

'MINDING' OUR OWN BUSINESS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The Olah Offering: 'Minding' Our Own Business

And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying... "This is the teaching [Torah] of the Olah [Elevation-offering]: It is the Elevation offering that stays on the flame of the Altar all night until morning." [6:1-2]

The Midrash, commenting on the above pasuk, says: "Rabbi Acha said in the name of Rabbi Chanina bar Papa: [Why does the pasuk refer to the laws of the Olah as Torah?] Perhaps one might say: When the Holy Temple stood, we were able to bring sacrifices and achieve atonement. Now that there is no Temple - how are we to achieve atonement? Says Hashem: If you will study the laws [Torah] of the Olah, I will consider it as if you have brought an Olah for a sacrifice."

K'sav Sofer explains that it is no coincidence that the Midrash chooses to derive this novelty - that learning the laws of an offering is equivalent to bringing one - specifically in regard to an Olah offering. Each korban (sacrifice) had its purpose. A Chatas, for instance, was brought by one who had inadvertently violated a Torah prohibition, such as eating forbidden meat, or performing work on Shabbos. A Korban Olah, say our Sages, was to atone for impure thoughts.

Thus, he explains, it is specifically with regard to the Olah offering that "learning its laws is as good as bringing one." Since the purpose of the Olah was to atone for impure thoughts, it is befitting that purifying one's thoughts through Torah study should stand in its stead. But for a korban whose purpose was to atone for having actually transgressed a specific sin, perhaps studying and "thinking" about its laws is not enough. In other words: For sins of thought, it is enough to repent in one's mind. For sins of deed, one must go further...

The whole idea of a thought-sin seems almost foreign to one living in Western society. After all, what I think is no one's business but my own. We acknowledge that it is wrong to sin: The challenge of being human is to overcome one's desires and do what's right, even if we'd prefer otherwise. But thinking about sin? As long as I don't follow through, no harm done. No?

"Do not stray after your thoughts, and after your eyes..." (Bamidbar/Numbers 15:39) While present day's free-to-be attitude dictates that it's okay to think about, and talk about, and joke about sin as much as we want, as long as we know our limitations, the Torah sees things differently. "The eyes and the heart," say our Sages, "are the two 'agents' of sin: The eyes see, and the heart desires, until one ultimately goes ahead and sins. (Rashi, *ibid.*)"

In fact, talking about sin, and thinking about sinning, is just a devious form of acclimatization to sin. Once we've toyed with the idea long enough, and we've spoken about it with others, even in jest, it no longer seems as foreign as it once might have to take the next step - to go ahead and do it.

I will not go into details, but if you give the matter some thought, you will see that society has gone one step further. They have taken the most evil and immoral sins, and created a lexicon whereby sin no longer sounds so bad at all. Using a subtle turn-of-phrase, one can easily avoid "calling a spade a spade." Call a pig "Artiodactyla suiformes suidae sus scrofa" (it's scientific name), and it just doesn't sound like a pig anymore.

This simple notion - that entertaining thoughts of sin while hoping to avoid falling prey to sin is simply baiting one's yetzer hara (evil inclination) - has sadly failed to dawn on "enlightened" society. As simple a concept as this may seem to a Torah-observant Jew, it is completely lost on most of today's world. Is it any wonder, then, that society has degenerated to the violent, moral-less, vile reality that we find ourselves in? Fill a kid's mind with thoughts of guns and violence, and then sit and scratch your head when he goes on a shooting-spree. "Blessed is our G-d, Who created us to honour Him, and separated us from the nations, and gave us a Torah of truth!"

Rashi, at the beginning of this week's parsha, comments on the parsha's namesake "Tzav/Command." Why do the laws of the Olah begin with "Tzav - Command Aaron and his sons [regarding the laws of the Olah]?" The word "tzav," Rashi explains, is an expression of encouragement and urging on. "Rabbi Shimon said: The Torah must especially urge in a situation where there is a monetary loss [Hebrew: Chisaron kis]."

Mefarshim (commentaries) are puzzled by this statement. What type of Chisaron kis (monetary loss) is there to Aaron and his sons when they assist a Jew in bringing his Olah offering? To the contrary: The Talmud states that the Kohanim receive the hide of the Olah as a form of payment for their assistance!

The Hebrew/Aramaic word kis means a pouch. Thus, a "chisaron kis" usually means, "something that causes a loss to one's [money] pouch." Kis also means a covering. Thus "chisaron kis" can also mean, "lacking a cover." All of our bodily entry points have a covering, which we can use to avoid sinning with them. We can close our eyes to avoid seeing evil. We can (as the Gemara suggests) fold our ear-lobes into our ears to avoid hearing evil. We can close our mouths to avoid sinning with them. But the mind has no covering. It is only with great effort and practice that one can train one's mind to focus on pure thoughts, and keep it from wandering to places it shouldn't.

As we have discussed, the Olah offering corresponded to having sinned with one's thoughts. Perhaps, say mefarshim, this (homiletically) is what Rabbi Shimon meant to say: "The Torah must especially urge with regard to the Korban Olah," which corresponds to the thought, "because we are dealing with a situation of chisaron kis - where a covering is lacking," for the mind has no cover with which to protect it! Therefore, says R' Shimon, special care and concern must be given to this area of

our avodah.

It is no small matter that we often refer to the holiest of men as "pure-minded individuals." While getting a grasp on our thoughts is no simple task, Torah study, as we have seen, provides us with the strength and wherewithal to conquer our thoughts and take control not only of our bodies, but even of our minds.

Have a good Shabbos.

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