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Parshat HaShavua sheet**

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Parshat Vayikra
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SINS OF GREATNESS

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week the Torah teaches us about sins and offerings. It tells us about how a human is supposed to respond to misdeeds. It tells us about all types of people who make mistakes and sin. High Priests and princes as well as simple Jews are subject to failures and so, in addition to penitence, each sinner on every level must bring an offering.

When referring to the average sinner the Torah teaches the halacha by beginning the laws with the words, “If a man shall sin” or “when a man shall sin.” It uses the Hebrew word “im,” (Leviticus 4:27) or “ki” (Leviticus 5:21). However when it comes to “a prince amongst the tribes” who is the sinner, the Torah uses a different expression. It does not use the standard words for if and when, rather it uses a totally different expression “asher.”

“Asher nasi yecheta — if that a prince sins, and commits one from among all the commandments of Hashem that may not be done — unintentionally — and becomes guilty” (Leviticus 4:22).

The word *asher*, is quite similar in fact to the word “ashre,” It means praiseworthy. That point is not lost on the Talmudic sages. Rashi quotes the Sifra, “If that a prince hath sinned: The word “Asher” is connected in meaning with “Ashrei” which means praiseworthy. The verse implies the following connotation: Praiseworthy and fortunate is the generation whose prince (king) takes care to bring an atonement sacrifice even for his inadvertent misdeeds.”

That is surely praiseworthy, especially to those of us who live in a generation pock-marked with scandals of denials and cover-ups. But if that is the case, why not use the term “asher” in reference to the bringing of his pertinence, not referring to the sin itself? Isn’t it the admission of guilt that merits praise, not the actual misdeed? There are many variations to this story. The basic premise, however, is well known.

In the city of B’nai Beraq there are many Bar Mitzvah celebrations every Shabbos. It became very difficult for Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievski, the elder sage known to world Jewry as the Steipler Gaon to attend every Bar Mitzvah. In fact, he was old and weak and hardly had the strength to go to shul. One week, a Bar Mitzvah boy was honored with the mastir.

Immediately after the davening, the Steipler Gaon was standing there in line, waiting to wish him Mazal Tov. The Steipler Gaon bent down and began conversing in earnest with the neophyte member of the adult Jewish community. It seemed to the hushed crowd that this was much more than a perfunctory Mazel Tov wish. The boy paled as he shook his head several times in amazement. “Of course, Rebbe!” he exclaimed. “Of course! There is no question. I feel terrible that the Rebbe felt he had to discuss this with me!” The Steipler thanked the young boy, wished him Mazel Tov again, blessed him, and left the shul. The entire congregation was shocked. What could the Steipler have wanted? “Let me explain,” began the boy. “Six years ago I was davening in this shul with a very large siddur (prayer book). The Steipler approached me and chided me for learning Gemara in the middle of the Tefilah. I showed him that it was a Siddur and that I actually was davening. He apologized and left. Today the Steipler came to my Bar Mitzvah and reminded me of the story. He explained to me that even though he apologized for his mistaken reprimand six years ago, it was not enough. Since, at the time, I was a child under Bar Mitzvah, I did not have the frame of mind to truly forgive him. Even if I did forgive him, it had no halachic validity. The Steipler found out when my birthday was and waited for six years until my Bar Mitzvah. Today, I am halachically old enough to forgive him, and so, he came back today to ask my forgiveness!”

Sometimes the praise of our leaders is not the fact that they bring a sin offering, but rather in the entire sin and absolution process. It is important for us to understand, not only that they ask forgiveness, but what they did wrong and how they rectified their misdeed. We are praiseworthy when we have leaders that understand what is considered wrong, and openly teach us through their actions how to respond. When the process is comprehensive, then the combination of the mistake and the absolution can be considered praiseworthy, for they are acts we can all learn from.

Regrets

by Rabbi Ari Kahn

*“Regrets, I’ve had a few
But then again, too few to mention
I did what I had to do and saw it through without exemption
I planned each charted course, each careful step along the byway
And more, much more than this, I did it my way.”*

(Written by Paul Anka for Frank Sinatra)

Modern man, increasingly the product of moral relativism, looks at life with few regrets. “After all,” the logic goes, “I am who I am because of the path I have taken. Had I taken a different path, I would not be me, nor would I be true to myself.” This semi-deterministic attitude, seasoned with a sizable dose of narcissism, leaves us fully accepting the choices we have made and the people we have become.

