

The Olah Sacrifice: The Exception or the Rule?

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Parashat Tzav

Revisiting ground already covered?

The beginning of Parashat Tzav (VaYikra 6:2 ff.) appears to revisit territory that has already been explored at the outset of the book of VaYikra (1:3 ff.) In both places we are told about aspects of the Olah (“the one going up” or “totally burnt”), begging the question why all of the information concerning this particular sacrifice could not have been concentrated in a single section of the Tora.

A distinction between the two accounts of the Olah sacrifice.

Both R. S.R. Hirsch and Da’at Mikra point out that whereas the instructions in Parashat VaYikra deals with the perspective of the person bringing the sacrifice, (1:2) “A person who offers up from among you a sacrifice”, Parashat Tzav focuses upon the issues specifically relevant to the priests who will be actually carrying out the offering, (6:2) “Command Aharon and his children saying, ‘This is the law of the Olah...’” The dichotomy between the “owners” of the sacrifice as opposed to the individuals offering it up, appears to underscore a Talmudic discussion regarding the precise definition of the role played by the priests in the Temple Service. In Nedarim 35b, the following question is posed: “These Kohanim, are they Shluchei Didan (our surrogates, representatives) or Shluchei D’Shmaya (the stand-ins for Heaven, the Divine)?” On the one hand Kohanim could be viewed as extensions of the offerers of sacrifices, carrying out those rituals¹ from which non-Kohanim are precluded. On the other, the Kohanim could be viewed as representatives of God,² receiving on behalf of HaShem the sacrifices being brought by human beings. When the commentators cited above insist that the Tora separates the discussion of aspects of the Olah between those that bring the sacrifice to the Temple in VaYikra 1, and those who offer it up in VaYikra 6, it might suggest that the Shlichut (status of acting as a surrogate) in this instance (Chapt. 6), in light of the rule of Shlucho Shel Adam Kemoto (the surrogate of an individual is equivalent to himself),³ is not part of the identity between the owner of the sacrifice and the Kohen, but rather between God and the Kohen.⁴

An additional reason that the Olah offering stands out.

¹While Shechita (ritual slaughter) of even a sacrifice could at least theoretically be performed by a non-Kohen, the collection of the blood, the conveying of the blood to the proper area in the Temple, and the application of the blood to either an altar or a curtain, are tasks that can be fulfilled only by Kohanim.

²This role is emphatically demonstrated in the rite of the Blessing of (by?) the Kohanim, appearing in BaMidbar 6:23-27, where HaShem Blesses the people via the Kohanim.

³See e.g., Kiddushin 42b.

⁴A particular aspect of the special laws applying to Kohanim that indicates very strikingly that they are more representatives of God than of man, would appear to be the extraordinary depersonalization of the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest) with regard to prohibiting him from engaging in mourning even for the closest of his relatives. See VaYikra 21:10-12. While it could be countered that the ordinary Kohanim who comprise the overwhelming majority of those serving in this capacity are not restricted in this manner, the concept that even a single individual has to place issues of the Temple ahead of his personal life in general, and mourning for loved ones in particular, stands out sharply. A specific example of this practice recorded in the Tora is the incident of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu in VaYikra 10:3, 6-7, where it would appear that other family members, in addition to Aharon, the Kohen Gadol, also had to continue to function in their priestly capacity, despite their overwhelming personal grief.

The revisiting of the Olah sacrifice in VaYikra 6 allows for another dimension of this sacrifice to be explored by Rabbinic commentators. Those closely scrutinizing the Tora text, note a slight variation with regard to the Olah from the pattern that is established in VaYikra 6-7 for sacrifices in general. While the phrase “Zot Torat” (this is the “body of law” concerning...) appears not only with regard to the Olah (6:2), but also in terms of the Mincha (meal offering) (6:7), the Asham (guilt offering) (7:1), and the Shlamim (peace offering) (7:11), there is no parallel to the additional language of emphasis, “He HaOlah” (IT is the Olah) in 6:2. Merely by occupying the first position in the listing of the sacrifices, which is not only the case in Chapter 6, but also in Chapter 1 (verse 3), already confers upon the Olah a special, primary status. The addition of the words “Hi HaOlah” draws even more attention to this specific sacrifice and generates evocative insights in order to account for this difference.

A Rabbinic perspective upon the uniqueness of the Olah offering.

