



ישיבת הר עציון

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Selected and Adapted by Rabbi Dov Karoll

Quote from the Rosh Yeshiva

In an important, famous passage at the beginning of his commentary to our parasha, the Ramban deals at length with the reason for the mitzva of sacrifices. He establishes that the word “korban” (sacrifice) bears the sense of “kirva” (closeness, intimacy)... On the other hand, he brings a reason on the aggadic level, which sees sacrifices as coming to atone for man...

In a later passage... the Ramban speaks of a sacrifice that is offered because of the quality of judgment. Note the 2 main approaches to the world of sacrifices reflected here. The first approach sees a sacrifice as a present offered by man to God, the objective of which is to demonstrate intimacy and admiration. To take a metaphor from our world, a sacrifice resembles a birthday present or flowers given to one’s spouse on an anniversary, i.e., an article given to express love and intimacy. Just as every parent emphasizes, that what is important is not the gift but the thought, the prophets emphasized this point regarding the sacrifices, because of the inherent danger. Nevertheless, we do not suffice with thought alone, but rather we express our feelings in a tangible, concrete way. This is why sacrifices are so important... If we look in Scripture for the idea of a sacrifice expressing this quality, we find that this is the meaning of the idea of “an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor to the Lord.” “Sweet savor” represents something given to find favor...

The second approach sees a sacrifice as expressing the smallness of man vis-à-vis the lofty Master of the universe, coming to atone for man’s actions, allowing him to stand before the King of kings. In other words, sacrifices are founded on the quality of fear, with the objective to express man’s submission before God. These 2 approaches are not necessarily contradictory, with distinctions between different sacrifices and different fulfillments, allowing sacrifices to embrace more than one principle. -Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein



Parashat Vayikra “Wisdom Cries Out in the Streets”

Based on a Sichah by Harav Yehuda Amital zt”l

Based on: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/wisdom-cries-out-streets>

“He called to Moshe, and God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying...” (Vayikra 1:1). Rashi explains:

“He called to Moshe” – the Divine voice reached his ears, but the rest of Israel did not hear it...

“From the Tent of Meeting” – this teaches that the Voice stopped and did not emerge outside of the Tent. Perhaps this was because it was a weak voice? [Surely not... It is the voice of God described in Tehillim (29:4-5): “The voice of God in strength, the voice of God in splendor; the voice of God breaks cedars.” But if this is so, why does the Torah say, “from the Tent of Meeting”? This teaches that the voice stopped.

Chazal emphasize the fact that the voice that Moshe heard in the Tent of Meeting did not emerge outwards. Why is this so?

The Gemara (Berakhot 28a) recounts that when Rabban Gamliel was the Rosh Yeshiva, he limited entry to the beit midrash to those people whose “inside was like their outside,” enabling only those learned scholars in their innermost personality to study Torah. The Gemara records that when Rabban Gamliel was replaced as Rosh Yeshiva by Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, the latter allowed anyone who wanted to enter and learn to do so. On that very day, many more benches (either 400 or 700) were brought into the beit midrash. When Rabban Gamliel heard this, he was disheartened, fearing that he had prevented all these people from learning Torah. That

night he had a dream, informing him that those who were entering were not worthy of learning Torah – but the Gemara states that this dream was only a gesture in honor of Rabban Gamliel, merely to placate him.

We see from this episode that it is important that a beit midrash be open to all who wish to learn. It should not limit its population to a small group of learned scholars, who alone will understand the language and methodology of Torah study.

Elsewhere, the Midrash (Tanchuma, Bechukotai, 3) recounts that Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani saw Rabbi Yonatan bar Elazar in the marketplace, and requested that he teach him Torah. The latter replied that they should go to the yeshiva and he would teach him there. Rabbi Shmuel asked what was wrong with teaching in the marketplace; is it not written, “Wisdom cries out in the streets, she lifts her voice in the squares” (Mishlei 1:20)? Rabbi Yonatan replied that the proper interpretation of the verse views the words, “lifting her voice in the squares (rechovot)” to mean, “in a place where people broaden (marchivin) wisdom – these are the synagogues and batei midrash.”