In fact, it may be said that only the “losers” in modern society regret their mistakes. Only they are made to feel guilty of having made colossal errors, whereas the missteps of the rich and famous are more often than not parlayed into the all-too-familiar circus of rehab, followed by a tell-all memoir, followed by talk-show appearances and assorted opportunities for public catharsis. The message is that when bad choices, poor judgment, self-indulgence and abusive behavior go too far, they may require reining-in or containment, but no regret is necessary.

The new world presented in this week’s parashah stands in contrast to this regret-free mindset. The Mishkan, and the sacrificial offerings that would be brought there, become a part of the Israelites’ reality in Parashat Vayikra. In a sense, we may say that mistakes – errors in judgment, oversights, sins large and small – lie at the very core of this holy edifice; the Mishkan is created in order to redress human failure. On the other hand, the world in which the Mishkan exists is a world in which change is possible, a world that breaks through the complacency of accepting oneself “as is,” a world in which we can strive to correct our failings.

The Mishkan does not provide healing from deliberate sin; premeditated offenses are not expunged by specific offerings. The “sin offerings,” for the most part, atone for transgressions committed accidentally, when the major offense was thoughtlessness of one kind or another. The experience of bringing an offering is intended to lead to heightened awareness and increased responsibility, on an intellectual level, for ones’ actions. The entire system of mitzvot is intended to create human beings that function on a higher level of cognitive awareness and spiritual alertness. We are enjoined to march through life not as automatons or as creatures of instinct or habit; rather, we are expected to be constantly thinking of the consequences of our actions. Intellectual sloth leads to a dulled sense of personal responsibility; this, in turn, will lead to the necessity for atonement, through sin offerings in the Mishkan.

The *korban Olah*, the very first offering listed in this parashah, is particularly instructive. This offering is generally brought as recompense, not for a violation of one of the negative commandments, but as a means of reconnecting with God after failing to fulfill a positive commandment. The *Olah* is an offering for a mitzvah that was not performed. It is an expression of regret for the good that was not achieved.

Both the thought process and the ethic taught by the *korbanot* can be transformative – even for those of us who only read about them in the Torah but are unable to experience them firsthand. As opposed to our society, where we are taught that all of our shortcomings can be attributed to every possible external factor, the world of *korbanot* places the blame squarely on the shoulders of the person who made the mistake, particularly when that mistake was accidental. More responsibility, not less, is called for; heightened alertness, a higher level of consciousness, more finely-attuned thoughtfulness, are the tools that enable us to avoid future transgressions – but that is not all.

The Judaic view of a perfected society is not a world in which we simply err less; avoiding sin is only part of the equation. In addition, we are commanded to constantly question whether we are doing enough good. Have we missed opportunities to do mitzvot? Have we been negligent or lazy, thus allowing a deficiency to exist in the world – a deficiency of good that we could have or should have filled? A very basic tenet of our faith encapsulates this dual mandate: “Distance yourself from evil and do good, pray for peace and pursue it.” (Psalm 34:15)

The point of origin of the Book of Vayikra is the *korban Olah*, a sacrifice that expresses regret for a missed opportunity to do good, to bring goodness into our lives and the lives of those around us. In a world in which we quickly forgive our own foibles, the Torah challenges us to look inside ourselves with humility and honesty, and to ask ourselves if we have done enough good. If the answer is “no,” we are instructed to bring an *Olah* – an offering from which man derives no physical benefit. The *korban Olah* is a burnt offering, dedicated entirely to God – just as we should be. When we internalize the lesson of this offering, we have taken the first steps on the path to a perfected world – a world with less error, but, no less importantly, a world with much more good.

Go the Extra Mile

By Rabbi Avrohom Altein

The first chapters of Leviticus describe the offerings that Jews brought to the Sanctuary. It sums it all up with the statement: “Offer the best of everything to G-d.”¹ This phrase serves as the basis for a beautiful concept in Jewish teaching.

A building that serves as a synagogue or as a center of Jewish learning should be more beautiful than the personal homes of the community members. The furniture donated to a synagogue should be more comfortable and more luxurious than those in its members’ personal homes.

When we offer food to a starving poor person, the food should be of better quality than the food that we eat ourselves. The clothing donated to the poor should be nicer than those we wear ourselves.

A similar thought is expressed in a verse that the Jews sang when they crossed the Red Sea: “This is my G-d, and I will do beautiful things for Him.”² The Talmud interprets this to mean that one should strive to acquire the most beautiful *etrog* and *lulav*, a beautiful *sukkah*, *tallit* and *tefillin*, a neatly written Torah scroll, and so on.

