

## Vayikra: The Grand Fusion

Moshe Taragin

Parshat Vayikra lists the various sacrifices or *korbanot* and their respective procedures. *Korbanot* mark transformative life-cycle moments: moments of elation and gratitude (*korban todah*), moments of religious equanimity (*shelamim*), moments of religious confidence (*olah*) and, of course, moments of historical Covenant (*korban pesach*). The *korban* which frames the most potent emotional “moment” is a *korban chatat* –a sacrifice offered to enable recovery from sin. Even though a failure may have been unintentional (*shogeg*), it, none the less, generates guilt and remorse. Processing these crucial emotions, as well as learning to move on from guilt, are each essential to overall religious success and personal wellbeing.

Unfortunately, the modern psychological discourse has vilified the emotion of “guilt” as suppressive of human confidence and self-esteem. In truth, healthy guilt is an invaluable religious emotion and allows authentic self-inspection; authentic self-awareness is vital for true personality change. However, as important as guilt may be for authentic self-inspection, the ability to move on from guilt rather than wallowing in despair, is absolutely critical. A *korban chatat* allows both acknowledgement of failure as well as an eventual catharsis.

In introducing the *chatat*, the Torah describes the scenario of a sin. A very odd phrase is employed to narrate the occurrence of a sin. Presumably, every sin is driven by the desires of the human body and the weakness of human flesh. Yet, the Torah writes “*v’nefesh ki techeta*” (if a *nefesh* sins) thereby portraying sin as a product of “*nefesh*” or of a human soul. Shouldn’t the Torah have assigned the blame for sin upon the human body, and not the human soul? Shouldn’t the *chatat* section be launched with a word referencing the human body such as ‘*guf*’ or, at the very least, a neutral word such as ‘*ish*’? How does the assignment of “sin” to our souls reconfigure our perspective upon sin and our perspectives upon the recovery process of *teshuva*.

The atypical word ‘*nefesh*’ forces us to re-examine the pathology of sin. Every sin or failure possesses a “root cause” or an internal psychological pressure that

influences our behavior. This internal drive is expressed in an actual forbidden activity or any other moral failure. Often, the root cause is very dissimilar to the actual expression. More often than not, our sins are driven by deep psychological forces or fundamental spiritual deficiencies. They may express themselves in physical desires and bodily needs but these expressions stem from a much deeper place. This discrepancy- between the root cause and the actual 'sinful expressions'- accounts for the difficult challenge of shattering bad habits. We often pay too much attention to the manifestation and insufficient attention to the root cause. This approach is similar to dealing with the symptoms of an illness while ignoring the root cause of the illness. Though the symptoms may disappear the illness endures. Without questioning the emotional and psychological drives which manifest in physical desires, it is extremely difficult to reshape or repair our behavior.

In an effort to accentuate the emotional and psychological basis of our failures, the Torah introduces the chatat section with the term nefesh. Sin shouldn't be attributed to the body while exempting the soul or the spirit. Without a body a spirit is pure and cannot sin. Likewise, without an animated soul, a body lies lifeless and rots. This unique blend between body and soul which is a human being bears full responsibility for sin. Understanding the dynamic of sin is the first step toward avoiding sin. It is also instrumental in allowing self-inspection after sin and to initiating authentic teshuva.

The message that sin is driven by both body and soul, is significant far beyond the pathology of sin and the manner of recovery. Human beings are fusions of a spiritual soul welded to a physical body. We inhabit a physical world, but also sense that we belong "elsewhere" and will one day inhabit a different realm. Sometimes these two aspects of human identity can feel very disparate and we often compartmentalize our experiences: our moments of soul-experience "feel" religious whereas our moments of body-experience do not. Of course, we recognize that bodily experiences are governed by halachik standards and that these experiences can serve as platforms for religious opportunities. However, the experiences themselves aren't inherently religious-minded, but merely "stages" for the execution of religious duties. Eating isn't religious per se but provides an opportunity for our souls to connect to Hashem through a beracha or through adhering to kashrut expectations.

This pigeonholing of our religious lives into different “cells”, can sometimes lead to a very binary view of our lives. It may compartmentalize our experience into two unrelated realms. When in the religious realm such as a Beit Knesset, Beit Midrash or mitzvah ‘moment’ we identify the religious opportunities and sense religious experience. When in neutral realms- our homes, workplaces and other public areas we have a more difficult time identifying religious opportunities and sensing religious experience. At worse, this can cause religious schizophrenia- excelling at religion within the spiritual domain but failing abjectly once we step outside overtly religious zones. Even if we are able to act religiously in both realms do they feel integrated? Or do we switch personalities as we shift into the different spheres of our lives? Switching personas always dilutes the depth of our experience by preventing integration of personality.

Hashem created a fusion of body and soul and welded them so deeply that, in our experience, more often than not, they feel as one. If we stop to reflect, we can certainly divide our body from soul but in the day-to-day moments we sense these two components as one integrated identity. Only Hashem could be capable of creating such a deep integration between two such vastly different entities; by bonding body and soul He expects us to integrate our experiences. Sin may seem to be a disintegrating moment – our body has fallen prey to its weaknesses and dragged our soul into a darker and lower realm. To refute this incorrect partitioning of identity the Torah prefaces the story of sin with the term “nefesh” to remind us that, in sin, as in life, we live as one unified being- body and soul.