

Parashat Vayikra ויקרא

Torah: Leviticus 1:1–5:26 (6:7 in English versions)

Haftarah: Isaiah 43:21–44:23

The Purposes for the Sacrifices

General Overview

God said to him Moses, “I have one more task for you, surpassing all that you have done so far. Go and teach the people of Israel the laws of ritual purity and instruct them in the sacrifices.” (A midrash cited by Rabbi Elie Munk)¹

We come now to the third book of Moses. The title for this book, “Leviticus,” is derived from the Septuagint (LXX). It probably reflects the oldest title for the book in Hebrew *torat kohanim* (הכוהנים תורת) which means, “The Instructions of the priests.” The present Hebrew title is derived from the opening words in Hebrew, *vayikra* (ויקרא), which can be translated, “and He called.”

Exposition

Leviticus is a book that mainly describes the duties of the priests and operations of the sacrifices. Of course there is much more, such as the most detailed treatment of the Holy Day cycle, found in chapter 23. As with every book of the Bible, it is helpful to see the book in a broad outline. This helps us to get a firm grasp of the contents and logical flow of the book. Accordingly, we offer the following outline of Leviticus, with chapter numbers:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------|
| I. Teachings of Sacrifices | 1–7 |
| II. Consecration of Priests | 8–10 |
| III. Purity and Purification | 11–15 |
| IV. Day of Atonement | 16 |
| V. Personal Holiness | 17–26 |
| VI. Tithes and Vows | 27 |

The first *parasha* in Leviticus is called *Vayikra*. This of course is also the Hebrew name for the entire book. Because of potential confusion therefore, when we are referring to the whole book of Leviticus in this particular commentary on this Torah portion we will call it “Leviticus” and we shall use the word “Vayikra” only when we are referring to this first Torah portion in the book.

Parashat Vayikra is one of the foundational sections in the Torah. Its contents are extremely important and basic to our understanding of the sacrificial and priestly systems. Our study of this parasha, reflecting the flow of the contents, will focus on the sacrificial system. Our outline is as follows:

Introduction

- I. The Purposes for the Sacrifices
- II. The Names of the Sacrifices
- III. The Procedure for the Sacrifices

Summary and Conclusion

In this excerpt from Parashat Vayikra, we will focus on section I, The Purposes for the Sacrifices.

Introduction — He is Calling Again!

Parashat Vayikra opens with the words, “The Lord called to Moses....”

This is the third time that the Lord called to Moshe. The first call came at the burning bush. The second one took place at Mount Sinai immediately before the Torah was given. Each time God called Moshe it was at a critical juncture in the history of Israel. The same holds true for this, the third call here in Leviticus 1:1.

Rabbi Munk crystallizes the significance of this call when he says,

The noblest part of the prophet’s task has only begun. All that came before was but a prelude to the realization of Israel’s Messianic vision/mission. He must now train the nation for its sacred role.²

That sacred role was for Israel to be a kingdom of priests. If this line of reasoning is correct, then it shows us the importance that the Lord placed on the sacrifices. For as some commentators imply, not only were the sacrifices essential for Israel, but they also had significance for the entire world. It was through the sacrifices and the duties of the priesthood that Israel, at least partially, fulfilled her role as a light to the nations. Thus, once again, the Lord called Moshe to teach Israel her God-given task in telling the world about Him.

I. The Purpose of the Sacrifices

Why did God institute sacrifices? Why did He not just give teachings in order to help people live moral and upright lives? Commentators are not unified in their opinions about the answers to these questions. Whether or not the sages agree, it is clearly taught in the Renewed Covenant Scriptures. The Book of Hebrews makes it clear that the blood of bulls and goats was intended to deal with sin. (More on that later.)

There is a hint however from the text of Leviticus itself of another purpose for the sacrifices. The hint is found in the meaning of the Hebrew word for sacrifice. The root is *k-r-v* (ק-ר-ב), which can be translated “near.” What this seems to be saying is that a sacrifice or an offering was designed by the Eternal One to bring the worshipper near or close to Him.

In *Exodus* we have just finished learning about the house that the Husband built in which to have fellowship with His Bride. That was wonderful and it sounded rather idyllic, but there was a problem. The Bride, Israel, was comprised of typical men and women — sinful by birth. The Scriptures are clear when they insist that sinful people cannot come into the presence of a holy God. Consequently the holy God, out of grace and mercy, established a way of approach — through sacrifices.

In other words, sin is the main obstacle to intimate fellowship between God and man. Because of sin man is unable to have fellowship with God and cannot come into His presence. However God instituted a just way to deal with sin, making it possible for the sinner to bring a sacrifice, which “if offered in the right spirit, is the medium whereby man attains closer nearness to the divine.”³

II. The Names of the Sacrifices

Vayikra describes five kinds of sacrifices, each identified by a different name. Let us look at them one at a time and see what we can learn.