These verses convey a teaching that is contrary to contemporary practice. People tend to donate things only when they no longer need them. Old, rickety furniture and used clothing are the typical stuff for donations. The Torah, however, teaches us to do a mitzvah with heart and soul.

If we treat the poor with empathy, we would not give them things of lesser quality than we want for ourselves. But the Torah goes beyond that, and says that we should give the poor even better than what we ourselves have. This is because we put all our energy and resources into the things that we truly love. *Tzedakah* (charity) is a mitzvah, and when a person loves doing mitzvot, he will invest more in the mitzvah than in his ordinary needs.

A person who thinks of his religious obligations as a burden and nuisance will do the bare minimum that is required by Jewish law. Once he is “off the hook,” he will no longer exert any effort in doing more. But the Jew who appreciates how Judaism enriches his life with depth and meaning does mitzvot with love. And when a mitzvah is done out of love, it is done with care and beauty.

The extent of how much effort a person puts into mitzvot is a pretty good barometer to measure his attitude towards Judaism. When given an opportunity to earn more dollars, few people will say, “Why bother? I can manage with the bare necessities.” Why would the spiritual quality of life be any less important? A Jew with a healthy attitude towards Judaism will “go the extra mile” and strive to do mitzvot in the very best way possible.

The mitzvah itself is only half its value. The same mitzvah that is done with a good attitude has double the value.

With a Grain of Salt

by Rabbi Eli Scheller

For you shall not cause to go up in smoke from any leavening or fruit-honey as a fire-offering to Hashem. You shall salt every meal-offering... (2:11, 13)

The verse states that one is not permitted to use honey in the meal offering, while it is an obligation to use salt for all the offerings. Why is one obligated to bring salt as part of a sacrifice, as opposed to honey?

Even though honey and salt are both used for flavoring food there is a fundamental difference between them. Honey itself is sweet and when poured on food, it provides the food with a sweet taste. Salt, however, enhances flavor, pulling the flavor out of food and giving it a stronger taste. It can be added to something bland and make it flavorful.

The symbolism of the obligation to use salt on the offerings as opposed to honey teaches us that God wants every person to develop and nurture his own unique talents. This is like a good teacher who doesn’t merely put information into the student - rather he brings out and develops what’s already there.

The Zohar states that the word “Yisrael” is an acronym for *there are six hundred thousand letters in the Torah*. This number corresponds to the six hundred thousand men who left Egypt. Every Jew is a letter in the Torah. If there is one letter in a Torah scroll that is touching another letter that Torah is invalid, and so too, a Jew who ignores his own abilities and tries to be like others is ‘invalid’. Everyone needs to serve God in his own unique way. Don’t imitate others; rather locate qualities within yourself, ‘salt’ them, and let them shine.

“And He called to Moshe, and Hashem spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying” (1:1)

The Midrash says that Moshe had ten names, yet Hashem only called him by the name “Moshe,” the name that was given to him by the daughter of Pharaoh. What is it about this name that led Hashem to use it exclusively? It does not even describe anything about him?! R’ Chaim Shmulevitz answers that the daughter of Pharaoh ignored her father’s decree to kill all Jewish boys in order to save Moshe Rabbeinu when she pulled him out of the water. Moshe thus became a beneficiary of “mesiras nefesh,” a tremendous personal sacrifice on the part of the daughter of Pharaoh. As a result, this characteristic became ingrained in him and personal sacrifice became a part of his life. This value is what drove Moshe to kill the Mitzri who was hitting a fellow Jew and to ask Hashem to erase his name from the Torah if He would destroy the Jewish nation. This characteristic was the best description of Moshe Rabbeinu and that is why Hashem used this name over all the others.

“If his sacrifice is a burnt offering from cattle, an unblemished male he shall bring it. He shall bring it willingly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, before Hashem” (1:3)

The goal of korbanos was to bring a person closer to Hashem. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch famously notes that the root of the word korban is “karov,” “to be close.” Today, our davening is meant to take place of korbanos and can enable us to become closer to Hashem in the same way. Remembering this power of tefillah should inspire us to work on davening properly all the time in order to make the most of the opportunity that it affords us. As the posuk says: “Hashem is close to those who call Him, to all those who call Him in truth” (Tehillim 145:18), i.e. with a whole heart and complete focus. As we study Sefer Vayikra, the sefer about korbanos, over the course of the next few weeks, we should remember the goal of these korbanos and try to assimilate this idea into our lives through tefillah.