This explanation seems problematic: clearly, the literal meaning of the verse is not that Torah should be studied only in the beit midrash, but rather that it should be taught to the masses – outside, in the streets and squares! Rabbi Yonatan’s message is not that Torah’s voice should not emerge outwards. Rather, the lesson is that the voice should emerge and influence the outside specifically by means of, and by virtue of, the study that goes on inside beit midrash, in “the place where Torah is broadened.”

The messages arising from these 2 episodes are important ones. Inside the beit midrash it is necessary that the voices from outside manage to enter, and that the study that goes on inside is aware of and sensitive to the sound of the “infant’s cry.” At the same time, it is necessary that the voice that emerges from the beit midrash should also pertain and belong to the outside, the street, and not stop at the door of the beit midrash.

Only in the Tent of Meeting, in the encounter between God and Moshe, was there a miracle whereby the Divine voice stopped at the curtain of the Tent. But everywhere else, the voice must burst through the walls and reach the marketplace, the people outside.

In prewar Lithuania, there was a clear separation between the Torah scholars and the regular folk – to the extent that the term “balebatim” became an expression of scorn, referring to people who were not learned as not deserving of one’s attention and respect. I saw the negative consequences of this hierarchical approach. However, styles of Jewish study that directed their messages also towards the street, towards the simple people, succeeded and remained strong.

Today there exists an entire sector that does not direct the voice of its beit midrash outwards. This Torah study uses codes and language that anyone outside of the clique cannot understand, and obviously they will not feel any attachment towards it. We have tried, here in our beit midrash, to create a style of learning that can be understood on the outside, too. It is for this reason that we instituted serious study of Tanakh and Jewish philosophy, we publish books, and we see that, indeed, the voice that emerges from the beit midrash is meaningful to people outside, too.

When we planned our beit midrash, the architect wanted to build it without windows; she wanted all the light to come from inside. I insisted that there be windows. When she asked why, I told her that once there was a Rebbe whose disciples came to him and told him that the Messiah had arrived. He poked his head outside the window, sniffed the air, and announced decisively that the Messiah had not yet come. I told her that I needed a window so I could know when the Messiah arrived.

There is great depth to this story. When the Messiah comes, his presence will be felt not only in the beit midrash, but in all circles, on all levels – even in the very air outside. It is for this reason that it is necessary that the voice of Torah be felt on the outside, and not only within the walls of the beit midrash; and conversely, that the beit midrash have a sense of what is going on outside.

Moshe Rabbeinu indeed experienced a unique phenomenon whereby the Divine voice did not emerge outwards; God spoke to him alone, privately, with no interruptions. But in general, it is vital that the voice also make itself heard outside, and belong to all sectors of society.

[This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Vayikra 5765 (2005). Summarized by Shaul Barth, Translated by Kaeren Fish]



Parashat Vayikra

The “Ascending and Descending” Offering

By Rav Amnon Bazak

Based on: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/ascending-and-descending-offering>

A. The Problem

Parashat Vayikra describes the various types of sacrifices. First, the Torah presents the 3 free-will offerings: the burnt offering (olah) (chapter 1), the flour offering (mincha) (chapter 2), and the peace offering (shelamim) (chapter 3). These are followed by the mandatory offerings: the sin offering (chatat) and the guilt offering (asham).

The unit on the sin offering is divided into 2 parts. Chapter 4 lists the regular sin offerings – those that are brought for sins committed unwittingly or unintentionally. The offering depends on the identity of the sinner: the Kohen Gadol, the entire nation, the Nasi, or an ordinary individual. At the beginning of chapter 5 (this chapter is our focus), the Torah goes on to discuss specific sins that are subject to the law of what Chazal refer to as the “ascending and descending offering” (korban oleh ve-yored). In these cases, the Torah takes into consideration the financial situation of the sinner and determines his obligation accordingly. The Torah distinguishes 3 levels of obligation in these transgressions. The regular obligation is a sheep or female goat as a sin offering (v. 6); if the sinner is unable to purchase an animal, he may bring 2 turtle-doves or 2 young pigeons (vv. 7-10); and if even this is beyond his means (referred to by Chazal as “dire impoverishment,” “dalei dalut”), he may bring as his sin offering a tenth of an efa measure of fine flour (vv. 11-13).

