



## Why the Sacrifices?

### Further Thoughts on Parashat Vayikra

*Preface: The Bible is described as a “book of blood and a bloody book.” In the Torah, just as in the New Testament, sacrificial blood is connected to atonement and the forgiveness of sin. In this brief article, I explore some of the reasons why the LORD asked for sacrifices as the means to draw near to Him.*



The Book of Leviticus (i.e., *Vayikra*: וַיִּקְרָא) centers on the various laws of sacrifice pertaining to the Mishkan (Tabernacle), and therefore it is undeniable that sacrifice is an integral part of the both Jewish law and the Torah. Indeed, even today the traditional Jewish liturgy includes prayers that appeal for the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of the sacrificial system. Nonetheless the sages wondered why God demanded offerings of animals and grain as part of his worship. Surely God has no physical need for these things: “For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills” (Psalm 50:10). Unlike pagan sacrificial rites, the sacrifices of the Torah were never intended to “bribe” God or to curry His favor. The Jewish people were designated a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” during the time of their liberation from Egypt, even before the pattern of the Mishkan had been revealed at Sinai (Exod. 19:6).

Let’s review a little Torah history. The very first sacrifice of the Torah was offered by God Himself, when He slaughtered a lamb to cover the shame of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21). According to Jewish tradition, Adam built the first altar and offered sacrifices to the LORD as humanity’s first high priest. Adam taught his sons about the law of sacrifice, though Cain’s offering (מִנְחָה) was rejected (because it came from the fruit of the earth that was cursed) whereas Abel’s was accepted because it was based on blood sacrifice (Gen. 4:3-5). When Adam later died, his son Seth (שֵׁת) became high priest in his place. When Seth later died, the priesthood went to Methuselah (מֵתוּשֶׁלַח) who served for centuries. Methuselah was prophesied to die seven days before the advent of the great Flood, and upon his death his grandson Noah (נֹחַ) was commissioned to be humanity’s high priest.



The first occurrence of the word “altar” (i.e., *mizbe'ach*: מִזְבֵּחַ) occurs after the great flood (Gen. 8:20). According to Jewish tradition, Noah had learned the laws of sacrifice (“clean” and “unclean”) from his forefathers and rebuilt Adam’s original altar in Jerusalem (which had been destroyed earlier by wicked people of the generation of the Flood). Later, however, he was disqualified to be priest and his firstborn son Shem (שֵׁם) took his place. Shem remained in Jerusalem (i.e., Salem) and became its king and high priest (the name “Malki-Tzedek” [מַלְכֵי-צֶדֶק] was later ascribed to him as an honorary title). From Shem’s line would come Abraham, through whom would descend the Jewish people. Of particular importance is the altar where Abraham sacrificed his son Isaac upon Mount Moriah (i.e., the Akedah). At the last minute, God stopped Abraham and provided a divinely appointed substitute (a male lamb, or ram) in place of his son. Thereafter each of the Hebrew patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – offered sacrifices upon altars to the LORD (Gen. 12:8; 26:25; 33:20).

The theme of the sacrificed lamb reappears centuries later, when Moses commanded Israel to sacrifice the Passover on the eve of the Exodus from Egypt (Exod. 12:1-28). Indeed the birth of the Jewish nation resulted from the sacrificed lamb of God, and the theme of the sacrificial system thereafter became enshrined as the climax of the Sinai revelation itself, in the description and creation of the Mishkan (i.e., “Tabernacle”). In other words, the redemption secured by the blood of the lamb in Egypt led directly to the revelation of the laws of the altar revealed at Sinai. As the New Testament later attests, the sacrificial death of Yeshua as the “Lamb of God” was within God’s mind as He revealed the “pattern” (תְּבִינָה) of the Mishkan and the various laws of sacrifice to Moses.