“Any meal-offering that you offer to Hashem shall not be prepared leavened, for you shall not cause to go up in smoke from any leavening or any honey as a fire-offering to Hashem” (2:11)

The Baal HaTurim comments that chametz is a symbol of the evil inclination because it expands and puffs itself up like an arrogant person who is controlled by his evil inclination. Honey also symbolizes the perceived sweetness of temptation. The Torah forbids the inclusion of these ingredients in korbanos because the point of an offering is to earn forgiveness and, in order to achieve that, one must subdue his evil inclination. When we clean our houses during this time of year and rid ourselves of all the chametz that we own, we are symbolically removing the spiritual deficiencies that we have and character flaws that could use improvement. To truly do that requires hard internal work, but that must also be done in tandem with our cleaning efforts. The plans of the evil inclination are in conflict with the messages of freedom that we will absorb over the Yom Tov of Pesach, so the first step in preparation for the holiday is removing all the chametz and, by extension, removing ourselves from the grasp of the yetzer hara.

“And you shall salt every one of your meal offering sacrifices with salt, and you shall not omit the salt of your G-d’s covenant from upon your meal offerings. You shall offer salt on all your sacrifices” (2:13)

R’ Dovid Feinstein explains the reason for the mitzvah to add salt based on its use as a preservative. When one places salt on the altar, one is expressing his wish that his repentance that results from this offering should be preserved, even long after the korban is burnt up. It is easy for one to be inspired during the times when he is bringing a korban, but to maintain that inspiration and take it with him from that point forward is more difficult. The salt expresses the desire that this inspiration should be preserved for a long time to come.

“If the anointed Kohen will sin, bringing guilt upon the people; for his sin that he committed he shall offer a young bull, unblemished, to Hashem as a sin-offering” (4:3)

R’ Yaakov MiLis, the author of Nesivos HaMishpat (a famous commentary on Choshen Mishpat), writes that when the Kohen Gadol sins, even unintentionally, it brings guilt upon all the people because he is a leader who is looked up to. When the people see what he does, they assume that they can do the same and this leads them to sin intentionally and sink to a lower level. Such a person has to be doubly careful not to stumble in sin and to be extra mindful even of sinning accidentally. This applies to all those who bear the name of Hashem. Anyone who is looked at as a religious person has to realize that others are constantly looking at him and learning from his behavior. We have to be aware of the influence that we have on others and go out of our way to be sure not to adversely influence others through our actions and our manner of speech. As much power as we have to be a good influence on others, we can also easily cause people to become even worse with just one misstep. It is a tremendous responsibility that we have to be aware of at all times.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Giving All That One Can

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

In connection with the person who brings a flour offering (korban mincha), the Torah states: “And when a nefesh [soul] will bring a meal offering to Hashem.” [Vayikra 2:1]. Rashi asks why the person is called a “soul” (nefesh) in connection with the bringing of the Mincha offering and this is not the case with any other offering. Rashi explains that we are dealing here with a person who is too poor to bring an animal and too poor even to bring a bird offering. All he can afford is an inexpensive flour offering. Rashi writes: “The Holy One, Blessed is He said: Although the poor man’s offering is modest, I consider it on his behalf as if he offered his soul.”

A taxi driver in Eretz Yisrael once told the following story to an American Yeshiva student:

I once gave the Steipler Gaon a ride in my taxi. The Gaon asked me “Do you set aside times for learning Torah? Do you learn Gemara?” I told him the truth: I am exhausted when I come home from a long day of driving, but after supper I go to a Gemara shiur in the neighborhood. The nightly shiur is 1 hour long, but inevitably after 5 minutes, I fall asleep and I am only woken 55 minutes later by the sound of the Maggid Shiur [teacher] closing his Gemara. That is the end of the shiur. I pick up about 5 minutes worth of Gemara study every night. The Steipler responded by quoting the above referenced pasuk from our parsha: “When a soul shall bring a meal offering...”

The Steipler was saying this taxi driver is giving all that he can. The fact that he falls asleep every single night by the Gemara after 5 minutes is due to the fact that he is dead tired. But he makes an effort to come to the shiur and he is giving all that he can give. Giving all that one can give is all that the Almighty ever asks from a person.

Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Remembrance

By Cheryl Levi

This Shabbat, before the Jewish holiday of Purim, religious Jews all over the world will flock to the synagogue to keep one of the Torah’s commandments: to remember Amalek. The commandment in itself is not rare in Judaism. The verb “remember” appears in the Torah 169 times. Clearly, memory is a critical part of Judaism. What makes this commandment interesting is what we are required to remember.