What are the circumstances of the sins for which the Torah permits a poor person to bring a more modest offering, a situation with no parallel regarding other transgressions? This provision applies in 3 cases, set forth in the first 4 verses of chapter 5:

And if a person sins, and hears the voice of adjuration (“alah”), and is a witness, whether he has seen or known – if he does not say (his testimony), then he shall bear his iniquity. Or if a person touches any unclean thing, whether it be the carcass of an unclean beast, or the carcass of unclean cattle, or the carcass of unclean creeping things, and it is hidden from him that he is unclean, and he is guilty. Or if he touches the uncleanness of man, whatever the uncleanness may be with which he is unclean, and it is hidden from him; and he becomes aware of it, and is guilty. Or if a person swears, pronouncing with his lips to do evil or to do good, whatever it be that a person shall pronounce with an oath, and it is hidden from him, then when he becomes aware of it, he shall be guilty in one of these things.

What is unique about these 3 particular situations? Why does the Torah provide special consideration for the poor specifically in these instances? In order to answer this question, we must first understand what these cases entail. This is not a simple task, since the generally accepted interpretation of these verses among Chazal does not follow the simple meaning of the text. We shall thus first attempt to understand the simple meaning of the text, and then try to understand why the Torah shows special consideration here.

B. “If he does not say it, then he shall bear his iniquity”

Let us start with the first case. The commentators explain, following Chazal, that the verse is talking about one whose friend asks him to testify on his behalf, but he refuses, claiming that he knows nothing about the matter, and he swears falsely in this regard. This person is required to bring an “offering of an oath of testimony.” On this interpretation, the requirement of the sacrifice arises mainly as the result of the false oath in its specific context – the denial of knowing anything to testify. However, this understanding does not sit well with the words, “ve-shama kol alah,” “and he hears the voice of adjuration,” for 2 reasons. First, why does the Torah say that an oath is “heard,” rather than simply stating explicitly that someone caused him to take an oath? Second, why is the word “alah” used for an oath, rather than “shevu’a,” which would be more consistent with the third case (verse 4)?

It would therefore seem that the simple reading suggests a different situation. The key is to be found in the story of the idol of Mikha (Shoftim 17:2), which begins with Mikha’s words to his mother: “The 1100 silver pieces that were taken from you, concerning which you pronounced a curse (alit), uttering it also in my hearing – behold, the silver is with me; I took it.” When a large sum of money was taken from Mikha’s mother, she uttered in his presence an “alah” (curse) upon the thief or anyone with any knowledge of the theft, not knowing that her son was the thief. An “alah” is thus a curse that is voiced publicly, demanding a response by anyone who hears it and is somehow involved.

This helps us understand the verse in our parasha, which requires those who hear the “alah” to give evidence and thereby help the person who uttered it, even if the “alah” is not directed explicitly towards them. This also explains the expression “the voice of the alah.” A “voice” is something that is heard (see Shemot 36:6), and the text wants to tell us that even someone who did not actually hear the curse first-hand, but rather only heard reports of it, is required to respond. (See also Melakhim I 8:31-32, Mishlei 29:24.)

In light of this, it is clear why this transgression is less severe than regular transgressions. This is not a usual prohibited act (or utterance of a false oath, as Chazal interpret this law), but rather the refraining from carrying out a legal and moral obligation. Admittedly, the text tells us that in this instance the person is obligated to bring a sacrifice for his refraining, which itself is a transgression. Nevertheless, refraining from an act is not as severe as taking an action; therefore, the Torah allows for leniency in the sin-offering.