Jewish theology following the destruction of the Second Temple (i.e., post-Temple Judaism) has attempted to explain the significance of the sacrificial system apart from acknowledging Yeshua as the true Lamb of God, the Substance of all that the sacrifices foreshadowed. The *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez*, for instance, said that the sacrifices were given for five reasons: First, as a means of undergoing self-examination; second, as a means of providing sustenance for the priests; third, to admonish Israel (i.e., a sacrifice acted as a “fine” for a sin); fourth, to inspire the sinner to repentance; and fifth, to demonstrate the futility of idolatry. The medieval theologian Maimonides stated that the sacrifices were “chukkim” (decrees) that were intended to be offered as a sign of devotion to God. Later he said that they were given as a concession to man’s weakness, since the rituals made it easier for people to tangibly approach the infinite God, and God “allowed” for them sacrifices to keep them away from idolatry (Lev. 17:5-7).



The Baal Hachinuch said that the sacrificial system was intended to teach the need for *teshuvah* (repentance). He argued that man's distinctive attribute is his ability to reason, that is, his ability to think, use language, and make ethical decisions. These qualities constitute the image of God within man and therefore set mankind apart from the animal world. When a person sins, however, it is a failure of reason, and this implies the forfeiture or desecration of the image of God. In other words, sin is a form of "animal" behavior, based on the lower instincts and unreflective desires, and therefore the sacrifice of an animal is intended to reveal the end result of a "reasonless being." Witnessing the destruction of the animal is intended to warn against sin and its destructive irrationality.

These sorts of "rationalistic" approaches are in contrast to Nachmanides, who argued that the sacrifices were offered as a response to man's sins and failures. Since every sinful act has three aspects, Nachmanides said there were three corresponding aspects to animal sacrifices. Sinful thoughts and desires correspond to the slaughtering of the animal and the application of its blood upon the altar; sinful words correspond to confession (*vidui*) that accompanied the sacrifice; and sinful deeds correspond to the laying on of hands (*semichah*) prior to the slaughter of the animal. Participating in substitutionary sacrifice causes the sinner to recognize the nature of his offense and his culpability: "Were it not for God's acceptance of this sacrifice in my stead, I would merit a place upon the altar." This idea is similar to the theology of "penal substitutionary atonement," that is, God's demand for justice is "satisfied" with the exchange of the shedding of a sacrificial victim's blood. In other words, punishment for sin must involve the shedding of blood, and the sacrifice "pays the penalty" for the offense against a holy and morally perfect God.

The Torah makes it clear that blood (דָּם) is used as a means of consecration as well as a means of obtaining atonement (i.e., *kapparah*: כַּפָּרָה) with God. Blood was used on the doorposts of the houses in Egypt to ward off judgment and was later used to ratify the covenant given at Sinai (Exod. 24:8). All the elements of Mishkan (Tabernacle) were likewise "separated" by its use: The altar, the various furnishings of the Temple, the vestments of the priests, and even the priests themselves were sanctified by blood (Exod. 29:20-21, Heb. 9:21). But ultimately blood was used to "make atonement" for the soul upon the altar. As the Torah (Lev. 17:11) plainly states: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood (כִּי נַפְשׁ הַבֶּשֶׂר בַּדָּם), and I have given it for you on the altar to atone (לְכַפֵּר) for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life (כִּי-הַדָּם הוּא בְנַפְשׁ יְכַפֵּר)." Blood is therefore connected to the holiness of life through sacrificial death....

The Scriptures plainly teach that the "wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23, 1 Cor. 15:22) and the soul that sins shall die (Gen. 2:17, 3:19, Ezek. 18:4, 20). Sin is a source of lethal spiritual contamination or defilement (symbolized by *tza'arat*). The holiness and justice of God requires that sin be punished by death, and death is represented by the shedding of



blood (i.e., blood represents the “life of the flesh,” and blood outside the flesh therefore represents death). God graciously instituted the system of animal sacrifices and blood rituals to “atone” for sin (i.e., restore the broken relationship with God) by means of identifying with the death of a vicarious substitute. With regard to the chatat (“sin offering”) or ashram (“guilt offering”), the worshipper would bring a kosher animal (korban) to the entrance of the Mishkan and place both his hands on the animal’s head, leaning on it to identify it with himself (Lev. 4:29). This act of “semikhah” (סְמִיכָה) symbolically transferred sins to the sacrificial animal. Then, the offerer himself would slay the animal and confess that his sin caused the innocent victim to be slain in his place (*Menachot 110a*). Nachmanides was basically correct: The sacrificial system was intended to depict the “life-for-life” principle: God accepted the sacrificial substitute in place of the offender based on his faith.