The National Geographic has an interesting article on “cultural memory, which they define as “the constructed understanding of the past that is passed from one generation to the next through text, oral traditions, monuments, rites, and other symbols.” But cultural memory is not simply an “understanding of the past”. There are other extremely important elements to cultural memory.

Firstly, it is a way to learn from the past. The well-known saying “those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it” has proven itself again and again. According to the National Geographic article, traumatic memories are some of the most powerful ones. The article brings the example of Russia’s role in World War Two in which 10 million Russians were killed. This historical event is still a vital part of Russian remembrance. The memory serves to prevent a tragedy like this from reoccurring. It also provides them with feelings of strength, defiance, and survival.

Secondly, cultural memory is an important part of cultural identity. In his book *Covenant and Conversation*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks discusses the importance of history for Jewish identity. When Moses first encountered God at the burning bush, he asked the question, “Who am I?”. Seemingly he was asking God, “Who am I to stand in front of Pharaoh?”, but Rabbi Sacks explains that Moses was asking a much more fundamental question. He grew up in Egypt and then in Midian, and now he is being told to become the leader of the Jewish people. Moses actually wanted to know who he really was.

God’s response was telling. He was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses’ identity was related to his genealogy, not where he lived. It was the history of his people that defined his essence. God explained to Moses about the promise He made to his forefathers. He explained that He told them He would bring the Jewish people out of slavery to freedom. This is the story that the Jewish people would tell over and over again, through every generation because as Rabbi Sacks puts it, “we are what we remember”.

According to National Geographic, cultural memory is the longest form of memory, and as collective memory (as opposed to an individual memory) it is preserved in objects, symbols, activities, and books. It provides us with a deep comprehension of the culture, values, and norms of a particular society.

Shabbat is a perfect example of the latter idea. In Exodus 20:8, we are commanded to remember the Shabbat. We do so through prayer, food, song, and refraining from certain activities. Shabbat is more than a remembrance of the six days of creation, it is a reflection of the values and beliefs of Judaism. It celebrates the ideas of monotheism and God's interaction in the world. It also celebrates the values of family and Torah learning. The Jewish Shabbat reflects the uniqueness of Judaism. This Shabbat we will read about a particularly difficult historical event that we remember every year: the attack of Amalek in the desert. We will read from the Torah:

REMEMBER what Amalek did to you along the way as you left Egypt; how he confronted you along the way, and smote the hindmost among you, all that were enfeebled, when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore, it shall be that when the Lord your God gives you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall erase the memory of Amalek from under the heavens; you shall not forget. (Devarim 25:17-19)

The war against Amalek is a crucial event in Jewish history and a perfect example of cultural memory. But why is Amalek singled out? Many nations attacked the Jewish people?

A multitude of reasons have been offered by commentators. Some say that Amalek was the first nation to fight against the Jews after the splitting of the sea when other nations were afraid to do so. This made it more feasible for others to attack the Jews. Others believe that Amalek represents an idea, rather than a specific nation, that is contrary to Judaism and must be contended with. But I believe October 7th has shed some new light on this commandment to remember.

I'm fully aware that articles and blogs have been written about the differences between Amalek and Hamas. And while the commandment to wipe out Amalek cannot literally apply to any other nation (as Amalek was a biological nation that no longer exists), the commandment to remember them does apply. And as stated above cultural remembrance is about many things. It is about learning from the past and cultural identity. Unfortunately, Jewish identity is very much associated with nations like Amalek. Our history is replete with nations that have tried to wipe us off the face of the earth. Purim is one example of such an event. October 7th is another.

Hamas took lessons from Amalek. They attacked the rear, the southern cities that were not properly protected. They waited until we were weak, a nation divided both politically and socially. Like Amalek, their goal was simple – to wipe out the nation of Israel. They made no secret about it

But the commandment to remember Amalek runs deeper. The fact that Hamas succeeded in torturing and murdering so many of us on October 7th was the result of the fact that we failed to remember. This led to a dangerous form of complacency. We simply did not believe that Hamas was so evil because we forgot about Amalek. That is why this commandment is so crucial. We must remember Amalek, so this does not happen again and again. We must destroy the evil in our midst so that next year this will become another crucial memory, but no longer a living threat.

And there is still a further facet to this commandment. The stories of Amalek, Purim, and October 7th are not just stories of our failures; they are also stories of our resilience. The biblical nation Amalek no longer exists. The Persian Empire from the time of Purim no longer exists. The Jewish nation outlived both. And this is what will happen with Hamas. Historically Jews have overcome every form of evil that has been thrown at them. This history is also an essential part of our national identity. And it's crucial to remember that as well.