

The Limitations in Knowing Yourself

In the Torah section of Vayikra, the Tabernacle is open for operation and the priestly clothing is ready to be donned, and so begins a detailed account of the many different sacrifices, or *korbanot*, introduced by God for Bnei Yisrael. From the *olah* to the *mincha* to the *shelamim* – it's a gamut of sacrifices for the nation. In general, understanding the objective of these Towards the ends of the portion, we come across a fascinating sacrifice, one that stands out from those previously listed – namely, the *asham talui*. As we will soon see, this sacrifice occupies an exclusive spot in the pantheon of *korbanot*.

The sacrifice known as *asham talui* is an extremely unique sacrifice, especially when viewed in the category of *korbanot* brought for sins. Chazal use a universal example to describe the “sin” performed: a person puts himself in a situation where he has in front of him a piece of *cheilev* fat (forbidden) and a piece of *shuman* fat (permitted). He eats one of them, and is then unsure whether he ate the forbidden or permitted one. As a result, he is now obligated in the *korban* of *asham talui* (*talui* meaning he is unsure).

The structure of this sacrifice is notable in that the person did not actually engage in or perform a sin. It is quite possible he ate the piece of meat that was permitted. Nonetheless he is obligated in this *korban*. If this were not enough, there is something more exceptional about this *korban*. The Rambam (Hilchot Shegagos 3:9-10, based on the Talmud) writes that there is another feature that makes this *korban* distinctive. If someone is obligated in a “regular” sin offering, and he did not bring his *korban* prior to Yom Kippur, he must still bring the *korban* after Yom Kippur. In other words, the *kapara*, or forgiveness, for the sin and its subsequent *korban* do not fall under the forgiveness equation of Yom Kippur. However, the *asham talui* is different, as one would be exempt from bringing this *korban* if he did not bring it prior to Yom Kippur. The Rambam explains that the source for this idea comes from the primary role of Yom Kippur – “...any sin that one is not aware of except for God is forgiven” on Yom Kippur. We see then a clear distinction between the *korban* of *asham talui* and other sin offerings, in that Yom Kippur functions as a *kapara* for the sin, in contrast to other offerings, where the individual is still obligated. This distinction needs to be explored further.

To begin our analysis, let's turn to the Chinuch (128) and his understanding of this commandment. He explains that the source for this lies in the fact that a person should be careful, fearing of sin, and always investigating and analyzing all his actions, for fear some obstacle will appear and lead him to sin. Therefore, he writes, the Torah had to ensure that a person bring a *korban* when he is not very careful in his actions, to the point that this doubt

(*safek*) was able to emerge. And the proof of this need for forgiveness for his laziness stems from the fact that if a person discovers he indeed, for example, ate the forbidden food, he brings a different *korban* (meaning a “regular” sin offering), rather than the *asham talui*.

We now see an interesting formula for this sacrifice. One must ask, what exactly did he “do” wrong here? There is no action – he was just being lazy! Of course, laziness is not a prized virtue, but to obligate someone in a *korban* seems pretty severe. When studying the area of *shogeg*, where someone violates a law in an accidental way, we see there is some degree of culpability (versus *oneis*, where the matter is accidental but there is no culpability). If someone, for example, kills someone else by accident, he is consigned to exile to one of the cities of refuge – he does not get a free pass, so to speak. One can deduce from this that when it comes to *shogeg*, there usually is present some of the underlying issues that would indicate a proclivity towards that specific sin. By the accidental killer, his failure to take adequate steps to prevent the tragedy indicates a less than ideal view of his fellow humans. Therefore, the normal sin offering for *shogeg* is tied to the specific sin. However, one cannot apply this same rationale to the case of the *asham talui* – at the end of the day, he does not know if he actually ate the forbidden food or not. There is a different type of *shogeg* that is being introduced here. What was the flaw of this individual? The Chinuch stresses the fact that the situation of doubt, that emerged reflects a lack of vigilance in knowing himself. He suffers from laziness, but not in the emotional, unable to get off the couch sense. It is an intellectual laziness, an overall lack of vigilance with regards to Jewish Law as a whole. Had he been vigilant, the situation of doubt never would have emerged. His ignorance of himself, so to speak, produced a result of ignorance, where the facts are in doubt. Ultimately, his attachment to the system is now in question. When this becomes evident, when a person demonstrates this laziness towards to system as a whole, he is now obligated in this *korban*.

When we turn to the law by Yom Kippur, we can now begin to get a sense of how the *asham talui* does not fit into the normal category of sin. A person should not look at Yom Kippur as a formulaic type of forgiveness, where once it comes along, all sins are forgiven. If he commits the sin and is obligated in the sin offering, the *korban* is clearly part of the process of repentance. Yom Kippur does not step in to be a blanket of forgiveness for all. The same cannot be said by the *asham talui*. It both exists as a *korban* that the individual must bring, but it also has the ability to be “forgiven” via Yom Kippur. How so? The Rambam explains (Hilchot Teshuva 2:7) that everyone is required to engage in repentance on Yom Kippur. One could ask, if an individual kept some type of ledger of all his actions during the year, and he knew without a doubt that he had not violated one of God’s precepts, would he still be obligated to repent on

Yom Kippur? The language of the Rambam indicates that he would, without a doubt. One therefore could posit that the Rambam is telling us that everyone, on this day of Yom Kippur, is defined as a *choteh*, a sinner. Part of this definition is that while we may think we can have complete knowledge of ourselves, from top to bottom, we don't. As we say in the prayers on Yom Kippur:

*“Those [sins] that are revealed to us we have already declared before You and confessed them to You; **and those that are not revealed to us are revealed and known to You...**”*

We must enter Yom Kippur understanding that there is a limitation in our knowledge of the self, and that only God has complete knowledge. Therefore, it is clear why Yom Kippur is the *kapara* for those sins we do not recognize and are unaware of. How does this fit into the case of the *asham talui*? It is difficult to assume that the reason is that it could be that indeed he ate the forbidden food. The digestive process involved in the forbidden is no different than in something kosher. And if he had no knowledge of what he ate, but actually ate the forbidden food, what impact will it have on him to know that God knows? The issue here is that he allowed this state of doubt to emerge. As such, through his own lack of vigilance he created a state of unknown, where only God can know the answer. Therefore, on the one hand he is responsible for allowing this state to emerge. On the other hand, once it does, he now must recognize the inherent difference between God's knowledge and his own. Now we can see how this *korban* functions. Being that the person, through laziness, allowed for the doubt to emerge, he is now obligated in repentance and the subsequent *korban*. However, the very sin and the repentance attached to it involve the concept of God's knowledge of ourselves being qualitatively different. Due to this reality, Yom Kippur is able to create the exemption from the *korban*.

We see now how this *korban* is revealing of an important tenet in Judaism. We must always be aware of ourselves, try our best to constantly be vigilant, and to abhor ignorance. At the same time, we must also recognize there is a limitation to how much we can know of ourselves. A person can easily understand how there is a constraint to knowledge external to ourselves – any physicist will tell you the pursuit of knowledge is infinite. But it is a harder pill to swallow to imagine that God's knowledge of ourselves is on a different plane. This idea is contained within this unique and significant *korban*.