



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Vayikra 5774

By Mollie Andron

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This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of a contemporary midrash—a literary exploration of the sacrificial system described in Parashat Vayikra. It addresses questions about the relationship between our thoughts and actions and helps us think about the nature of our responsibility for the impact of our actions on those near to us and those around the world.

She gently took my hand off of her back, looked me in the eye, and said: “Sarah, these laws are like sealed books to us: we comprehend neither their basic meaning nor the purport of their rules and regulations.”¹ We must honor what is being asked of us. Today you must bring your offering of flour² to the priest who will make expiation for you;³ even if your act was *beshogeg* (accidental).⁴

This was hardly the answer that I was seeking. While my mother was a person of complete faith who accepted the laws from Mt. Sinai without hesitations or questions, my sisters and I struggled. “*Ema*,” we would say, “we are from a different generation. We didn’t experience the miracles that happened when you left Egypt or the revelation at Sinai. We have only your words, but hearing about something is radically different than seeing it with your own eyes. You always taught us that it wasn’t until Moses saw the golden calf with his own eyes that he broke the tablets.”⁵

She saw the truth in our argument, but she also fully believed in her relationship with the Divine. She trusted God even if God’s actions were beyond her human understanding. “Sacrifices,” she said, “are not only about atoning for a wrongful act; they are also a way to draw closer to God.”⁶ “Remember,” she said, “even the word for sacrifice—*korban*—comes from the root *karov*—closeness. Sacrifices are a privilege, a way of communicating with God.”

“But I didn’t even do it on purpose,” I said. “It was *beshogeg*,” I muttered under my breath. I sat in the kitchen alone fixated on the laws of *shogeg*—accidental sins. “If a soul shall sin inadvertently against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning things that ought not to be done, and shall do any of them...”⁷

After repeating the words to myself again and again, I suddenly noticed something strange in the language of the commandment. Why does God use the language of “soul—*nefesh*”? Why not “person—*adam*”? My accidental sin was a physical action, committed by my body, not my soul. So why then is God talking about souls? I always thought of my body and soul as two separate and opposite entities, but God seems to be suggesting that my soul and my body are one, and that human actions, which come from thoughts, reside in the soul.⁸ According to that logic, even if I sinned accidentally with my body, it came from my thoughts. That idea made me quiver. How could I have thoughts that I didn’t even know about?

I grew more and more upset and confused by the sacrificial system. Even if I agreed that I was responsible for my subconscious thoughts, why did I need to perform a physical ritual to atone for them? And also, how could the system

¹ Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, trans. Rafael Fisch and Avner Tomaschoff (Israel: Haomanim Press) 1.

² The exact type of sacrifice depended on one’s economic capabilities.

³ Leviticus 4:31.

⁴ According to the tradition of our Rabbis, there are two sorts of *shogeg*: one who is ignorant of the law or the contents of the law, and one who is ignorant or unaware of one’s actions.

⁵ Dvarim Rabba, Parshat Ekav, Parshah 3.

⁶ Nehama Leibowitz, 15

⁷ Leviticus 4:2.

⁸ Nachmanides on Leviticus 4:2.

guarantee that a physical act will cause an internal change? What about people who sacrifice just because they are told to do so? Or those who simply offer their sacrifice without actually changing their behavior or attitude?

Without noticing what I was doing, I snatched a jar from the kitchen counter and flung it across the floor. The jar immediately shattered into several tiny pieces and flour scattered across the floor. In disbelief, I looked down at my hands. How had I once again managed to do something that I hadn't intended?

On one of my fingers a cut from the broken glass began to gently bleed. A few droplets of blood dripped into the flour. Looking at it, I realized that this flour on the ground—roughly a *tefach*—was the flour that had been intended for my sacrifice. I started to cry. There was none left for my offering. I had missed my chance.

As my tears touched the flour, they slowly started turning it into dough. I sat there cupping the dough in my hands and began to knead it, pressing and sculpting it with all of my strength.⁹ In those brief meditative moments, gazing down at the fragmented jar, I recognized the power of a physical action accompanying a verbal intention. This flour scattered across the floor *was* my offering, I realized, although it didn't occur in the place that it was supposed to, or with a witness nearby. But it had the same intended effect: I experienced the power of a physical action causing an emotional transformation.

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Author's note: As I grappled with the notion of a *shogeg*, described in *Parashat Vayikra*, I was struck by two elements: the relationship between our subconscious thoughts and our actions, and the value of a physical atonement ritual. I wrote this story in order to explore the relationship between these two ideas. Drawing from the ideas of several commentators,¹⁰ I came to appreciate the significance of a system that asserts that we must be held responsible for our actions, even those actions that are motivated by thoughts that are somewhat hidden.

The prescription to engage in the physical act of sacrifice was about helping people pay attention. It was a way of reminding people of the danger that can come from not being mindful of one's behaviors.¹¹ Today, we engage in many acts that can unintentionally result in negative impacts on people around the world. We may purchase clothes that were produced by workers whose rights are violated or consume food from other countries that struggle to feed their own populations. In the absence of a sacrificial system, *Parashat Vayikra* reminds us to consider what physical actions we can take to help us be mindful of our thoughts, actions and their impact. By paying closer attention, we can simultaneously be drawn closer to ourselves and to one another.



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⁹ Rambam elaborates by saying that when sacrificing, "The one leaning needs to press with all his strength... [there shall not be] anything interposing between his hands and the animal" (Laws of the Acts of the Sacrifices, 3:13).

¹⁰ Baruch Levine's explanation that in ancient cultic belief systems, guilt existed regardless of whether the perpetrator was aware of having committed a sin helped me understand sacrifice as a way of promoting mindfulness of our actions. (See Baruch Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003) 18.) The Sefer haChinuch's suggestion that only the physical process of bringing and offering a sacrifice—as opposed to a verbal confession—enables someone to understand his sin and take measures to avoid it in the future, helped me see the importance of a physical ritual to atone for a wrongdoing. (As cited by Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, trans. Rafael Fisch and Avner Tomaschoff (Israel: Haomanim Press) 10.)

¹¹ Ibid.

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