Midrash Yelamdeinu⁵ places the Olah in the following context:

The sacrifice should never be removed from the altar (i.e., as opposed to other sacrifices, more of the Olah is burned upon the altar rather than being distributed for consumption among various people) because it is more beloved than any of the other sacrifices. To what might this be compared? To a king who is celebrating and gifts are being brought to him by his sharecroppers, members of his family, and his beloved friends. As he received these presents, he would ask each of the bearers of the gifts, “Who are you?” And the presenter would respond, “A sharecropper of the king.” And so the second and so the third, etc. Then someone else came bearing a gift. He said, “I simply come to honor the king,” whereupon the king said, “The gift that this one brings will not leave my table.” They said to him, “Our master, why do you love this gift more than all of the other gifts?” He said, “All of these others who have brought gifts, have done so because they are either obligated to me financially or feel bound to honor me. But this one, who is neither my sharecropper nor a member of my household, simply comes to honor me. For this reason, I love his gift best of all.” So too, in the matter of sacrifices, if someone has sinned, he is obligated to bring a sin offering, and for other sins, he must bring a guilt offering. But the Olah is a pure gift.⁶ For this reason it is especially dear to Me.

In the essay on Parashat VaYikra, “Competing Visions of the Purpose of Korbanot”,⁷ it was noted that RaMBaM saw as the primary purpose for sacrifices, a means of atoning for sins. The Midrash cited above suggests that not only are there sacrifices that do not serve such a purpose, but that such sacrifices are more desirable from God’s Point of View than those that allow us to atone. While it is a wonderful act of Chesed (Divine Compassion) for HaShem to

⁵ Cited in Tora Shleima, ed. and annotated by R. Menachem Kasher, Vol. 26, Beit Tora Shleima, Yerushalayim, 5734, pp. 125-6.

⁶ While VaYikra 1:4 (“And he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt-offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him”) does seem to associate the Olah offering with atonement for sin, see Midrash Tanchuma #13 cited below for an intriguing approach for explaining such language.

⁷ <http://text.rcarabbis.org/competing-visions-of-the-purpose-of-korbanot-by-yaakov-bieler/>

create for us by way of the Chatat (sin offering), Asham (guilt offering) and Tamid (constant, daily offering) rituals by which we achieve atonement for our sins,⁸ The fact that we continually require and rely upon these numerous means of atonement indicates a particular understanding of overall human nature. Better not to sin in the first place, than have to try to get back into God's Good Graces following a lapse in judgment and proper behavior. When a person reaches out to God, not because he is in need either religiously or materially, but rather as a pure statement of love and respect, only then is it an act that is LiShma (for its own sake), pure and spiritually profound. Instead of drawing attention to man's imperfections as the various sacrifices associated with atonement seem to do, the Olah reflects the inherent positive spiritual potential that each of us possesses, our essential Tzelem Elokim (image of God), a quality which in the end truly justifies God's Creating the universe, and Endowing man with free choice.⁹

Perhaps the Olah expiates sins of the heart.

However, an alternate source in Midrashic literature substantiates RaMBaN's understanding of how all sacrifices essentially achieve a form of atonement, even the Olah. Midrash Tanchuma #13¹⁰ relates:

“These are the laws of the Olah”—So have the Rabbis taught: The Olah is entirely holy because it was not brought as a response to sins. The guilt offering was required because of acts of thievery;¹¹ But the Olah was not brought as a result of sin or thievery, but rather it comes due to Hirhur HaLev (mere thoughts of the heart related to sins). And so a person, who

⁸ I am inspired daily by the liturgical line that we are to recite when we first wake up in the morning:
“I give thanks before you, Living King for Eternity, that You Have Returned to me my soul. Great is Your Faith!”

Not only are we expected to have faith in Him; He constantly demonstrates His Faith in us! We must appreciate daily that we have been granted another chance to set things right, to live up to our potential. Yet the fact that the mechanism to offer sacrifices in order to achieve atonement is necessary also emphasizes our imperfections and shortcomings. Certainly these repeated “do-overs” benefit us, but hardly point to the perfection, at least at the present time, if ever, of God's Creation. Apparently what is important to HaShem, KaVeYachol, is the process rather than the product.

⁹The first time that such an interaction between God and man appears to take place, is recorded in Beraishit 8:20-21, when after Noach offers Olot following the flood, God “Smells the pleasant smell” and Concludes that man indeed has redeeming qualities that serve to justify his existence.

¹⁰Tora Shleima, Vol. 26, p. 125, fn. 9*.

