

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
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Haktara

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Chazal call Sefer Vayikra *Torat Kohanim* – the laws of the kohanim. Indeed, the majority of the book deals with the laws of the *mikdash*, as well as other laws related to the status of the priests and various ramifications thereof. In that sense, Vayikra is a direct and nearly seamless continuation of Sefer Shemot, which ended with Moshe erecting the *mishkan* and the visible Presence of God descending over it. God has given the *mishkan* to the Jewish people; now they have to read the instruction manual to know how to use it.

Parashat Vayikra opens with a concise list of instructions how to sacrifice the different types of sacrifices – *ola*, *mincha*, *shelamim*, and *chatat*. Leaving aside the *mincha*, which is an offering from the vegetative world, a cursory examination of the animal sacrifices reveals that there are two different climaxes to the sacrificial procedure. Taking the first section in the parasha as an indicative example (1, 3-9), verse 5, after commanding to slaughter the animal, directs the *kohen* to "throw the blood all around on the altar, which is at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." The *kohen* then returns to the animal, dissects it, and finally (verse 9) we are told that the *kohen* should burn (*vehiktir*) the animal on the altar as an offering which will be *rei'ach nichoach lashem*."

Bringing a sacrifice has two distinct halakhic goals, *zrikat hadam* (throwing the blood), and *hektev eivarim* (burning the flesh).

Halakhically, there is an important difference between the two. *Zrikat hadam* is a necessary condition for the fulfillment of the obligation that the sacrifice is representing; in other words, if the blood is not thrown, the *korban* is disqualified and another one must be brought. That is not true for the burning of the flesh on the altar. Specifically, the blood is associated with the concept of *kappara*, expiation. This is the basis for the idea, advanced by the Ramban at the beginning of the parsha, as well as many other commentators and philosophers, that the blood of the sacrifice represents the life of he who brings the sacrifice, with the sacrifice taking the vicarious place of the person. The Torah's identification of blood with life (*ki nefesh habasar badam hu* – "for the life of the flesh is in the blood" – [Vayikra 17,11](#); also v. 14), followed by the statement that "for blood is that which atones for the soul (*ibid.*) supports this idea. It would be easy to conclude, based on the many *sugyot* in Masechet Zevachim that discuss the importance of *zrikat hadam*, that the main goal of sacrifices is the blood, and therefore it is in the ritual of *zrikat hadam* that one should find the meaning and purpose of sacrifices.

However, I believe it is fair to say that outside of the framework of Masechet Zevachim most of us instinctively think of sacrifices as things burnt on an altar. For the same reason,

it is natural to understand the definition of an **altar** in the same manner – a structure designed for the burning of sacrifices. Sacrifices described in the Torah outside of the halakhic process – Noach ([Bereishit 8,2](#)), Yaakov (46,1), do not mention *zrikat hadam* (see also the sacrifice of Manoach, father of Shimshon). And, strikingly, in our parasha, a subtle but nonetheless distinctive emphasis focuses on the burning of the flesh. Whereas the blood is mentioned in the middle of a series of procedures (in verse 5), the burning of the flesh on the altar is left for last, and is itself characterized with the summary phrase "*ola, isheh, rei'ach nichoach laShem*." It is the burning of the flesh that, apparently, is what gives this particular sacrifice its name – *ola* means that all of the animal is "raised"; i.e., burnt. Being burnt, a *korban* is called "*isheh*," which the Ramban explains means "burnt." And finally, the *korban* is "*rei'ach nichoach*" – a pleasant fragrance – which of course refers to the burning flesh. More importantly, this phrase, especially its last part, appears to be defining the importance and effect of the sacrifice. While the exact import of the phrase "*rei'ach nichoach*" is unclear, it definitely implies that the *korban* finds favor in God's eyes, and the fact that the phrase is tied to the burning of the flesh indicates that *haktarat ha-eimurim* is the vehicle of achieving that end.

Therefore, I would like in today's shiur to concentrate on that aspect of sacrifices, the burning of parts of the flesh on the altar. The verse reads, "and the *kohen* shall burn it all on the altar." The Hebrew word which is here translated as "burn" is *vehiktir*, and the question is, what does that word actually mean?

The answer to this question seems today to be so obvious to me, that I hesitate to write a shiur about it. However, I must admit that when I first realized the correct answer, it changed my understanding of *korbanot*. Since then, I have repeatedly discussed this word with respected scholars, and what I now consider to be the correct interpretation has nearly always surprised them. So I will proceed, and I ask forgiveness for anyone who will find it all simple and obvious.