The New Testament teaches that Yeshua came to die “for our sins.” Sin separates us from God, but *korban* (sacrifice) draws us near. The message of the gospel is that the Voice of the LORD - the very Word spoken from between the cherubim above the kapporet (mercy seat) - “became flesh” (ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο) and “tabernacled among us” (ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν) for the purpose of becoming our substitutionary sacrifice for the guilt and defilement caused by our sins (John 1:1,14). Yeshua was “born to die” (Heb. 10:5-7), and his life was lived in relation to His sacrificial death (Mark 8:27-33). As the Apostle Paul put it: This is of “first importance”: Yeshua died for our sins to make us right with God, and was raised from the dead to vindicate the righteousness of God (1 Cor. 15:3-5). His sacrificial death eternally draws us near to God, and we can come boldly before God’s Presence on the basis of His shed blood for our sins...

The sacrificial system of the Mishkan functions as a *parable* for us, or a metaphor of God’s redemptive plan revealed in the life and death of Yeshua. The Mercy Seat (i.e., *kapporet*: כַּפֹּרֶת) represents both the Throne of God (Heb. 4:16; 2 Ki. 19:15) as well as the Cross of Yeshua, where propitiation for our sins was made (Rom. 3:25). The glory of the Torah of Moses was destined to fade away (2 Cor. 3:3-11), just as its ritual center (i.e., the Tabernacle/Temple) was a shadow (σκιά) to be replaced by the greater priesthood of Malki-Tzedek (Heb. 10:1; 13:10). Yeshua is the Goal and the “Goel” (i.e., גּוֹאֵל, Redeemer) from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13). “For the law made nothing perfect, but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, and that is how we draw near to God” (Heb. 7:19). The sacrificial death of Yeshua caused the parochet of the Temple to be torn asunder, thereby indicating that access to Presence of God was made available to all who would come before God through faith in the sacrifice of Yeshua.



The Bible is described as a “book of blood and a bloody book.” In the Torah, just as in the New Testament, sacrificial blood is connected to atonement and the forgiveness of sin (Heb. 9:22). Blood is the means by which spiritual uncleanness (*tza'arat*) - the defilement caused by sin and death - is removed from us. However, unlike the blood rituals of the Tabernacle which functioned as “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (Heb. 8:5), the sacrifice of Yeshua has “perfected for all time” those who are being sanctified (Heb. 10:4, 11-14). All the sacrifices offered in the Mishkan (and Temple) anticipated the greater sacrifice of Yeshua Himself (Heb. 9:23-26). By faith we “lean our hands” upon the head of Yeshua, accepting that He is our sacrificial substitute before the Father. We trust in the divine “life-for-life” principle of Yehua’s life given for us... We “lean into Him,” meaning we trust in His sacrifice and abandon our sins with Him...

“Come now and reason with the LORD. Though your sins are as scarlet, they can be made white as snow...” (Isa. 1:18). The blood of bulls and goats could never fully remove our sins since they did not represent the very life of God poured out on our behalf (Heb. 10:4). God chose the ultimate “cleansing agent” for sin by shedding the precious blood of His own Son for the sake of our atonement (1 Cor. 15:3-4; Rom. 5:11). The blood of Yeshua truly cleanses us from the stain of our sins (Heb. 10:12-14). We make “spiritual contact” with the sacrificial blood of Yeshua through faith -- by being “baptized into His death” and identifying with Him as our Sin-Bearer before God. We then are delivered from the law’s verdict against us and accepted into the Kingdom of God (Rom. 4:25; 2 Cor. 5:21; Col. 1:13-14, 2:10-15).

