

OVERVIEW

The Mishkan is complete. The various functions of the priests have been assigned. Now the biblical text turns to the sacrifices that Israel is to offer on G-d's altar. We recognize at once the difference between sacrifices that must be offered in their totality and those that are shared by altar and man. The eternal flame, never to be extinguished, is to burn on the altars height.

Nothing shall prevent the poor in Israel to demonstrate their allegiance and loyalty to G-d. Thus the sacrifice may consist of a small animal, a pair of birds or even a modest handful of flour. The common motivation may be an expression of gratitude to the Creator, the need for forgiveness or even a simple "peace offering" - symbol of the harmonious relationship between man and G-d.

The method of bringing the sacrifice varies with the type of offering. However, in every case, a part or the whole of the sacrifice is consumed by fire. Obligatory sacrifices differ from voluntary offerings, which represent the symbolization of the Jew's subjugation under the Divine Will.

COMMENTARY

The meaning of the sacrifice

Before one begins a detailed study of the Korbanot it is important to clarify their significance and purpose.

This is essential in view of the vast difference in interpreting the concept of sacrifice between the Torah view and that of other religious civilizations. In Greek culture sacrifice was a human act reflecting the fear of a menacing power and designed to pacify the deity. The idea of sacrifice as a gift (bribe?) to induce a humanized deity to look kindly upon the donor is totally incompatible with Jewish thought. "Sacrifice" in the Hebrew language is "Korban", derived from "karov", to approach, to seek the proximity of another. We desire to come close to the Almighty, for it is this nearness which alone is capable of helping man to overcome the chains of his animal-like shell and attain the highest degree of human spiritual and material well-being. By offering the animal on the height of the altar, it is our own flesh, our own blood that we dedicate to the ideals of a life elevated through the purifying fire of the Torah law.

We shall take a closer look at the main symbolic aspects of the korban act. A fundamental question concerns the motivation for employing an innocent animal for this symbolic setting. The same Torah that enjoins us from causing pain to an animal (Shemot 23:5) requires the killing of an animal as an expression of gratitude or guilt feeling. By the same token, what gives man the right to use the animal as a source of nourishment? The answer is clear: it is the Creator of all life, the G-d of love and mercy, Who has seen fit to designate certain animals as food to ensure man's physical health and survival.

The Chomesh - Torah Commentary

By R' Marc Breuer ל"צ

בכ"ז

"The whole sacrifice" (עולה)

For this category a male animal must be used which is totally burned on the altar. This offering symbolizes the most intense permeation of the human existence by the sacred fire. It is the ideal goal of our being. Its teaching is of immeasurable importance for those who have succeeded in penetrating the true spirit of Torah. No aspect of our lives, however insignificant, is beyond the reach of purity and sanctity. The offering must be whole and perfect in the sense that nothing is kept out of the fire and that the act itself is entirely voluntary. For moral perfection can only be attained by our free submission to the dictates of the Divine Will. Wholeness, perfection, free self-dedication are the maxims which must guide our lives. They are the essential conditions for gaining the spiritual summit of the altar.

The sin-offering (תאנס)

Wrongdoings committed by man often cause unpredictable consequences affecting his future actions. Genuine remorse calls for a break with a guilty past, a firm determination to eliminate all factors that contributed to mistakes. This requires self-examination of one's moral fibre, a clear awareness of the need for change and improvement. The sin-offering symbolizes the person's resolve to regain his moral integrity. It is ordained in cases when the Jew disregards his responsibility towards the community such as the duty to give testimony in court that depends on the evidence provided by witnesses.

The sin-offering is also required of a person who became impure by touching the cadaver of an unclean animal or by coming in contact with another person who is in a state of impurity. The latter rule is based on the thought that the sacrifice is to guide man - created in the image of G-d - towards his true calling at a time when he confronts the realm of death, a state which threatens the human quality by its physical transient nature. The sacrifice brings home to man the truth that we stand above death, that death wields no real power over us and that humans must free themselves from the "shackles of the dust". For Judaism is the religion of life. (or "celebrating life").

A further obligation to bring the sin-offering is placed upon a person who is unable to fulfill a vow he made by virtue of circumstances beyond his control. The very integrity of the given word is at stake. The Torah strongly condemns the ease and carelessness with which people treat the given word and puts it on the same level as the most severe moral transgressions.

The Torah formulates the lofty purpose of the sacrifice as "pleasing to G-d". This clearly denotes the healing quality of the sacrifice in restoring the impaired balance of man's relationship to G-d. Offering the blood, the actual bearer of life, represents the symbolic submission of our total energy and resources under the dictates of the Divine Will.

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