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Parashat Vayiqra Part II The Five Basic Categories of Sacrifices

This study is a discussion of the five basic categories of sacrifices that are described in Leviticus 1–7. It will focus on name derivations and the prominent characteristics of each and include some general remarks on sacrifices.

1. *'Olah:* “ascend.” The distinctive feature of this sacrifice is that it was completely incinerated on the altar (excluding the hide, which was given to the officiating priest), thus often translated as burnt offering. It may have been called *'olah* in the Torah because all of it ascended the altar. Or, more likely, its name may reflect the fact that in the rising smoke it entirely “ascended” to G-d. It was the first class of sacrifice recorded in Leviticus (1:3 ff.), undoubtedly because it was all given to G-d. An *'olah* was optional for an individual except when undergoing the purification process for certain conditions (the skin diseases of *sara'at* and unnatural genital flows) and for the Nazirite. The sages posited that one should volunteer an *'olah* to atone for those unintentional transgressions for which a sacrifice was not mandated.

An *'olah* could be brought from the herd (bovine) or from the flock (sheep or goats), but it had to be male. Perhaps because it is completely given to G-d it should represent the prominence widely associated with strength and vigor. A dove or pigeon could also be presented as an *'olah*. In those cases it could be of either gender, a leniency perhaps related to the generally understood assumption that birds were an option for the poor. The daily communal sacrifices of one animal from the flock each morning and one each afternoon, as well as the two extra sacrifices from the flock on the Sabbath day were *'olot*. The sacrifices for all festivals and the New Moon were mostly *'olot* (Num. 28-29). When an *'olah* and another sacrifice were prescribed for an occasion, the *'olah* was usually offered first.

2. *Minḥa:* “tributary gift” to G-d. This term was widely used in diplomatic contexts to signify a tributary gift from a dependent to a superior. Elsewhere in Scripture, it was applied to sacrificial gifts to G-d of both agricultural produce and animals (Gen. 4:3-4; 1 Sam. 2:15-17), implying acknowledgment of His sovereignty. In legislation of specifically sacrificial content, however, a *minḥa* refers exclusively to a grain offering.

Since the *minḥa* was elaborated immediately following the *'olah* (Lev. 2:1 ff.), the sages have taken it as a category of offering that was the common man’s substitute for an *'olah* (*b. Menah.* 110a). An individual of modest means who desired to present an offering at the sanctuary had an option. This would be somewhat similar to the measure-of-flour option the Torah prescribed for the indigent in place of an animal for *ḥattat* (Lev. 5:11). That this concept is not explicitly mentioned with the *minḥa* as it is with the *ḥattat* may reflect the intention not to minimize the value of the *minḥa* and to maintain a degree of equality between donors of both. It may also have been intended to create an aura of equivalence between animal and grain offerings, thus promoting the widespread substitution of the latter for the former. Concerning *ḥattat*, however, because it was a mandatory offering, the option for the poor had to be explicitly stated.

Generally, a *minḥa* comprised choice wheat flour (*solet*) with olive oil mixed in and some frankincense spice (*lebona*) added. It could be offered raw, oven-baked or fried. If oven-baked, it could be a thick or thin preparation; if fried, it could be prepared either on a griddle or in a pan. These offerings had to be unleavened. A fistful was burnt on the sacrificial altar, and the remainder eaten by male priests within sanctuary precincts. Leviticus 6 mandates that a priest’s own *minḥa* is to be completely burnt, perhaps

to ensure that a priest did not profit from his own offering.

Following several general laws (which we summarized at the end of our *Vayiqra Part I* study), the *minḥa* section concludes with instructions for presenting *minḥat bikurim* (offerings of first fruits). In contrast to the varieties of *minḥa* previously listed in the section, which were all specified to be from *solet*, the latter term is not mentioned with *minḥat bikurim*. This is an especially telling detail given that the word *solet* had not been mentioned for seven verses. Also, the *minḥat bikurim* was prescribed to be offered “parched in fire” (not ground into flour). The sages identified it with the communal *omer* offering of Leviticus 23:10, presented as parched sheaves brought from the first barley of the new harvest, the earliest-ripening grain in Israel. Ibn Ezra, partly basing himself on the opening word *וְאִם* (“and if”), implying a voluntary offering, understood it to refer to an individual’s private first-fruit offering of barley.

