

FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Fighting Fire With Fire ¹

While parshas Vayikra introduced us to a rich variety of *korbanos*, our parshah immediately adds an element that we have not seen before. The very first detail that we are told about the *olah* is that it is to remain on the fire of the altar through the night. When we examine this a bit more closely, we stand back in surprise. The Torah does not really describe anything in this halacha that is unique to the *olah*. In fact, we burn the heavy limbs of a variety of different offerings at night. Why does the Torah make the *olah* the exemplar, the vehicle through which we come to understand a much broadly applied halacha?

We can propose a solution by first examining another anomaly concerning the *olah*. Rather than directly indicate in which part of the Temple courtyard the *chatas* should be slaughtered, the Torah takes a roundabout path, predicating one upon the other. "In the place that you slaughter the *olah* [there] you should slaughter the *chatas*."² Why the circumlocution?

Shem MiShmuel observes that the assigned position of the *olah* is *tzafon*, the north. The same letters form the word *tzafun*, which means hidden, alluding to the thoughts of the one who offers his *korban*. Traditionally, the *olah* is brought to atone for thoughts of sin, thoughts that remain hidden within the heart of the offering's owner. Placing the *olah* in the north, in *tzafon*, beautifully marries function with place. *Chatas*, on the other hand, atones for active, observable sins, albeit committed without full intent. It does not seem appropriate that it, too, should be fixed in the north, in the direction that alludes to hiddenness.

Upon further reflection, the identity of *chatas* with *olah* is compelling. How does it come to pass that a person violates a Torah law without intending to commit a transgression? Surely it is Heaven itself that leads the inadvertent sinner to his failure, as a consequence of his sinful thoughts! A person who entertains thoughts of sin and refrains from committing it still has bound himself to sin through those thoughts. His fear of Heaven allows him to stop short of the commission of a forbidden deed, but he does not escape a dangerous involvement and flirtation with evil. That involvement percolates to the surface of activity in the form of a sin, albeit committed without deliberate intent.

Thoughts of *aveirah* are insidious. The gemara³ makes that abundantly clear: "Thoughts of *aveirah* are worse than *aveirah* itself." The ultimate source of all misdeeds is the mental involvement with

sin,⁴ which is the usual beginning of the downward spiral towards active transgression.

It makes perfect sense, then, that we learn about burning the limbs of offerings through the example of *olah*, specifically. Chazal tell us⁵ "whatever is used by way of fire must be purged through fire." This alludes to the universe of sins, in which what is committed through "fire" can only be rectified by fire (Magid of Kozhnitz). Chametz, which symbolizes the core kernel of evil, must be burnt; no other method of disposal will suffice. Similarly, there is but one way to address pernicious thoughts of *aveirah*, represented by the *olah*. Their dangerous fire must be met with the holy flame of the altar itself. One fire consumes another through the darkness of the night. The lusts and desires of Man's heart peak during the darkness of the dominion of the *sitra achra*.⁶ We were instructed to keep the light of the *menorah* lit throughout the night, emphasizing the Knowledge and consciousness that can protect us from sin, i.e. the awareness that the Divine King is watching and taking note of all our deeds.

Another facet of the struggle against evil is that HKBH creates the cure from the disease itself. A Jew never gets to fully savor and cherish his own sins. Hidden within the sin, *tzafun* within, is a powerful sense of regret and remorse, which opposes the stranglehold of the transgression. It leads to the "broken spirit" which the Torah⁷ tells us is the authentic offering to Hashem. This broken spirit functions in a comparable manner to the holy flame that can consume the fire of sin.

Generally we become overwrought with remorse only after actually committing a sin; thoughts of sin do not produce the same guilt within us. This may be understandable - but it is inaccurate. Our inner infatuation with evil is a devastating fault. The Torah therefore cautions us to expose those thoughts of sin to the holy fire of the altar throughout the entire night, until the light of dawn.

Torah is eternal. The dynamic that is hinted at in the *parshah* of the *olah* applies today, even in the absence of a Temple. We lack the holy fire of the altar, but we are obligated to seek the closest substitute. There is only one way to do battle with the thoughts of sin that weaken us and bind us to evil. They must be countered with the passion and fire of Torah and *avodah*.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 24-26

² Vayikra 6:18

³ Yoma 29A

⁴ For other explanations of the passage, see Kad HaKemach #9; Tanya 1:29

⁵ Avodah Zarah 75B, in describing how to purge a utensil of prohibited foods it absorbed

⁶ The "other side," i.e. the forces of evil, obscuring the consciousness of good

⁷ Tehilim 51:19

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