In all the traditional translations of the Torah into English, both Jewish and non-Jewish, this word was translated as "burn." Practically speaking, that is indeed what the Torah is telling the *kohen* to do – those parts designated for the altar are burnt in fire. The usual word for "burn" in Biblical Hebrew is, of course, *saraf*, and therefore it is important to understand the specific meaning of the alternative word "*hiktir*" used in this verse – and in every other one describing what is done with the flesh of a sacrifice.

One day, several years ago, I noticed a book on Sefer Vayikra in the library and began to read it. On the first page, the book, which was in English, quoted a verse. I generally need to translate the verse into Hebrew in order to recognize it; but, in this particular case I did not recognize the verse at all. Luckily, there was a reference note, and, after looking it up, I discovered that it was the familiar verse which we are discussing, [Vayikra 1.9](#). The reason why I had not immediately recognized it was because I had never before seen the phrase "turn into smoke"

in this context. A quick bit of research led me to the discovery that most of the newer Jewish translations of the Torah translate *hiktir* as "turn into smoke," which is the starting point for our discussion today.

First, a reverse question: Why does the Torah not write that the *kohen* should *lisrof* the flesh? I think that a short reflection indicates why that would be inappropriate. Meat of a *korban* that has been "left over" (*nottar*) beyond the allotted time is "burnt" – *vehanottar ... yisaref*. You would never say that *nottar* should be *niktar*. The reason is that *lisrof* refers to a negative action – you burn something to get rid of it. *L'haktir* is a positive action – it will often have a participle, as in *l'haktir laShem*. In our minds, *l'haktir* means to sacrifice, or to offer, and of course one does not sacrifice *nottar*; one gets rid of it. Similarly, no one would describe what we do to *chametz* in two weeks as *haktara*, precisely because it has no positive aspect. For the same reason, one does not "burn" sacrifices, since the purpose is not to get rid of the flesh, but to "offer" it to God in some sense. *Haktara* has a positive sense of moving the object forward; *sereifa* has the opposite sense of negating its existence.

So what does the word *haktara* actually mean? The new translations are based on the belief that the root *KTR* means smoke. This is, in fact, true in Aramaic, where smoke is called *kutra*. In modern Hebrew, *kitor* means steam, which is a sort of smoke. In ancient Hebrew, *ketoret* is incense, something burnt in order to make a fragrant smell.

So, I think it is correct to state that the word does actually mean, "to turn to smoke." That is, it does mean to burn, but in the positive sense of transformation by fire and not in the negative sense of elimination by fire. There is a result of the burning which is productive – smoke, rather than merely a negative one – destruction.

There is another use of the verb *l'haktir* in the *mishkan*, and that is in connection with the incense burnt every day. In that framework, we understand why the Torah is interested in turning certain ingredients into smoke. The smoke is the intended result, since it is the smoke which produces the fragrance. But why is this verb used here? Are we in fact interested in the smoke that comes from the burning of the sacrifice?

It appears to me that if sacrificing an animal is characterized as "turning the flesh into smoke," the inner meaning of this action is "turning the physical into the spiritual." The physics of gasses and combustion aside, for the Biblical and rabbinic mind, smoke is a symbol of the spiritual. This is clear from the very word used in philosophical Hebrew to indicate the spiritual – "*ruach*," which is the same word as "wind." (This reflects the use of the Greek word "*pneuma*" for the same purpose, and is carried on in the English "spirit" as well.) In the verse under discussion, this is clearly indicated by the concluding phrase "*rei'ach nichoach*." *Rei'ach* – fragrance – is of course closely related to *ruach* – spirit. The Ramban here quotes the statement of the angel who met Manoach telling him that if he is offered meat to eat, he will refuse, but if the goat is sacrificed to God, then he will partake – by joining the flame (smoke) rising in the air. The Ramban is comparing eating, which is a physical action and is therefore inappropriate for the angel (and of course, for God as well) with *rei'ach* – with smelling, which is taken to be a spiritual activity, the enjoyment

of the soul rather than that of the body. (This is the basis for the requirement to smell sweet fragrance after Shabbat, to accompany the additional **soul** of Shabbat that is leaving). Meat is the food of the body; the smoke, as the vehicle of *rei'ach nichoach*, is the sustenance of the soul. In other words, *haktara* is the process by which we convert the ultimate symbol of the physical, flesh and meat, into the ultimate symbol of the spiritual, smoke rising towards the heaven.