¹¹While VaYikra 5:21 ff. does speak of bringing an Asham in response to not returning an object belonging to another, a similar sacrifice is also brought for a) inadvertently appropriating material belonging to the Mishkan/Mikdash for personal use (5:15 ff.), and b) performing an action that was thought to be permissible, only to discover at a later point that it may have been prohibited, but one remains unsure (5:17 ff.). While the former situation could be defined as stealing from the Temple, it is less clear why the latter case should be categorized as a type of thievery. Perhaps metaphorically, for an individual to obtain benefit from a portion of the world that God Has Declared as off-limits, constitutes a form of stealing (see Berachot 35a where until a blessing is recited, at least a figurative form of Me'ila is transgressed by benefiting from something “without permission”). The concept may share a similar perspective reflected in the verse in Mishlei 9:17, “Stolen waters are sweet”, which is often applied to an individual who finds it hard to observe negative prohibitions, as in Nedarim 91b and Sota 7a.

would fantasize in his heart about something, would bring an Olah for these matters that rose up in his heart.

In light of such a hypothesis, a curious aspect of the Olah ritual described in Chapt. 6 can be explained. Accounting for the emphasis in 6:2 that the parts of the Olah burn upon the altar throughout the night, Mincha Belula and Toldot Yitzchak write:

The reason for the Tora stating that the Olah will be burning throughout the night, is because an individual fantasizes at night and then carries out his fantasies during the day, as the prophet says, (Micha 2:1) “Surely those who think about sin and evil deeds while in their beds, by the light of the morning carry out their plans...” ...and since the Olah is brought as a result of improper fantasizing, for this reason is the command given that the sacrifice should burn throughout the night, so that the atonement should take place at the time of the sin.

But do fantasies of sin require atonement?

However, the approach that the Olah is brought for atonement just like other sacrifices, if not for overt sins, then at least for the precursors of sin, i.e., evil thoughts, appears to run counter to the clearly articulated position in Jewish thought that HaShem Holds an individual accountable only for the negative actions that s/he actually performs, rather than the thoughts that may pass through his/her head. As the Shabbat Zemer boldly proclaims, “Hirhurim Mutarim!” (fantasies are permitted). In Kiddushin 39b and Chullin 142a, when recounting the classical story of theodicy whereby a boy who is following his father’s instructions to retrieve eggs from a bird’s nest by first driving away the mother bird, two commandments that the Tora promises will each be rewarded by longevity,¹² falls off the tree and dies, the Rabbis speculate that perhaps the boy was thinking evil thoughts and for this reason was punished. The Talmud concludes that only for thoughts denying essential beliefs about God and affirming false deities might an individual be held accountable when all he is doing is thinking. And in Kiddushin 40a, it is maintained that the proof text for HaShem not Holding less than pure thoughts against an individual is based upon Tehillim 66:18, where the Psalmist states, “Even if I saw iniquity in my heart, HaShem Did Not Hear it.” But here too, an exception is listed, i.e., the sinner will be held accountable for his thought if they come to fruition and are actualized, as implied by Yirmiyahu 6:19, “...I will bring evil on this people for the fruit of their thoughts”; however, the Talmud insists that if they remain only thoughts, then no consequences will result. So why should a sacrifice be required to atone for a non-sin, if we are dealing with negative thoughts that are either non-theological or that never “bore fruit”?

Olah as recognition of not only imperfection but the resolve to resist temptation.

Perhaps it could be said that the ambivalence concerning man’s less than admirable thoughts—are they or are they not sinful—arises from our acknowledging that while the presence of such thoughts attest to man’s imperfections, when s/he resists acting upon them, they become manifestations of his/her self-control and discipline. In Ben Zomah’s words, “Who is a mighty individual? One who can control his/her own desires.”¹³ The need

¹²Shemot 20:12; Devarim 5:16; 22:7.

¹³Avot 4:1.

for atonement for such thoughts might be designed to remind us that we are always susceptible to acting badly, to the extent that negative thoughts cross our minds. They are potential sins, just waiting to be actualized, a fulfillment of God's Observation to Kayin, (Beraishit 4:7) "If thou doest well, shall it not be lifted up? and if thou doest not well, sin coucheth at the door; and unto thee is its desire, but thou mayest rule over it." But as long as we refrain from acting upon these thoughts, they become statements of personal heroism and self-control, illustrating the power of the will, and the capacity for restraint. Could it be that the same animal that might have had to be a sin offering or a guilt offering is instead being brought as an Olah, in order to say, "I realize how I have to continue my struggle against the inclination to sin, even after I have been victorious at one time or another. Only by my connecting to God in a total manner, will I continue to strengthen the resolve required to meet the future challenges that my Hirhurim will inevitably pose."