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The Elevated Status of the Korban Olah

Parshas Vayikra discusses the *korbanos* (sacrifices). The first *korban* mentioned is the *korban olah*, the offering which was entirely burnt on the Altar.

The Sages explain several reasons why it was called “*olah*”. The simple meaning is because it was “*olah*” (elevated) since it was entirely burnt. It is also called *olah* because it was “*me’uleh*”, the most desired, of all the *korbanos*. It is also called *olah* because it was *ma’aleh*, it “elevated”, the Jewish people from *Gehinnom*.

The common denominator between all of these terms is that the word *olah* refers to *aliyah*, ascension. The *korban olah* ascends entirely onto the Altar. It is most elevated of all the *korbanos*, and it elevates Am Yisrael.

The “Korban Olah” In Place, Time & Soul

In Hashem’s creation, everything exists on three planes – in *olam*/place, in *zman*/time, and in *nefesh*/soul. [\[1\]](#) There is therefore a *korban olah* in place, time, and soul.

1) Place: The *korban olah* is *olah l'maalah* - it "ascended to above". The Sages state that the Torah was given over a period of forty days, by one who ascended to Heaven for forty days (Moshe Rabbeinu), just as it takes forty days for a fetus to develop. "Hashem looked in the Torah and created the world" - the world itself comes from the Torah.

An infant is called "*olel*", for it is always searching to attach itself to its source, its mother. Similarly, the world yearns to return its source, to the Torah which it comes from. The *olam*, the world, is a place that really desires *aliyah*/ascension to its source which is the Torah.

2) Time: The *korban olah* in "time" is the *alos hashachar*, the dawn, when the sun begins to rise. The day begins from an *aliyah*/ascension when the sun rises. It is not by chance that the sun rises each day. It is because the very design of Creation is *aliyah*, ascension. The Creation first is brought down to our own level, "Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world", there is a Heaven and earth, and all of the Creation desires ascension to its source. Every day, at dawn, with the rising of the sun, the entire Creation ascends.

In addition, we also had three festivals in the year in which we had the *mitzvah* of *aliyah l'regel*, to ascend by foot, to Yerushalayim. This was an *aliyah*/ascension of time itself. For three times a year, the very "time" itself was uplifted and elevated.

3) Soul: The *korban olah* in terms of the "soul" is depicted in a statement of one of the Sages, "I have seen those who ascend (*bnei aliyah*) and they are few." [2] A *ben Aliyah* is one who grows and ascends in spirituality. They are people who reveal the nature of the Creation to ascend to its Source.

A *ben aliyah* is not merely a person who accepts resolutions upon themselves to have spiritual growth. That is merely the beginning of what it means to be a *ben aliyah*. The meaning of a *ben aliyah* is a person who wishes to return to their Source, just as the world and time desires to ascend back to its Source. Those who have revealed the deep nature of the soul, of wishing to ascend back to their Source are those who are called "*bnei aliyah*".

Elevating Actions, Speech & Thoughts

There is also more to understand about *aliyah*, ascension.

The Ramban explains that the *mitzvos* involving *korbanos* correspond to different functions of man. There are three general functions of man, from lowest to the highest use: action, speech, and thought.

The "action" aspect of *korbanos* is the act of offering the *korban* on the Altar. The "speech" aspect in *korbanos* is when reciting *viduy* (confession over sins) before offering the *korban*. The "thought" aspect of *korbanos* is represented by the kidneys of the animal, for the Gemara says that "kidneys offer advice", corresponding to thought. Thus, all aspects of man (action, speech and thought) need to undergo *aliyah*/ascension.

It was explained earlier how there is *aliyah* in the areas of world, time, and soul. With the *korbanos*, the concept of *aliyah* is manifested in the *korban olah*, as the Ramban explains (cited in earlier words of the Sages as well) that whatever was done to the *korban* is really what the person himself deserves, for the Torah says, "אדם כי יקריב מכם", which implies that the person himself is really the *korban*. Man contains the functions of action, speech, and thought, and the purpose of the *korban olah* is to elevate the actions, speech, and thought of a person [hence the *korban olah* 'offers' the entire spectrum of the person as a *korban*].

Similarly, the *Rishonim* explain that the word *korban* is from the world "*keiruv*", "close", for it draws a

matter closer to its root, its source.

As it was explained, the root of all of the *korbanos* is the *korban olah*, which is most elevated from all the *korbanos*, and on a deeper note, which also raises all of the *korbanos* to a higher level.

Elevate the Thoughts of Man

Where is the root of the *korban olah* in the Torah?

Avraham Avinu was told, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, and elevate him as an offering." The Torah uses the word "olah" here, and this is the first time in the Torah where the word "olah" appears. (Adam HaRishon also offered a *korban olah*). Avraham took Yitzchok as a *korban olah* for Hashem. This involved action, speech, and thought. It involved the action of preparing Yitzchok for the Altar. It also involved speech, similar to reciting *viduy*. It also involved thought. How do we see this?

[The Gemara^[3] says that according to Rava, the "olah comes as a gift". Whereas a *chatas*-offering is for the purpose of atonement, the *olah*, which is brought after the *chatas*, comes as a "gift".] However, the *Talmud Yerushalmi*^[4], as well as *Vayikra Rabbah*, both state that the *korban olah* comes in order to atone for "improper thoughts of the heart" (*hirhurei halev*). Hashem does not punish for sinful thoughts which did not lead to any action, (with the exception of thoughts to commit idol worship, which Hashem does punish for)^[5]. Even so, the *korban olah* is brought in order to atone for *hirhurei halev*, for any sinful or improper thoughts. Why?