3a. *Shelamim*: from *shalem* or *shalom*. This is the third category elaborated (3:1 ff.). There are many interpretations of the *shelamim* designation that reflect the various meanings its root word has. Each interpretation connotes a different motive the donor may have had to bring this sacrifice. Perhaps *shelamim* expressed one’s sense of personal well-being, and his appreciation of it, before G-d. Perhaps it reflected the donor’s desire for wholeheartedness with G-d. It may have been intended to be a gift of greeting to G-d, tendered upon arriving to visit Him. Some take it as referring to completeness in the sense of inclusiveness because the altar, donor and priest all share in it. Some theorize that it was so named because it reflects amity and unity, in that the priest, the donor and the donor’s guests share together in it.

Male or female animals were acceptable for this offering, but not birds. We will proffer an explanation shortly. Except for certain fat and internal organs that were placed on the altar, the remainder, almost the whole animal, was permitted to be eaten. Priests received the breast and the right thigh, and the balance went to the donor. Any ritually pure person was permitted to partake of it, thus allowing the donor to share it with family and friends. Its eating was permitted during the day of the offering, the succeeding night, and the day following.

Eating from it was not restricted to sanctuary precincts. Thus, it was the most common type of sacrifice.

Since a *shelamim* was usually brought to be eaten by the donor and his circle, it is understandable that it could be brought from whichever gender he chose; in a way, he was sanctifying what was to be his meal by first offering the animal on the altar. A bird may not yield the donor a sufficient quantity of food for a dignified meal, thus causing resentment or disappointment, feelings that do not bring honor to the sanctuary program, and may therefore have been excluded from this category.

The frequently used scriptural term *zebah*, which means “the slaughtered” or “the sacrifice,” when used alone usually refers to *shelamim*. Nevertheless, the compound term *zebah shelamim* is attested a number of times in Scripture.

The *todah* or “thanksgiving offering” appears to be best classified as a subdivision of the *shelamim* category. A *todah* had to be accompanied with four types of grain loaves (Talmud: ten loaves of each type [*b. Menah. 77b*]), three of the four unleavened and one leavened. Although within the *shelamim* category, the *todah* was exceptional in that the time frame during which it was permitted to be eaten was limited to the day of its offering and the immediately following night. The laws that required it to have a significant bread accompaniment and that severely restricted the time frame for eating it tended to encourage the donor to invite many people to the celebratory meal to commemorate the occasion for which the thanksgiving was brought. One of each type of bread loaf was *terumah laHashem*, and given to the priest, while the rest were eaten by the donor and his guests. Mandating four types of grain loaves made the repast more appealing.

An individual’s *‘olah*, *minḥa* and *shelamim* (except in several particular cases not referred to in these chapters), were voluntary offerings. Although their names may connote certain purposes or circumstances, and expiation was mentioned in connection with the *‘olah*, the specific reasons why one may choose to bring these offerings are not spelled out. We know that in the ancient Near East there were well-established notions as to when such

offerings were appropriate and at the time of the lawgiving the Israelites undoubtedly had such traditions. But perhaps, in accordance with the view that the Torah intended to minimize the sacrificial cult (see our study *Maimonides on Sacrifices Part I*), it did not formalize such prescriptions in order to weaken the hold sacrifices had over the masses and lessen the appeal of such worship. Indeed, the literary formulations of these categories, together with their subcategories, are all initiated with *וְאִם* (“and if”) and *וְכִּי* (“and when”), indicating that the laws are addressing what is clearly a donor’s free-willed choice to bring a sacrifice.