C. “Who touches any unclean thing”

The second instance is treated in verses 2-3, concerning one who unwittingly (“it is hidden from him”) touches something that is ritually unclean: an animal carcass (beast, cattle, or creeping thing) or a form of human impurity, “that he is unclean, and he is guilty.” Here too, there is a real discrepancy between the simple meaning of the text and the midrash halakha. According to Chazal, the verses are talking about “impurity of the Sanctuary and its sanctified foods” – that is, the person entered the Temple or ate of sanctified food, unaware that he was in a state of ritual impurity. Thus, the act requiring a sin offering is the entry into the Sanctuary or the eating (see Rashi and Ramban).

However, this interpretation diverges from the simple meaning of the text, since the verses do not mention the Temple or sanctified food, nor any act of transgression.

According to the simple meaning, it seems that what necessitates an offering is the very fact of contracting impurity – simply having touched something essentially impure out of negligence and lack of caution. Indeed, there is no prohibition in touching something impure, but if a Jew becomes ritually impure – even if he is not a kohen – he is obligated to undergo purification. This obligation is based on the idea that the very presence of impurity in Am Yisrael damages the sanctity of the Mishkan, as we are told explicitly in the order of the service of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, which comes to purify the Sanctuary from 2 sets of transgressions:

He shall make atonement for the Sanctuary, [1] from the impurities of Bnei Yisrael and [2] from their iniquities, for all of their transgressions, and so shall he do for the Tent of Meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their impurity. (Vayikra 16:16)

Here, too, Rashi understands the “impurity” as referring to the context of one who unwittingly entered the Sanctuary in a state of impurity. But once again, only the reality of the impurity is mentioned, without a word about entering the Sanctuary. Similarly, in Parashat Chukat we are told explicitly:

Anyone who touches the dead, even the body of a man who is dead, and does not purify himself – he has defiled God’s Mishkan, and that soul shall be cut off from Israel. (Bamidbar 19:13; see also 19:20).

There, too, Rashi understands this as talking about someone who entered the azara, but the verse makes no reference to this.

To summarize, according to the text itself, the Torah requires a person to purify himself of any ritual uncleanness; if he fails to do so, he is considered as having defiled the Mishkan. This certainly explains the leniency shown by the Torah with respect to the sin offering in this instance. Here too, there is no act of transgression, but rather a state or reality that the Torah regards as negative, even if it is not forbidden. This command therefore represents another unusual example of a sin offering that is brought without any actual transgression having been committed – hence the leniency.

D. “Or if a person swears, pronouncing with his lips”

The third case is the simplest to explain. A person swears to do a certain thing – “to do evil, or to do good” – but ultimately, “it is hidden from him” – the matter slips his mind and he forgets to fulfill his oath. Here again, it is easy to understand why the Torah allows leniency in his sin offering. Once again, he has not committed any transgression, but has rather refrained from fulfilling his oath. As we explained concerning the first case (failure to respond to an alah), here too the very fact that his omission – rather than any actual action – requires an offering is itself the message that the Torah is conveying; hence the leniency here.

Thus, we conclude that these 3 instances share an obvious common denominator: the absence of an active transgression. In 2 of these cases (the first and the third), the sin offering is required because of one’s passive behavior, while in the case of impurity the problem is a spiritual state that is not defined as an act of transgression. Therefore, the Torah differentiates between these instances and regular unintentional transgressions, providing a measure of leniency in the sin offering brought in their wake.

Translated by Kaeren Fish



The Structure and Meaning of the Daily Prayer

Shiur #18: Aleinu

By Rav Ezra Bick

Based on: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-18-aleinu>

The theme and content of the short prayer of Aleinu express a unique hope and aspiration whose grand vision is breathtaking, inspiring, and compelling. Aleinu also stands apart from the previous prayers and is not explained by anything we have discussed previously, so we will address its place within the seder tefillot at this juncture.

Interestingly, Aleinu is not found as part of the daily prayers in the classic siddurim of the Geonim or the Rambam. Its original source is in the Musaf prayer on Rosh Hashana, attributed to the Babylonian Amora Rav, dating to the earliest formulations of the prayers; but it was added to the daily prayer relatively late. This fact does not diminish its importance; on the contrary, the fact that all modern prayer rituals include this prayer should be taken as indicative of its importance. It seems that the collective genius of Israel has insisted on its adoption. This alone should focus our attention.