As explained earlier, the *korban olah* elevates actions, speech, and thoughts. Its unique quality to elevate is mainly with regards to its power to elevate the power of thought. It is called the most desired (*me'uleh*) of all the *korbanos* because it has this special power to elevate thought. Since thought is the highest function of man, and the *korban olah* is the most elevated of all the *korbanos*, its main power is that it atones for improper thoughts.

How do we see this power of the *korban olah* to elevate thought, in the *korban olah* which was brought by Avraham Avinu?

The Sages said that the Satan tried to stop Avraham Avinu by telling him that if he offers Yitzchok as a *korban olah* to Hashem, his lineage will discontinue and all of that Hashem had promised him will be ruined. Avraham Avinu then said to Hashem, "I could have questioned Your words, but I did not question. Rather, I have gone to offer Yitzchok." Thus, the "*korban olah*" which Avraham brought was for the explicit purpose of countering any *hirhurei halev* (improper thoughts). This is the depth of the power of the *korban olah* to elevate thought.

The simple level of the atonement of the *korban olah* is that after a person has had any *hirhurei halev* (improper thoughts), the *korban olah* comes in order to atone for these thoughts. This is the lower use of the *korban olah*. The higher use of the *korban olah*, which was Avraham Avinu's offering of Yitzchok as a *korban olah*, was brought in order to prevent any *hirhurei halev* from taking root in the first place. The *olah* which Avraham Avinu brought was for the purpose of elevating his own thoughts, so that he wouldn't have question Hashem in his thoughts.

This is the depth behind the matter that the *korban olah* comes to atone for *hirhurei halev*, for improper thoughts of the heart.

The Vilna Gaon's Evil Inclination

Rav Chaim Volozhiner said that he asked his teacher, the Vilna Gaon, what his evil inclination was

like. Since the Sages state that “Whoever is greater than his friend, his inclination is greater”^[6], Rav Chaim Volozhiner wished to know what kind of evil inclination the Vilna Gaon had, in order to see how the Vilna Gaon had a greater evil inclination than others. The Vilna Gaon answered that he has an evil inclination to ask questions about much higher levels of comprehension that he hadn’t attained yet.

Each person has his current spiritual level (*madreigah*) and the level that is above him. If a person wonders about the level above him, this is an example of *hirhur* – a subtler degree of an improper kind of thought. It is not within one’s current grasp, and therefore it is improper for the person to think about it. Most people associate the term “*hirhurei aveirah*”, “sinful thoughts”, with lewd kinds of thoughts. But that is only a baser level of *hirhur*. There are higher levels of *hirhur*, which are also forbidden: When one wonders about levels of comprehension that are higher than his current level.

The Gemara says, “Do not involve yourself in secret matters [of the Torah].” A subtle form of *hirhur* is when one wishes to understand things that are beyond his current level of comprehension. This requires atonement through the *korban olah*. The *olah* comes to atone for any thoughts that are *me’uleh*, “above”, the person’s actual level. These kinds of thoughts are in the category of “sinful thoughts” which greater people struggle with.

Elevating Ourselves To A Higher Level – In Our Own Times

When the *korban olah* was brought and it atoned for improper thoughts of the heart, it would elevate the person to higher spiritual levels which he hadn’t been on before that were above his grasp.

By the lighting of the *Menorah*, the commandment was to light it so that “the flame shall rise on its own”.^[7] This same concept is also the innermost depth of the *korban olah*. The *korbanos* were offered on the outer Altar, but on the inside of the *Beis HaMikdash*, there was the *Menorah*, *Shulchan* and the inner *Mizbeiach*. The flame of the *Menorah* would ascend, similar to the concept of the *korban olah* which ascends above. The flame of the *Menorah* was meant “to rise on its own”, and this is like the concept of “I have seen those who ascend (*b’nei aliyah*), and they are few”. The *b’nei aliyah* are those who are always ascending higher [like a flame rising on its own]. They keep ascending higher, even after the atonement of the *korban olah* [like a flame rising on its own].

This is what is behind the first *korban* of the Torah, זאת תורת העולה – the *korban olah*. We do not have the actual *korbanos* in our times. All we have today is the recitation of the *korbanos*, of which it is said “All who recite [the *parshah* of] *olah*, it is as if he offered an *olah*”. (One who studies the “*Toras Olah*”, the *parshah* in the Torah about the *korban olah*, is considered to have brought it). When one studies about the *korban olah*, he can reach the “*Menorah*” [in the inner sense], which corresponds to the study of the holy Torah.

When one reaches true understanding in Torah, it is then that he reaches the “flame rises on its own”. Of this it is said in a deep sense, “I have seen those who ascend” – those who merit the unending spiritual growth of a flame reminiscent of the *Menorah*’s, which “rises on its own”.

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^[1] Sefer Yetzira III:1

^[2] Bava Metzia 45a

[3] Zevachim 7a

[4] Yerushalmi Yoma

[5] Kiddushin 40a

[6] Succah 52a

[7] Rashi, parshas Behaaloscha (Bamidbar 8:2)

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