In Numbers 15, supplementary prescriptions are given for *‘olah* and *shelamim*. They are to be accompanied by a *minḥa* mixed with oil, and by wine libations of specified measures. The mandated sacrifices of firstborn animals, tithed animals, and the *Pesaḥ*, although certain unique laws applied to each, are all considered *shelamim*.

3b. Regarding the *Todah* Sacrifice from Psalms, Ibn Ezra and the Midrash. In Psalm 50, G-d is quoted as saying to Israel:

Not for your *zebahim* will I rebuke you or for your *‘olot*, which are continually before Me. I will not take from your property a bull...a he-goat...for Mine are...the animals of thousands of mountains...for Mine is the world and its fullness...Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of he-goats? Sacrifice a *todah* offering...then call upon Me in the day of distress...I will rescue you and you shall honor Me. (Ps. 50:8-15)

The end of the psalm states: “He who sacrifices a *todah* honors Me” (v. 23). The thanksgiving offering, which is an expression of gratitude to G-d for His favorable intervention and which entails a celebration with others thus spreading the word of His care and compassion, is a most praiseworthy endeavor.

On verse 8 of that psalm, Ibn Ezra comments: “[G-d’s statement] ‘I will not rebuke you if you do not offer Me *zebahim* and *‘olot*,’ is as elaborated in Jeremiah, when Hashem said, ‘add your *‘olot* to your *zebahim* and eat the meat thereof (Jer. 7:21).” That passage, in the context of G-d chastising Israel,

continues: “For I spoke not unto your fathers...on the day that I brought them forth from the land of Egypt, concerning *‘olah* or *zabah*. But just...hearken to My voice that I may be your G-d and you may be My people, and that you shall go in the path that I command you” (Jer. 7:22-23).

In the following psalm, Psalm 51, after expressing regret for his iniquity, the psalmist says to G-d: “For You do not want a *zabah*, else I would give it...an *‘olah* You do not desire; true sacrifice to G-d is a humbled spirit; a humbled and crushed heart, G-d, You will not despise” (Ps. 51:18-19). In the concluding verse of that psalm (21), G-d is described as accepting *zibḥe sedeq*, *‘olah* and *khalil* (sacrifices offered in righteousness, the burnt offering and whole offering). That the latter verse should not contradict the preceding verses and the prior psalm, Ibn Ezra defines *zabah* of 51:18 as “a sin-offering” and *zibḥe sedeq* of verse 21 as *shelamim* (related to the *todah* offering, the most prominent of the *shelamim*), while the *‘olah* he limits to the daily *tamid*, thus differentiating it from the other *‘olot* and sin-offerings of verses 18-19. Ibn Ezra interprets the term *khalil* (complete), also cited as desirous by G-d, as referring to the priest’s grain offering of Leviticus 6:15-16, which in the latter context is described as *kalil*. The difficulties are evident, and it appears that Ibn Ezra’s explanation requires some tweaking, but the point is that ultimately G-d desires a very limited number of sacrifices.

The sages, supported by these psalms, deemed the thanksgiving offering, as well as thanksgiving prayers in general, so special that they accorded them singular and extraordinary praise. They proclaimed: “In the time to come (*לְעֵתֵיךָ לְבוֹא*) all sacrifices will be annulled except for that of the thanksgiving, which will never be annulled, and all prayers will be annulled (perhaps: become unnecessary) except for the thanksgiving prayer, which will never be annulled” (*Lev. Rab.* 9:7; 27:12; *Tanḥ. Emor* 14; *Midrash Tehillim*, Buber ed. on 56:13; *Yalqut Shimoni* on Neh. 12:31).

