

BURNT OFFERINGS

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

The Almighty said, "Let us make adam (man) in our image and our likeness." (Bereshith 1:26)

The word "adam" is used again in Vayikra: "When an adam (man) sacrifices one of his animals to God...."¹ Man is referred to here as "adam" to teach us that just as the first "adam" offered sacrifices to God only from his own property - for everything belonged to him - so all sacrifices should be taken from property belonging to the person offering them, not from stolen property.²

"I am God who loves justice and hates theft in an Olah offering."³ The prophet notes that God's hatred is not limited to stolen sacrifices, but that He hates theft in the Olah offering itself. Since a bird's diet consists of stolen food, the Torah specifies that the organs that consumed the stolen food be removed before sacrificing it.⁴ Since a bird's innards are associated with theft, they cannot be allowed to exist even for a moment in the Beith HaMikdash, a place of absolute truth. They are thrown onto the floor where they are miraculously absorbed into the ground.⁵

There is another reason that the verse singled out the Olah sacrifice. The meat of most offerings is divided three ways: between the owner, the Kohanim, and the altar. The Olah is the only sacrifice that is totally burned up on the altar. Since no one would benefit by eating the meat of a stolen Olah, one might think that God would accept a stolen Olah. The verse emphasizes that when it comes to theft there are no exceptions, and all stolen offerings are repulsive in God's eyes.

Our Sages illustrate this idea with the following analogy. A king was journeying through his kingdom when he reached the place where travelers pay customs. The king took the required amount of money from his pocket, and instructed his servants to give it to the tax collector. The servants were slightly taken aback; since all the money collected belonged to the king, what reason should the king have to pay customs. Replied the king, "If I pay this tax all of the other travelers will understand that they certainly should pay."⁶

One might think that since everything belongs to God, He would accept a stolen Olah on the grounds that it is merely being returned to its true owner. As the verse notes, God "loves justice," even when it is seemingly unnecessary, for it is a pillar of the world and a mainstay of society. Therefore God hates injustice, even when no one benefits from it.

1. Vayikra 1:2.

2. See Pirke D'Rav Eliezer Ch. 31 (cited in Ramban, Bereshith 22:2), which explains that Adam offered sacrifices to God.
3. Yeshiah 61,8.
4. Riff, Sukkah 30a, based on Vayikra Rabbah 3:4.
5. Yoma 21a, as cited in Rashi Vayikra 1:16.
6. Sukkah 30a.

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