

# Parshat Vayikra

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Annual (Leviticus 1:1-5:26): Hertz p. 410

Maftir (Deuteronomy 25:17-19): Hertz p. 856

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## Torah Portion Summary

The book of Vayikra is known as Torat Kohanim, the Teaching of the Priests, for much of it concerns things that fall within their area of responsibility – the *korbanot* (offerings), ritual impurity and the ways in which it is removed, and the Yom Kippur purification ritual. This week's parsha, the first in the book, describes the different types of offerings that were to be brought by individual people. All of the *olah*, or burnt offering, except its hide was completely consumed on the altar. An *olah* could be brought from cattle, sheep, goats, birds, or even grain, depending on the donor's means. One part of the *minchah*, or grain offering, was burned on the altar. The remainder was given to the priests to eat. There were two types of *minchah*, the communal grain offering made on Shabbat and festivals and the individual offering brought by those too poor to afford an animal for an *olah*. The *zevach sh'lamim*, the offering of wellbeing, was only partially burned. After the designated portions were removed and placed on the altar, the rest became a sacred meal shared by the donors and the priests. A person who committed a sin accidentally or unknowingly was to bring a *chattat*, a sin or purification offering. The community's elders also were to offer a *chattat* when the entire community committed an inadvertent sin. Finally, the *asham*, the guilt offering, was to be brought when a person was unsure if he had sinned or when he wanted to make amends for a sin previously committed against another person. In the latter case, the *asham* was in addition to making restitution and paying a fine to the person who had been wronged.

I. And he shall bring as his penalty to the Lord, for the sin of which he is guilty, a female from the flock, sheep or goat, as a purification offering; and the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for his sin. But if his means do not suffice for a sheep, he shall bring to the Lord, as his penalty for that of which he is guilty, two turtledoves or two pigeons... And if his means do not suffice for two turtledoves or two pigeons, he shall bring as his offering for that of which he is guilty a tenth of an *ephah* of choice flour. (Leviticus 5:6)

1. "His means" implies that which he [currently] has and he is not obligated to borrow, even if he finds someone from whom to borrow. They do not tell him to borrow or to work at his trade until he has the means to bring the offering of a rich man, for a mitzvah is best at its proper time. If he has a sheep but does not have everything needed for it (for example, if he is far from Jerusalem and has enough money to buy a sheep but not enough to feed it for several days on the journey), he should bring a poor man's offering. (Sifra)
2. The Torah ensured that even the poorest person will be able to find forgiveness for his sin. Even if he cannot afford two doves, he can bring a meal offering. On the other hand, our sages tell us that if a rich person brings a poor man's meal offering he has not fulfilled his obligation. Nowadays, because we have no Temple, we have to give tzedakah in place of the offerings. That being the case, a rich man cannot fulfill his obligation by giving that which a poor man would give. He is required to give according to his means and ability, and if he does not do so, he has not fulfilled his obligation of giving. (Chafeitz Chaim--Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohein, 1835-1933, Poland)

## Sparks for Discussion

The Torah provides a sliding scale so that the *chattat* (the purification offering that was part of the process of atoning for certain transgressions) would be within everyone's means. Why do you think this was done? It is easy to understand why a rich person cannot fulfill his obligation by bringing a poor person's offering, but why do you think the *Sifra* makes the point that a less wealthy person should not spend more than he can afford easily? What do you imagine a person felt as he or she brought a purification offering to the Temple?

The Chafeitz Chaim draws an analogy between these offerings and *tzedakah* – the rich person (and the poor one as well) “is required to give according to his means and ability.” How do you understand this? Should each person give the same percentage of income? Should the wealthy give a higher percentage? During difficult economic times, should those who are comfortable forgo luxuries – vacations, remodeling projects – to increase charitable giving when the need is great? What is fair? What constitutes righteousness in giving?

II. When a person sins and commits a trespass against the Lord by dealing deceitfully with his fellow in the matter of a deposit or a pledge, or through robbery, or by defrauding his fellow, or by finding something lost and lying about it; if he swears falsely regarding any one of the various things that one may do and sin thereby – (Leviticus 5:21-22)

1. Said Rabbi Akiva: What does the Torah mean by saying: “Commit a trespass against the Lord?” When the creditor and debtor or two parties to any transaction conduct their business through contracts and witnesses, a repudiation of obligation constitutes a repudiation of the witnesses and the contract. But he who deposits something with his neighbor does not want a soul to know about it other than the Third Party between them. When he repudiates his obligation, he repudiates the Third Party (i.e., God) between them. (*Sifra*)
2. These verses treat the offering to be brought by a man who has denied on oath a justified claim for reparation and later admits that his oath was false... Every transgression committed by a man against his neighbor is tantamount to rebellion and trespass against the Almighty... He, as it were, is the Third Party, the unseen witness to all human transactions and the guarantor that they will be conducted in an honest fashion. Since here the defrauder called on the name of the guarantor during his denial – that is, he swore falsely by the name of God – this is not just false dealing. The Jew attests to the honesty of his conduct by his priestly role of nearness to his God. Since his calling on the name of God was purely an empty and vain deception, the term fitting it best is trespass against God. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)
3. We have sinned against You by wronging others... We have sinned against You by deriding parents and teachers, and we have sinned against You by using violence... We have sinned against You by dishonesty in business, and we have sinned against You by taking usurious interest. (Machzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, The Rabbinical Assembly, p. 46)

## Sparks for Discussion

As Rabbi Hirsch points out, the *pshat* – the contextual meaning of “trespass against the Lord” in these verses – refers to a person who owes money or property to someone else and then swears a false oath, in the name of God, denying that obligation. But Rabbi Hirsch also implies that any sin committed by one person against another, even when no oath is involved, is also a sin against God. Do you agree? On Yom Kippur, when we recite *Al Cheit* we declare that we have sinned against God not only by violating ritual commandments (*kashrut*, *Shabbat*, etc.), but also by hurting others. In what way are dishonesty and violence sins against God? Do you think that understanding acts that hurt others as sins against God makes it harder to perform them?