The vigor with which the sages interpreted sacrifices as ultimately dispensable, despite their great efforts in elaborating their details, was surely influenced by the prophets who consistently railed against their misconstrual and complained about their serving as

diversions from the values of righteousness and justice. The scriptural vision of a tranquil society that mankind could ultimately reach undoubtedly played a role. In Genesis, the Garden of Eden was described as a totally vegetarian habitat. Isaiah, in his allegories, views the future in such terms: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf and the beast of prey and the fatling together, with a little boy to herd them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; And the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw” (Isa. 11:6-7, NJPS). Other aspects of this topic will be discussed in our study *Maimonides on Sacrifices, Part I*.

4. *Hattat*: “sin-offering” or “purgative.” This sacrifice is designed to provide atonement to an individual for an unintentional transgression; with few exceptions that we will discuss shortly, the Torah innovated that a sacrifice does not atone for an intentional transgression. An unintentional transgression results from ignorance or forgetfulness of the law or of the circumstances of the case. The sages understood the standard *hattat* as limited to major offenses, those that, had they been violated intentionally, would render the perpetrator liable to the divine punishment of *karet* (being “cut off” from the nation). One who sins through carelessness and inadvertence, although lacking full awareness of what he was doing, indicates laxness as concerns his responsibilities. The procedures of purification through the *hattat* prompt the individual to ennoble his inner character and “cleanse” his subconscious and not rationalize away what might be considered a minor transgression because it was performed without intention. The law requires full conscientiousness.

As the purpose of the sanctuary is to bring the whole nation to a state of constant awareness of G-d in all spheres of life, the goal is frustrated by any and all wrongdoing, however and wherever it is committed. Accordingly, all wrongdoing of the Israelites is perceived as defiling the sanctuary and the *hattat* also serves to bring purification and atonement to it. This goal is an essential part of the unintentional sinner’s repentance process. (We will touch upon several aspects of the symbolism associated with the *hattat*’s purificatory function in our *Parashat Shemini Part III* study.)

Leviticus 4 itemizes four cases of *hattat*, varying in accordance with the offender’s status and without reference to the particular transgression. These are those of:

- a) the high priest
- b) the whole community of Israel (explained by the sages as resulting from a high court directive)
- c) the chieftain (which included the king when there was one)
- d) any individual.

From the sanctuary’s perspective, lapses of the first two categories constitute a graver offense than those of the others because they involve the religious leadership and the spiritual welfare of the whole nation; accordingly, they defile the sanctuary in a more profound manner than do the others and call for a more elaborate purification ritual. Thus, the *hattat* for the first two classes requires a young bull, a blood-sprinkling ritual on the *parokhet* veil in the Tent of Meeting, upon the incense altar as well as upon the bronze altar, and the incinerating of the entire bull on the ash heap outside the camp.

The rites for the last two classes of *hattat* are significantly less extensive – blood is placed on the bronze altar and only the fat is burned and in the standard manner. After all, the chieftain is not an official religious leader but what may be termed a political and social leader. In recognition of his leadership status, he brings a male goat, while the private individual brings a female goat or ewe. Male priests eat from these latter two sacrifices within sanctuary precincts.

Besides transgressions of commission the Torah specifies four classes of transgressions of omission that require a *hattat* offering for expiation:

- One who withheld testimony despite having heard an adjuration to testify. Although such a transgression is usually intentional, it is not necessarily so, and may be considered a type of negligence. The violator may not have yet gotten around to testifying, perhaps he intended to do so but inadvertently missed the deadline. Maybe he was aware that others also knew what he knew about the case at hand and was not aware of the necessity of his testimony. Some consider this rather

ambiguous case “the exception that proves the rule” that a *hattat* expiates only unintentional sins (see our discussion on *asham gezelot* in the next section).

- b) and c) Various cases of one having been ritually impure in a span of forgetfulness (and, the sages expound, having then entered the sanctuary or partaken of sacral items.)
- One who inadvertently violated an oath. Depending on financial ability, one either brings a female sheep or goat, two birds, or a measure of flour. In the latter case, oil and frankincense are not added, reflecting the somber nature of the offering.