The blood of our Messiah Yeshua is called the “the blood of the everlasting covenant” (דָּם בְּרִית עוֹלָם) that cleanses us from our sins (Heb. 13:20, 1 John 1:7). The Cross represents the “Mercy Seat” (*kapporet*) that covered the ark in the Holy of Holies made without hands. It is interesting to note that the word used in the Greek Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *kapporet* (“cover”) is *hilasterion* (ἱλαστήριον). The New Testament picks up this usage in Romans 3:25: “God put forward Yeshua as a propitiation (ἱλαστήριον) through faith in His blood.” In other words, the sprinkling of Yeshua’s blood - represented by His Passion upon the cross - was “presented” upon the Heavenly Kapporet, before the very Throne of God Himself. There is a new altar, *chaverim*, whereof those who serve the older shadow of the Tabernacle have no right to eat (Heb. 13:10).

Because of Yeshua, we now have access to the Throne of God Himself (Heb. 4:16). All glory be to Yeshua our Savior, “the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood” (Rev. 1:5). “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God” (Rev. 5:6-9).



## Addendum:

### *Shadow and Substance in Gospel of John*

The Gospel of John, perhaps more than the other gospels, shows how the Mishkan (i.e., Tabernacle) foreshadowed the redemptive plan of God given through the sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah. The Word became flesh and “tabernacled” (i.e., ἐσκήνωσεν, from σκηνος, the Greek word for the Mishkan) among us, just as the presence of YHVH appeared in the pillar of cloud and of fire over the Mishkan in the wilderness (John 1:14; Exod. 40:34-35). Yeshua is the logos (ὁ λόγος), the Word of the LORD (דְּבַר יְהוָה), and the very Voice of YHVH (John 1:1). He is the *mikdash* (מִקְדָּשׁ), the true Temple of God (John 2:19-21; Exod. 40:34-38). His was the Voice that spoke from the between the outstretched wings of the cherubim in the Temple of God (John 1:18). He is the LORD God, the great I AM (John 8:58). Yeshua is revealed in the three furnishings located in the Holy Place (הַקֹּדֶשׁ) of the Tabernacle. He is the Bread of Presence (John 6:23-33; 51; Exod. 25:30), the Menorah of the world (John 8:12; Exod. 25:31-32), and the Golden Altar of Incense (John 16:23-24; Exod. 30:1-10). He is the Lamb of God (John 1:29; 19:36; Exod. 12:46; Isa. 53:4-7) and the prophesied Suffering Servant of the LORD (Isa. 53; John 19:16). Yeshua is the true Bridge to the Father (John 1:50-51, 14:6), the gateway to the Throne of Glory (John 10:1-10; Exod. 27:16), and the Savior of the World (הַעוֹלָם מוֹשִׁיעַ) (John 4:42). Yeshua is the very “Son of God” (John 1:29; Psalm 2:7; Prov. 30:4) who came to bear our sins. He is the great High Priest who intercedes on behalf of His people (John 17). His life represents the Shekhinah Glory of the LORD (John 12:38-41; Isa. 6:1-10; 53:1) and His resurrection demonstrates the righteousness of God (John 20). The veil (parochet) separating the Holy Place (הַקֹּדֶשׁ) from the Holy of Holies (הַקִּדְשִׁים הַקְּדוֹשִׁים) is likened to the body of Yeshua that was broken for us (Heb. 10:20; Matt. 27:51; Heb. 9:20; 10:10,12,14).

Yeshua is the Messiah (John 1:49-50; 4:25-26), heralded by spirit of Elijah (John 1:23; Mal. 4:5; cp. Matt. 11:14), the true King of Israel (John 12:15; Zech. 9:9), and the great Prophet spoken of by Moses (John 5:39,46; Deut. 18:15). He is the “Smitten Rock,” the “Living Waters” (John 4:10; 7:38; Exod. 17:6), the living manna that came from heaven (John 6:51), and the Deliverer of Israel (John 8:24-43; 12:47; Exod. 12). Yeshua is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11-4; 12:15; Isa. 40:9). He is the True Vine of Israel (John 15; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6) and all who abide in Him bear fruit to the glory of God. Finally, Yeshua is the Judge of the World who is worthy of the same honor accorded to the Father (John 5:22-23).

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15; Num. 21:5-9). Humanity as a whole has been “bitten by the snake” and needs to be delivered from its venom. Just as the image made in the likeness of the destroying snake was lifted up for Israel’s healing, so the One made in the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3) was to be lifted up as the Healer of the world. *Bless His Holy Name.*