

PARSHAS VAYIKRA - TO THINE OWN TORAH SELF BE TRUE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

To Thine Own Torah Self Be True¹

Many find the broader lesson of chatas shocking. We are used to invoking the mantra "I didn't do it on purpose! I didn't mean to do that!" to free ourselves from guilt. The chatas/ sin-offering proclaims that we are wrong, that we have missed the Torah's mark in a major way. Intention is not the only yardstick of moral failing. The Torah holds us accountable as well for what we do not intend - for oversights that could have been avoided had we cared enough not to lose sight for a moment of the importance of the duties with which He entrusted to us.

An unstated elitism, however, greets us when the Torah maps its chatas demands upon us. The first few instances of chatas do not even deal with active transgressions, so much as improper judgment - and only by the most special people! When the anointed Kohen or the High Court rule improperly and regret it later, they are to bring a special chatas that fits their role. Only after they, the highest spiritual authorities are considered, does the Torah tell us about the more common chatas - the one brought by ordinary people. They, however, only need to bring this korban for an active discretion - only when they have done something, violated some precept. We get the impression that Hashem concerns Himself, so to speak, with the inner life of only the people who lead the spiritual charge. For everyone but the superstars, what they think does not matter so much, as long as that thought does not morph into illicit action.

The korban olah ve-yored strikingly disabuses us of this notion. The inner life of the common man are incredibly important. Moreover, those private thoughts are very much His concern, kivayachol.

How else could we make sense of this grouping of three seemingly unrelated transgressions? Why their own, special protocol? Why here - and nowhere else - does the Torah create ways for everyone to bring this korban, regardless of how rich or poor they are, going so far as to describe three completely different forms of the korban, depending on a person's material well-being? Why are those who transgress these three sins described as ashem/ desolate[2]?

The common thread that unites all three transgressions is Truth, and its place in the inner life of the everyday person. Each of the three transgressions which necessitate a korban olah ve-yored shows that the truth of a core value has been compromised. These truths are critical to turning a soul into a Jewish personality according to the Torah's expectations.

The first of the three deals with Man in the context of greater society. Hashem makes many

demands on us as individuals to share our energies and talents with the larger community. When we fail to do our share, we sin not only to our fellow citizens, but to Him, as the ultimate guarantor of the Torah society. Upholding justice is the most significant of the social obligations. When a person denies his knowledge of evidence relevant to a lawsuit, he harms his fellow Man, he sins against G-d, and he shows that he has lost his grasp of an essential truth about his place in the community of men. The Torah allows each and every individual to approach his friend (even without the official court order that we call a summons), and demand that he testify on his behalf. When a person then denies his knowledge, and asserts this in court, he must bring an olah ve-yored. Denial of truth needed in service of Justice is a denial of a greater truth about Man's obligation towards others in general, and to uphold justice in particular. There simply is no way that Justice can prevail without everyone recognizing that they must be prepared at all times to make their individual contribution to the legal system.

The second transgression of the three seems to deal with a violation of the sanctity of the Mikdosh, but contains a subtle, secondary error. A person becomes tameh, and then enters the Mikdosh inadvertently, forgetting for the moment that he or she is tameh, or losing awareness that he has stepped into a holy place. The consequence is the korban olah ve-yored.

Taharah/ purity, as symbolized by the Mikdosh, is a fact of life. We experience it in the innocence of childhood, and in the exhortations of our childhood teachers never to lose it. We spend years learning about how to safeguard it, how to nurture it and preserve it in adulthood. We absorb the idea that we are morally free to soar to heights of accomplishment. The Mikdosh is the visible symbol in our midst of the striving for spiritual achievement on the absolutely highest plane.

Tumah/ impurity is also a fact of life. We become halachically tameh when we encounter involuntariness. To be morally free means that we are not compelled to act. We have free will. We are not programmed by our genes, inexorably shaped by our environments, destined by the motions of the stars. Yet, from time to time we face what seems to us to be stunning evidence of the contrary. There is so much that we do not control! We are not even fully in charge of our own bodies, the part of the material world necessarily closest to us. When we experience some sort of involuntary discharge - and all the more so when we come in contact with the Death, the most feared involuntary experience! - the Torah calls us tameh. It has us perform some ritual to stop a slide on a slippery slope. Impressed with our lack of freedom in regard to physical phenomena, we could consciously or unconsciously assume that the same is true of moral and spiritual choices. Our recovery from tumah always reasserts the truth of moral freedom. Tumah is indeed part of life, but it can be experienced without our allowing it to become universal and the only fact of life.

Particularly dangerous is blending the realms of tumah and taharah. We can and must deal with both - but they must each take their separate place, and receive their individual attention. The person who is tameh who enters the Mikdosh because he forgets his tumah, or forgets that he has entered the place that forever teaches the gifts of taharah, has combined polar opposites. He has

undervalued the truth of moral freedom. This, too, is a sin against G-d, and something that concerns Him even in the most undistinguished person.

The last of the three olah ve-yored transgressions concerns the truth of inner thought itself. A person swears falsely, either about what he knows not to be true, or by failing to live up to a commitment he has made through an oath. He must bring an olah ve-yored offering.

Speech is thought, externalized. It is a product at the same time of human will to express some thought. An oath is speech that has been linked to the name of G-d. Every oath, whether it explicitly mentions Hashem or not, still invokes G-d. An oath proclaims, "G-d Himself will attest that what I am saying is true!"

Now if an oath impacted the interests of another person, the false oath would cause harm to the other, as well as cheapen Hashem's Name, by comparing His existence with a blatant untruth. The transgression here, however, applies even where there is no other interested party. The person swears regarding something that concerns him alone.

This, however, is the point. Your inner life, each small thought you think, is known to Him. He does not wish you to trivialize thought and will. When you move casual thought to the level of spoken declaration (and, by using an oath, call upon Him as a guarantor), you had better be true to "thine own self." The strength of the sense of truth within Man's mind - his thought and his will - is very much a concern of Hashem.

The olah ve-yored, then, sends a strong message about the integrity of every person that would like to call himself "Jew." We can transgress not only by what we do, but through the ill-formed and misshapen ideas that swirl around our heads. Those, too, along with our actions, determine what we actually are in the most profound sense.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 5:13
 2. Vayikra 5:2,3
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