Initially, Aleinu was recited after the prayers, and seems to have been recited only after Shacharit, but it eventually spread to the conclusion of every tefilla, an expansion strongly supported by the Ari z"l.

The Kol Bo cites a tradition that Aleinu was composed by Yehoshua bin Nun when he crossed the Jordan River to enter the Land of Israel. This assertion has little historical basis, but I believe that the idea behind it is indicative of how the prayer should be understood, as we shall see.

So, what is the meaning of Aleinu? I think the most persuasive explanation is the one offered by the Bach (133): when one leaves the secluded confines of the synagogue and goes out into the world, in which he will encounter idolatry and impurity, he should impress on his soul the true worship of God and recommit himself to the service of God. In other words, Aleinu is not the conclusion of prayer, but rather a prayer of departure. It is the introduction to the world outside of prayer and not the conclusion of the world of prayer.

This can be demonstrated by the common custom on days on which we recite Musaf. Although the Ari recommended reciting Aleinu after every tefilla, he stated that it should not be recited between Shacharit and Musaf. The reason, it appears, is that Aleinu is not the conclusion of Shacharit, but rather the accompaniment to leaving the synagogue. If we pray 2 tefillot together, there is no reason to recite Aleinu until leaving after the second tefilla. There was also a custom to omit Aleinu when Mincha and Maariv are recited together, for, I believe, the same reason. It is also the accepted custom not to recite Aleinu on Yom Kippur after any of the daytime prayers. The reason is, again, because the entire day of Yom Kippur is defined as "before God," and basically one remains in the synagogue all the time.

This explains the aggada quoted in the Kol Bo. I am not convinced that Yehoshua recited Aleinu when crossing the Jordan – but I think he should have. The desert was, for the Jews, a place of permanent presence of God, surrounded by the "clouds of glory," eating manna from heaven, spending their days learning Torah from Moshe. The outside world is on the other side of the Jordan River, a place where each man will be "under his vine and fig tree," where he will have to struggle with the world, including rampant idolatry in the Land of Israel. This may seem like a reversal of our usual impression of a desert and the Holy Land, but in terms of occupation and activity and the relationship with God, the desert was a sanctuary and the Land of Israel was the "real" world. The crossing of the Jordan marked the entry of the Jews into history, into conflict, into the risk of contamination and de-sanctification. That is precisely the moment for which Aleinu was written.

Aleinu has 2 parts – Aleinu Le-Shabeach and Al Ken Nekaveh. The relationship is explicitly causative. Aleinu le-shabe'ach, we must praise God for separating us from the rest of humanity and teaching us to worship Him, the King of kings, who created the world and whose glory fills the heavens – and therefore ("al ken") we hope to see the day when His majesty will be reflected in a world where evil has been eliminated and all people accept His kingship. This makes a lot of sense on Rosh Hashana, when Aleinu is the preface to the section of Malkhiyot (Kingship) and Al Ken Nekaveh is the opening in which we actually declare God to be king of the entire world.

The Chatan Sofer points out that to some extent, the 2 sections are opposites. The first celebrates Jewish distinctiveness and exclusivity, while the second aspires to universal acceptance of God. That is exactly the point of Al Ken. We must praise and thank God for enabling us to be the people for whom He is king – but precisely for that reason, we are charged with carrying that message to the entire world, le-taken olam be-malkhut Shakkai, to dream and aspire for a world in which He will be king over all, where "He will be one and His name one."

The Chatan Sofer explains this as deriving from the experience of the love of God. Because we love God, we cannot accept a situation in which only we recognize Him. (R. Chisdai Crescas writes that it is a characteristic of the love of God that it leads to a passionate desire to call others to join in the love.)

