

Parashat Tzav

By Rabbi Berel Wein

The daily permanent sacrifice that was offered in the Temple in Jerusalem and previously in the Tabernacle in the desert was called 'olah.' It was an offering that went completely to Heaven, so to speak, and was offered every morning and evening of each day of the year. It differed from other types of sacrifices in that it was consumed completely on the altar and no human being, not the priest who was the officiant or the person who, in certain cases, donated the sacrifice, had any direct physical benefit from the offering.

The public sacrifice that was brought twice a day came from public funds while the Torah allowed individuals who wished to, to donate this type of sacrifice. But the outstanding feature of this type of sacrifice was that no human being derived any physical benefit. Even when performing a positive commandment of the Torah, there always is an element of benefit and pleasure that accrues to the one performing the act.

Even though the Talmud discusses whether physical pleasures are allowed to be derived from performing commandments of the Torah, it is understood that when it comes to the offering of the sacrifice of the olah, even abstract pleasure and benefit is somehow not present. This type of sacrifice represents the ultimate in human service to the Divine without it being tarnished by personal gain and benefit.

The Torah is aware of the difficulty of coercing altruism on the part of human beings. Physically, spiritually and psychologically, we always have factors that influence us even when we are engaged in doing noble deeds and fulfilling positive commandments. The Torah comes to channel these factors but not to deny or to pretend that they are not part of the human makeup. As such, we see that in all other types of sacrifices that were offered in the Temple, there was some sort of physical human benefit, whether to the priest who officiated in bringing the sacrifice and even to the donor whose dollars brought the sacrifice to the Temple.

There were strict and detailed instructions as to what benefit could be had and in what state of purity the person who benefited from it had to be. This is always the pattern in the Torah, when it gives instructions as to how to conduct oneself in the physical world. We humans get practice in the necessary restraint that makes us special and not just another form of the animal kingdom. However, the public sacrifices that were to be brought twice daily and would represent the Jewish people to its Creator, were meant to create an aura of altruism that would endow the Jewish public generally and the Temple service particularly with the required measure of holiness and devotion. And this could be achieved only by the constant repetition of offering the sacrifice of the olah.