Expanding a little bit, the significance of this process can be explained as follows. The central problem of relationship between Man and God is the infinite gap that exists between them, between the perfect and decadent, between the absolute and the relative, between the eternally Divine and the temporally mundane. This problem does not exist in polytheistic paganism, where the gods are part of nature and freely cavort with humans, but appears to be unbridgeable in Judaism. One answer is given by God in parashat Yitro, where God descends and speaks to the Jewish people – and God emphasizes the revolutionary nature of that occasion when he immediately afterwards has Moshe point out to the Jews that "You have seen that I have spoken to you **from the heavens**" (*Shemot 20,18*). Communication, ultimately in both directions, bridges the gap. The gap, however, remains, and the question is whether real influence can take place. I contend that *korbanot* is the answer to that question. The *korban* creates an actual metaphysical link by bridging the gap, by actually turning the physical into the spiritual, or, to use the other metaphor in the verse (and naturally I agree it is but a metaphor), by using our food (meat) to provide a kind of nourishment (fragrance) for God (*rei'ach nichoach laShem*).

Since a bridge is by definition bi-directional, it should not come as a surprise that various sources see the daily sacrifices as the means whereby sustenance is brought down to the world from God. If the physical can be transformed into the spiritual, then the spiritual can be transformed into the physical; in other words, rain can fall from heaven. But that is already another topic.

I stated at the outset that there are two different foci of a sacrifice, the flesh and the blood. In the opening *parshiot* of the *Vayikra* – *ola*, *mincha*, *shelamim* – the sprinkling of the blood is not emphasized, as we saw. In contrast, when the Torah gets to *korban chatat*, the sin-offering (chap. 4), *zrikat hadam* occupies a much more prominent position. Starting with the first *chatat* (the *kohen* who sins), the Torah elaborates on the role of the blood.

The anointed *kohen* shall take from the blood, and shall bring it to the tent of meeting.

The *kohen* shall dip his finger in the blood, and he shall sprinkle from the blood seven times before God, in front of the curtain of the sacred.

The *kohen* shall place from the blood on the corners of the incense altar before God, which is in the tent of meeting, and he shall spill all the (rest of the) blood at the base of the sacrifice-altar, which is at the opening of the tent of meeting. (4,5-7).

This is repeated, in various degrees of elaboration, for all the different *chataot*. While there is *haktara* of the fats in the case of some of the *chataot* as well, this is stated simply at the end, without the usual mention of "*ishe haShem*" or the phrase

"*rei'ach nichoach*." On the contrary, the Torah goes back to the ultimate purpose of a *korban chatat*, which is personal atonement and not the bridging I have described.

All of its fat shall be burnt ("turned into smoke") on the altar, and the *kohen* shall atone for him from his sin, and it shall be forgiven him. (4,26)

As a rule, every mention of *ola*, *mincha*, and *shelamim*, includes the phrase "*ishe laShem lirei'ach nichoach*" in one of its variants, and the phrase does not appear for the *chatat*. The reason is obvious. *Chatat* is primarily a sacrifice of personal atonement; the others are **primarily** ones of connecting the upper and lower worlds. The *chatat* is *l'chaper*, for atonement; the others are *l'reiach nichoach*.

In one case, this is even more emphasized. At the end of the *chataot*, describing the individual's sheep-*chatat*, the Torah writes, "The *kohen* shall burn them on the altar, **in addition to the ishei haShem**, and the *kohen* shall atone for him from his sin which he sinned, and it shall be forgiven him (4,35)." The Torah here seems to be explicitly stating that the *chatat* is **not** included in the category of *ishei haShem*. Although burnt, it does not have the status of fire and is not destined to become smoke.

Since the exclusion of the *chatat* from *ishei haShem* and from *rei'ach nichoach* is so pronounced, the existence of one exception is all the more striking. In the personal goat-*chatat*, the Torah concludes, "And he shall burn it all on the altar, **as a rei'ach nichoach laShem**, and the *kohen* shall atone for him and it shall be forgiven him" (4,31). While stressing the forgiveness motif, the Torah in this one exception also includes the *chatat* in the category of *rei'ach nichoach*, in striking contradistinction to the very next section describing the halakhically identical case of the sheep-*chatat*.

I have no good explanation for this exception. A possible approach could be based on the comment of the Netziv to 4,28 and 4,31, where he explains that the goat is psychologically more expiatory, leading to a more general atonement of the total personality (based on a gemara in [Sota 32b](#)). I leave this to you to work out.

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