Still, there is some tension between the 2 parts – unless viewed in light of the Bach's explanation. We are not celebrating Jewish distinctiveness for its own sake. We are going out into the world, and that is only proper if it is accompanied by the understanding of the greatness of the mission, le-taken olam be-malkhut Shakkai. We can leave the sanctuary of the service of God only if we first understand that the life of sanctity we experience in the synagogue, the service of God our King, is radically different than what we will meet outside; and, secondly, that we leave the sanctuary only in order to bring the service of God with us. We leave the sacred precincts because we are carrying out a mission, to elevate the world and work for its transformation. Aleinu is not only a prophylactic to the dangers of the world, but a charge and mission to make the world the kingdom of God.

Hence, Al Ken, since we inhabit the kingdom of God, as exemplified in our prayer standing in the house of the King, therefore, when we go out it is with the dream, hope, and mission of advancing the vision of the world of the King, when "all flesh shall call on Your name." Only thus is it permitted for God's people to wander about the secular world.

The process whereby Aleinu moved from the Rosh Hashana prayer to every day represents an amazing transformation. Al Ken Nekaveh envisions a day when God will reign totally over the entire world. Placing it at the beginning of the special sections of Musaf on Rosh Hashana makes sense; Rosh Hashana is the day we crown God as king. Moving Aleinu to a daily recitation is taking it from the throne room of God, as it were, to the mundane street, to a daily experience, without the majestic glory of the holiest of holies. But that is precisely the point – we are commanded to "export" the majesty of God from the inner sanctum to the street, to the mundane, to the entire world. The Jewish People moved it to every day, to every time they leave the sanctuary to venture into the world, because that is the true message of being a member of the people of God. Since we have been favored and chosen to be the bearers of His name, we hope, pray and wait for the day when His name will be honored at every point, when "every inhabitant of the world will know and recognize that to You shall bend every knee and swear every tongue." We know this is true when we are in the synagogue of Rosh Hashana – but we must continue to let that message imbue our every breath precisely when we are walking in the street of a desecrated world. In the synagogue on Rosh Hashana, Aleinu is a statement of fact; at the door when leaving the synagogue on a regular weekday, it is a song of triumph and dedication to the ultimate transformation of the world to what should be.

The Rama states – as a rule of halakha – that one must pay special attention to the meaning of Aleinu. This can be difficult to do with a prayer one learned in first grade. But just read the extraordinary words of this prayer! It is the wind that carries a Jewish soul out into the cold world and supports it in flight, so that it should not crash to the ground. It is the vision that glows in the distance, before our eyes straining into the future, which gives a ray of light and hope when walking in the dark.

It is, in other words, the anthem of the believing servant of God. Standing on the banks of Jordan, about to set out on the great mission of creating the people of God in the Land of Israel, fearful and hopeful, Yehoshua recites Aleinu. It is the battle cry of a movement, a movement to "establish the world as the kingdom of God." The first paragraph, Aleinu, states who we are; the second commits us to what we stand for and to what we are dedicated.

It is important to understand the particular flavor of the kingdom of God described in Al Ken Nekaveh.

On Rosh Hashana, there is a Malkhiyot prayer recited at the start of the Amida, beginning with the words "and thus, Hashem our God, place Your fear on all your creation." It calls for the majesty of God to overwhelm the world, culminating in the hope that "all of evil shall disappear like smoke." This is not, however, the Malkhiyot that is chosen for the middle sections of the Amida. There, we recite Al Ken Nekaveh, focusing not on the overpowering of evil or its destruction, but on a vision of "all flesh shall call on Your name, to turn towards You all the evil of the earth... that every knee shall bend to You, every tongue swear, before You they shall bow and fall, and to the glory of Your name shall they give honor; and all shall accept the yoke of your kingdom, and You shall reign over speedily and forever." It is this vision, unifying all in the service of God, eliminating the separation we joyfully praised at the beginning of Aleinu, that is the anthem of the Jew in the world. It is not my mission to see the fear and terror of God overwhelming the world, but rather to call and encourage all flesh to turn and accept the kingdom of God: "And it is written: On that day shall God be one and His name be one."

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