

# PARSHAS VAYIKRA - ELEVATION IN AFFLICTION

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

## **Elevation in Affliction<sup>1</sup>**

To the merely casual student, korbanos represent a collection of details overwhelming in abundance, and short on inspiring understanding. One korban stands out as different. Olas ha-of, a bird offered as a wholly burnt offering, makes matters even worse! Its details are not just different from comparable korbanos, they seem to run in an entirely reverse direction.

An animal olah requires shechitah, or the neat, clean death of the animal through the use of a sharp blade. Bird offerings require melikah, a process of pinching the head with a fingernail in a way that would render a non-sacrificial bird forbidden as neveilah. On the other hand, melikah can only be done by a kohen, while the shechitah of an offering is kosher even if performed by a commoner.

Animal offerings come in many varieties. Bird offerings are restricted to olah and chatas. Animal offerings are brought sometimes for individuals and sometimes for the community. Bird offerings are never brought for the community. Animal and bird korbanos are sacrificed at different locations within the Temple's courtyard. The blood of animals is decorously received in a vessel, and a small amount thrown at or dabbed on the altar with a finger. The blood of the bird olah is pressed out on the side of the altar. Parts of the animal that are offered atop the altar are discarded in the case of the bird.

Even more flagrant is the reversal of procedures regarding the altar. The blood of an animal olah is directed below the red line that separates the upper and lower regions of the altar, while that of the animal chatas is directed above. The positions flip for birds: the blood of the olah goes above the line, and the chatas below.

The key to unraveling all the confusion is in understanding that different species symbolize different roles and positions in life. The olah and chatas themes (i.e. elevation and addressing shortcomings) impact differently upon these different roles.

The bovine offerings symbolize the vigorous servant of G-d, just as these animals are work animals. Sheep symbolize trust in Divine guidance, much as flocks are cared for by their shepherds. Birds play a very different - and a decidedly undomesticated role - in Tanach. They are described as unsettled, drifting. They are pursued by hunters who lay in waiting for them, and leave snares with which to trap them. Their life is troubled and precarious. They represent life on the brink of despair.

It makes perfect sense, then, that the bird offerings are attached to the poor (who lead more precarious lives) and to those overcome with spiritual (metzora) or physical (zav, yoledes) affliction. The community - whose public face does not admit to crushing poverty - never brings a bird offering. The sense of affliction brought to mind by the bird is also incompatible with the role of the shelamim, which is supposed to represent undisturbed happiness. Also, the requirements that an offering be male (symbolizing strength and virility) and free of blemish do not attach to bird offerings.

The striking differences in the way bird and animal offerings are treated are consistent with the different roles they symbolize. The shechitah of an animal is elegant and refined in comparison to the much more violent pinching of the neck during melikah. The bird's body is then torn asunder, rather than neatly butchered. Its very entrails are removed and thrown away; the blood, representing the life-force, is not simply drained but squeezed out of it.

Taken together, the details of the bird-offering speak symbolically to a person living with suffering. He or she approaches the south side of the mizbe'ach - the side (closest to the menorah, and therefore the side) of enlightenment, unlike the animal offerings brought in the north, the side of material concerns. The owner of the offering seeks both insight into his condition, and elevation. He presents himself to the kohen as a fragile, hapless dove. What he encounters is not visually pretty, but full of meaning for him. He is instructed that enduring oppression can also be a form of serving Hashem. Indeed, the life that has had all its vitality forcibly pressed out of it also has a place atop the altar - not just the one exhibiting the strength and willingness symbolized by the animal offerings. The oppressed, the suffering who do not lose sight of their goal of bringing themselves closer to G-d also contribute to keeping strong the fires of Hashem's Presence. Where some would find only victimhood, the bird-offering allows the suffering to find nobility and purpose.

We can now easily understand the curious inversion of the locations on the altar to which the blood is applied, and the methods by which it is applied. In an animal korban, the blood of the olah is directed below the dividing line, while that of the chatas goes above. An olah is conventionally brought by someone feeling a lack of elevation. He is plagued by sluggish, lethargic spirituality, and wants to be energized. The animal olah bids him to move energetically (hence the blood is thrown, the most energetic form of blood application) urging him to move from where he is upwards, with vigor. He finds himself in an unsatisfactorily low state; he needs to rouse himself from it with alacrity.

A chatas, on the other hand, is the result of some transgression, usually by precipitous, unthinking action without sufficient focus and thought. The blood of the animal chatas directs him to inaction. It is placed, not thrown, on the upper part of the altar, urging him to remain in place with whatever spiritual elevation he has achieved. It instructs him to not lose sight of the higher ideals, and to stay put rather than run after the desires of the heart.

The modus operandi for the suffering personality is indeed reversed. Whatever spiritual gifts he

possessed prior to his troubles, he must keep intact. It is in his inaction - not the energetic action of the ordinary person - that he has his greatest opportunity for utilizing his straits for elevation. The blood of the bird-olah is not thrown, and not even placed with a finger. Rather, it is squeezed and pressed on the upper part of the mizbe'ach, telling its owner that he must summon up much energy to keep himself on a high plane without backsliding.

The sins of such a person, on the other hand, are often part of a feeling of despair, which can lead him to discard his values and take up improper activities, feeling that no good will come of his life in any event. We must impress upon him the importance of not acting in such ways, of not being swept away in a moment of weakness. He must pull himself out of the listlessness of his mood by some sort of action. The blood of his offering is sprinkled. Like the throwing of the blood of the animal olah, the sprinkling of the blood of the bird chatas implies action, movement rather than staying put. It directs him to look up, away from his passivity, back on track of forever aiming higher.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 1:17; 4:7

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