5. *Asham*: “guilt-offering.” In this category there are three specific classes of violations, and the sacrifice brought in each case is a ram.

- a) ***Asham Me’ila*** – an unintentional misappropriation of sanctuary property for personal use. The violator makes full restitution and pays a penalty of one-fifth in addition to bringing the sacrifice.
- b) ***Asham Talooy*** – a “contingency” *asham*, applicable when one has a doubt if he committed an unintentional transgression. (Had he been certain that he did transgress unintentionally, he would have been required to bring a *hattat* sacrifice.)
- c) ***Asham Gezelot*** – a trespass against G-d in which one lied, under oath, defrauding his fellow man in a monetary case concerning any type of offense against another person. The Torah gives examples of such a deception: it may involve a deposit, a loan, a stolen article, withheld wages, or finding a lost article. The itemization is followed by a second itemization, thus stressing the fundamental responsibility of the perpetrator to repay the victim (Lev. 5:21-24). There also are general statements in this relatively brief passage to ensure that no case that should be included is excluded and to emphasize the supreme importance of bringing justice, as the guilty party has caused a monetary loss to another. When the defrauder who swore falsely chooses to repent, he restores the lost capital to the owner, adds a fifth as penalty, and brings an *asham* sacrifice. Although the sin was intentional, the violator who came

forth on his own to repent by making restitution and paying a penalty is allowed the atonement sacrifice, an exception to the rule that only unintentional transgressions can be expiated through sacrificial service.

Some have seen a justification to permit a sacrifice in the latter case since whenever restitution is possible, in a way, the transgression may be deemed as not yet finalized, since restitution would mitigate the original transgression (see *b. Mak.* 15a בִּיטּוּלָו וְלֹא בִּיטּוּלָו). However, this explanation is not compelling, especially since the defrauder has sworn falsely. Ultimately, it appears that the Torah prescribed this exception of offering atonement for an intentional transgression in order to provide incentive to the perpetrator to make restitution to his fellow man. Sometimes an individual might consider the repentance ritual indispensable to repentance and forgiveness, and, if unavailable, might remain in his sinful state. He is thus offered the possibility of sanctuary expiation if he confesses to his crime and makes restitution. This highlights the superseding importance the Torah places on sympathy and consideration for one who suffered an injustice at the hands of his fellow man in relation to ritual regulations, important as the latter may be.

Numbers 5:5-10 contains a supplement to this *asham gezelot* legislation, which we will discuss in our study on *Parashat Naso*.

The ‘*olah*, *minḥa*, *hattat* and *asham* are *qodesh qadashim*, that is, most holy, and more stringent regulations were applied to these sacrifices. An interesting feature of these is that the Torah mentions that the slaughtering of an animal from the flock for an ‘*olah* had to be performed in the courtyard area north of the altar (Lev. 1:11). It seems that in a number of verses the Torah alludes to the requirement that all most holy sacrifices must be in the north (see particularly Lev. 14:13). In any event, the Mishnah codifies the law as such (*m. Zeb.* 5:1). Some have explained this as a practical measure since there was no other area in the courtyard near the altar that could be conveniently designated for the

slaughter: tradition placed a ramp on the south side of the altar, the laver on its west, and the entrance for the people was on the east. However, there very likely was a symbolic reason attached to the north.

Shelamim, on the other hand, are *qadashim qalim*, holiness of a “lighter” character. This distinction appears to explain the variation in the order of their presentation. In the first subsection (Lev. 1–5), which was formulated from the donor’s perspective, after ‘*olah* and *minḥa* – most-holy offerings brought

voluntarily – comes *shelamim*, as it is also brought voluntarily. *Ḥattat* and *asham*, each of which presupposes a major transgression, understandably are last. In the second subsection (Lev. 6–7), however, which focuses on the priests’ service, the most holy offerings of ‘*olah* and *minḥa* remain in their order but the *ḥattat* and *asham*, as most holy, are explicated before the lighter-holiness *shelamim*.

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