s Presence in the *Mishkan* affects not only the sinner who impacted it but also the spiritual state of the entire nation. Therefore, the sinner has harmed all of *Am Yisrael*, not only himself, and must bring a *chatat* offering, which varies in keeping with his public status, to repair the gap that has opened between himself and the rest of the nation.

**Guilt-offering (*asham*)**

To a certain extent, the meaning of the guilt-offering is the opposite of the meaning of the *chatat*: the guilt-offering is indeed meant to erase the guilt of the individual, not to repair the *Mishkan*. According to the above, the main role of the *chatat* is to repair the *Mishkan*, while atonement for the individual – achieved by pouring the blood at the base of the altar – is secondary. The *asham*, in contrast, erases the sin and exempts the individual from bearing its results.

As we have seen, a plain reading of the text suggests that the value of the *asham* varies in accordance with the age of the sinner. Throughout the Torah, a person’s “value” is determined in accordance with his age – the only objective scale that could serve this purpose. Since the *asham* is a sacrifice whose purpose is to make atonement for the individual, its value varies depending on the “value” of the individual.

**Ascending and descending sacrifice**

The only sacrifice that is referred to by *Chazal* as an “ascending and descending sacrifice” is the one described in Chapter 5 of *Vayikra*, in our *parasha*. The reason *Chazal* reserve this name for this particular sacrifice is that it is the only one that is determined (partly) at the discretion of the owner: a poor person may choose to bring the sacrifice stipulated for a wealthy person.

All the sins for which an “ascending and descending” offering is brought are sins involving two stages: the person first performs an act that is not problematic in and of itself, but then he does (or fails to do) something else, which constitutes the sin. Examples include someone who makes a vow but then fails to fulfill it, a person who becomes ritually impure and then fails to undertake the purification required,[[8]](#footnote-8) and one who takes the oath for witnesses but then fails to give his testimony.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The difference between an animal sacrifice and a fowl or *mincha* sacrifice is not only the price of the sacrifice, but also the nature of the atonement that it achieves. The *chatat* that is an animal involves pouring blood at the base of the altar and on its horns; the *chatat* that is a bird does not involve placing blood on the horns of the altar; and a *mincha* (meal offering]) involves no blood at all. The “ascending and descending” sacrifice teaches us an amazing lesson: when it comes to certain sins, where there are financial constraints, one may suffice with a lower level of atonement. Unlike the *chatat*, where the different sacrifices reflect transgressions of differing levels of severity, there is no difference between the sin of a rich person and the sin of a poor person, and therefore a pauper may, if he so chooses, bring the sacrifice required of a rich person. Nevertheless, if he is unable to bring an animal sacrifice, he may suffice with a fowl or *mincha* offering – “and the *kohen* shall make atonement for him with regard to the sin which he sinned… and he shall be forgiven.”

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. In fact, even within this unit, each value is "ascending and descending" since the Torah states explicitly that if the person is destitute ("But if he is too poor for your valuation…," *Vayikra* 27:8), he may be able to pay a lower amount. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These three sacrifices are a category on their own, since they are not meant to be consumed on the altar but are eaten by their owners. The placing of the blood on the altar is required merely to turn the animal into a sacrifice, and therefore the Torah suffices with a minimal placement. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We will not address here the question of whether the altar upon which the blood is sprinkled on Yom Kippur is the outer altar or the altar of burnt offerings. I hope to address this question in a different *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The words “and sanctified it, to make atonement for it” may be meant as a summary of the process of sanctifying the altar, rather than referring specifically to the pouring of the blood at the base. However, as we shall see below, the division into two distinct purposes helps clarify the different sprinklings of the blood for different sin-offerings. In addition, the verse appears to be symmetrical, providing an explanation for each of the offerings of blood. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Even if *tzara’at* is caused by sin, it is clear that there is no connection between the sacrifice and the sin, since nowhere is there any mention of an obligation to bring a sacrifice for speaking *lashon ha-ra*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Ramban’s explanation for the sacrifice of the nazir (*Bamidbar* 6:14) may be similar. In his view, this sacrifice is not brought for any sin that the *nazir* committed, but rather for the fact that he now wishes to give up his nazirite status. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This may be compared to someone who falls ill and grows weak. He now faces a dual challenge: he must deal with the illness, and he must also deal with his weakness. Similarly, someone who has sinned must deal both with his sin and with the negative situation in which he is mired as a result of it. The *chatat* does not address the sin itself; it addresses the resultant negative situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There is room for debate as to whether one is obligated to bring a sacrifice only if he entered the Sanctuary while in a state of impurity, or whether he is obligated after any instance of becoming ritually impure. See David Hanschke’s article on the subject in *Megadim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Indeed, the Torah does not require an “ascending and descending” sacrifice for an oath taken regarding an article deposited for safekeeping, since the prohibition in that scenario is the actual taking of the oath; there is no two-stage transgression. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)