

The Curious Placement of the High Priest's Sin

Parshat Vayikra deals mainly with the Korbanot (sacrificial offerings). In the fourth perek (chapter) it discusses the "חטאת" (Chatat), an atonement offering for certain very serious sins. Interestingly, the ingredients of this offering vary not by the type of sin, but by categories of people who sinned. The list contains three types of leaders, whose sins are particularly serious because of the negative influence their mistakes have on large numbers of people, and also, the regular individual. The Torah discusses these offerings in the following order: 1) High Priest, 2) High Court (collectively); 3) King; 4) the common people.

The thirteenth-century Spanish scholar, Rabeinu Bachya ben Asher asked the following question. Why does the Torah describe the offering of the High Priest first? Shouldn't the common people be first because, as the majority of the population, their offering would be the most common? Then the offerings of the High Court judges should be discussed since there were seventy judges. Finally, the rare offerings of the High Priest and the king would be addressed.

His answer is that when the High Priest and a common person do the same עברה or sin, the high priest has actually done a much bigger sin, for as a respected role model, he has committed a 'חלול ה', a desecration of God's name. People will rationalize their own sins by pointing out that the High Priest did the same thing. Despite this, the high priest is written about first because his case makes an impact more positive than the desecration of G-d's name is negative. The message is that all sins, even the terrible sin of desecrating G-d's name can be erased by תשובה (repentance). The case of the High Priest is placed front and center to give common people hope by showing that one could repent even from a terrible sin.

The Talmud says the same idea in Tractate Avoda Zara 5a: "If an individual has sinned, one says to him: Go to that famous individual who sinned, King David (who sinned with Batsheva), and learn from him that one can repent. Highlighting the repentance of great people like King David and the High Priest also highlights their sins, which could result in people rationalizing their own sins (thus desecrating God's name). Yet God apparently knows that having confidence that we can do תשובה (repentance) is so important that it is worth the risk that some people might use the information to rationalize their sins.