A. The Olah Offering — Chapter 1

The first sacrifice, found in chapter 1, is called in Hebrew *olah* (עולה). There are various versions of the translation of *olah*, a word whose root 'ס-ל-אח (עלה) connotes "going up." According to Rashi and Radak, an olah offering was an offering that was completely burnt (apparently because it goes up in flames to God).⁴ This offering is often called a burnt offering because it was totally consumed with fire and its smoke was continually rising upwards to the heavens.

There are other ideas about the meaning of this offering. Rabbi Hirsch thinks that it has to do with the fact that the one making the offering is raised from the status of sinner and brought into a "state of spiritual 'elevation.'"⁵ Evangelical commentator, R. K. Harrison, on the other hand, alludes to 1:9 and suggests that it was called an olah offering because "the essence of the animal gave gratification to God as the sacrificial smoke ascended."⁶ We think that all of these connotations apply.

The text in 1:3 indicates that the olah offering is voluntary. Along these lines, Hertz suggests,

The individual is left free, according to the occasion or according to his feelings, to decide the kind of prescribed sacrifice he wishes to bring.⁷

When a person had a need in his own heart, he was permitted by God to bring this sacrifice. He was not commanded, however, to bring an olah. Instead he was left to his own motivation.

In addition to this apparently being a voluntary sacrifice, the text is not clear on which specific occasions one might be likely to bring such an offering. Munk asserts,

The olah is brought by a person who has sinned in his thoughts or a person who has failed to perform a required positive action.⁸

Hertz explains that in the olah,

the one who offers it expresses his desire and intention to ascend himself to Heaven, i.e., to devote himself entirely to God and place his life in God's service.⁹

Hence, Rabbi Hertz thinks that sin is not the prime issue in offering an olah sacrifice, but a secondary one. On the other hand, the *ArtScroll Chumash* claims that,

An olah offering may be brought by someone who has intentionally committed a sin for which the Torah does not prescribe a punishment or who failed to perform a positive commandment.¹⁰

1. Sin is at the Core

Offering sacrifices was common in ancient times. This olah offering was considered to be the most basic of all sacrifices.¹¹ No matter what confusion we may have in discerning its specific purpose, we can rest assured that the children of Israel clearly understood it!

There is a good hint of its intended purpose in the text of the Torah itself. We read in 1:4 that when one offered up the animal he was to place his hand on its head. We will see later in this commentary how this clearly implied confession of sin. Thus, no matter what the specific reason for this particular sacrifice, sin was at the core of one's motivation in bringing it. Whatever man wanted to accomplish could not have been done without dealing first with his sin.

2. Whether Rich or Poor

Vayikra indicates that the olah offering could have been brought from the cattle, the sheep, the goats, or doves. The reason for the variety of choices seems to have been based on how rich or poor a person was. The more affluent someone was, the larger the animal was that they brought for sacrifice. The very poor were permitted to bring doves. According to Munk, the *Zohar* (a compilation of Jewish mysticism) teaches that

It is to teach us that the sacrifice offered by the poor man, who can bring only fowl, has the same importance in the eyes of the Lord as that from the flock offered by the man of average means, and as that from the herd offered by the wealthy man.¹²

Yeshua taught the same in his famous encounter with the widow who only brought a mite, an extremely small amount of money contrasted with the large amount of money that her detractors were bringing. (Mark 12:41ff.)

3. Atonement Brings Change

There is one last comment we want to make on the olah offering. One of its distinctive features is that it was totally burnt on the altar. Neither the priest nor the one making the offering ate it. Rabbi Hertz best explains this characteristic when he says that this burning

embodies the idea of the submission of the worshiper to the will of God in its most perfect form, as the entire animal was placed upon the altar to be burnt.¹³

If Hertz is correct, and we believe that he is, then this would teach us that atonement for sin naturally results in a submission of the whole person to the will of God. James also confirms this in the Renewed Covenant Scriptures by teaching that a faith without works is really no faith at all (James 2:14–26).

¹ Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra*, 2.

² Ibid.

³ J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 410.

⁴ *The ArtScroll Chumash*, 545.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus*. (TOTC), 44.

⁷ Hertz, op. cit., 410.

-
- ⁸ Munk, op. cit., 6.
⁹ Hertz, op. cit., 411.
¹⁰ ArtScroll, op. cit., 545.
¹¹ Hertz, op. cit., 411.
¹² Munk, op. cit., 14.
¹³ Hertz, op.cit., 411.