YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Structure of and Meaning of the Daily Prayer**

**By Rav Ezra Bick**

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This week’s *shiurim* are dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky *zt"l*, whose *yahrzeit* falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the worldwide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of *Eretz Yisrael* and *Torat Yisrael*.

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Dedicated to Maya Bernstein & Noam Silverman -   
In honor of the Birth of their daughter, Niva Hallel

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**Shiur #07: *Korbanot***

The next unit we will discuss is usually referred to as *parashat ha-korbanot*, the sacrifices. Lack of time or patience has led to widespread skipping of this section, even though its roots go all the way back to the *siddurim* of the Geonim. I would like to investigate its basis and significance, and in doing so perhaps restore it to its previous prominence.

The *parashat ha-korbanot* includes a section about the *ketoret*, passages from the Mishna dealing with the sacrifices, and one passage from the Gemara, but the most important section is the Torah *parasha* mandating the *tamid*, the daily sacrifice.

The recitation of the *korbanot* is mentioned in the Tur in the opening section of *Orach Chayim*. This section is actually not about prayer, but rather about the service of God. The section begins with the words: "Yehuda ben Teima says: Be bold as the leopard, light as the eagle, speedy as the dear, and mighty as the lion to fulfill the will of your Father in Heaven." The Tur explains that one must shake off the spell of sleep and rouse himself to serve God. In that context, he continues, "It is good to recite the *parasha* of the *akeida*, and the *parasha* of the *mann*, and the ten commandments, and the *parasha* of the *korbanot* – for instance, the *parasha* of the *olah* and the *mincha* and the *shelamim* and the *chatat* and the *asham.*"

The Beit Yosef (ibid.) cites a gemara in *Taanit* (27b), apparently as the source for Tur:

Avraham said before the Holy One Blessed be He, “Perhaps Israel will sin before You and then you will do unto them as You did to the generation of the flood?” He said to him: “No.” He said to Him: “How shall I know that I shall inherit it?” He said to him: “Take for me a triple calf… [i.e., the sacrifices are the guarantee of the gift of the land]. He said to Him: “This is true when the Temple is in existence; what will become of them when the Temple is not in existence?” He said to him: “I have already established the order of the sacrifices (*seder korbanot*); for whenever they read it, I consider it as though they sacrifice before Me a sacrifice, and I shall forgive them their transgressions.”

This *midrash*, which relates to the *Brit Bein Ha-Betarim*, is not specific to the *korban ha-tamid*, as it is clearly based on interpreting the animals which God told Avraham to produce as representing **all** the sacrifices. Hence, the Tur suggests that one should read the corresponding Torah passages dealing with all of the sacrifices. On the other hand, the language of the Tur seems to suggest that reading these passages is a recommendation, a good idea, but not an obligation.

The Tur returns to this section of the *siddur* much later, when he discusses the order of daily prayer (48):

It was established (*ve-kav'u*) to read the *parashat ha-tamid*, as it is found in the *midrash*: “When the Temple is not in existence, what will become of them? He said to him: I have already preordained for them the order of the sacrifices, and whenever they will be engaged in them I will consider it as though they had sacrificed them before Me.

In regard specifically to the *parashat ha-tamid*, the language of the Tur appears to tend much more to the obligatory ("it was established to read"). This is in fact the opinion of Rabbeinu Yona of Gerona, the author of the Shaarei Teshuva, who in his commentary to *Berakhot* (5a) declares the recitation of the *tamid* to be obligatory. Rabbeinu Yona questions how it is that we occasionally recite Biblical passages by heart, against the Talmudic rule that passages from the Written Torah may not be recited by heart. His answer is that any passage whose recitation is obligatory – for example, the *shema –* is not included in this rule. He then adds that this is why the *parashat ha-tamid* can be recited by heart, as it too is also obligatory, and he then proceeds to cite the *midrash* cited by the Tur and the Beit Yosef.

But why is reciting this *parasha* obligatory? It may indeed be a good idea, since it helps to protect us from Divine abandonment, but Rabbeinu Yona has a specific halakhic status in mind when he calls it obligatory, which he needs in order to permit its recitation by heart. The obvious answer is that the obligation derives from the covenant between Avraham and God. A covenant is a binding agreement, and Avraham's participation in it obligates us as well, since he clearly represents the Jewish People. Thus, in fact, according to R. Yona, this obligation is a very special one, deriving not from a command in the Torah or from an edict of the Sages, but rather as part and parcel of the original covenant between God and the Avraham. It is an essential ingredient in the very status of the Jews as covenantal partners of God.

There is still something that bothers me about this idea that we recite *korbanot* in order to vicariously reconstitute the sacrifices. After all, there is another part of the daily prayers that seems to serve the same purpose. The central and most basic part of prayer, that which is referred to be the Sages by the unmodified title of *"tefilla*," the exemplar of *tefilla* *par excellence*, is the *Shemoneh Esrei.* The *gemara* in *Berakhot* (26b) states that "*Tefilot keneged temidin tiknum*," the prayers were instituted in place of the *temidim*, the daily sacrifices. Given that we are going to recite the *Shemoneh Esrei* three times in any day – with *Shacharit* in place of the *korban tamid shel shachar* and *Mincha* in place of the *korban tamid shel bein ha-arbayim* – why is there any need for the recitation of the Biblical text dealing with the *korbanot ha-tamid*? We will in any event fulfill the obligation to bring these sacrifices, to the best of our limited ability in these Temple-less days, through the *Shemoneh Esrei*. What does reciting the actual *parasha* add?

The idea of *tefilla* in general being "in place" of sacrifices is more than merely a parallelism of one substituting for the other. The Rambam famously claims that prayer is a Torah *mitzva*, derived from the verse, "You shall serve *Hashem* your God" (*Shemot* 23:25):

It is a positive commandment to pray every day, as is written, "You shall serve *Hashem* your God." It was taught in the tradition that this "service" is prayer, as is written, "To serve Him with all your hearts." The Sages said: What is the service of the heart? This is prayer. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 1:1)

"Service of the heart" is here contrasted with service not of the heart – service of actions. The term "service" (*avoda*) would typically be understood to refer to the service of the Temple, the *avodat ha-korbanot*. The Rambam is explicitly viewing prayer as being the mental equivalent of sacrifices. The latter is fulfilled through external actions, while the former is fulfilled through internal intentionality. Both, however, are of the same essential nature – an expression of serving God. It therefore makes sense that the Sages would order prayer to actually reflect the sacrifices by ordaining the times and frequency of prayer to match the Temple daily sacrifices.

Given that understanding, I return to the same question: If prayer in general, and the *Shemoneh Esrei* in particular, is an expression of the service of God transferred to internal self-consciousness and expressed verbally, why is there an additional need to actually recite the texts of the sacrifices so that God should view us as though we had sacrificed actually? Sacrificing is serving God and praying is serving God, and the second parallels the first. What more need be done and what more can be accomplished?

I have thought about this question for many years, and I continue to wonder about it. I would like to offer a suggestion, but I am not completely certain that it is correct.

There are, I think, two different aspects to the institution of *korbanot.* One is the notion of *avoda*, service. God is king, and we are obligated to serve Him as men once served their kings. The word which comes to mind – obviously an archaic one, practically medieval, but I hope we can still sense the meaning of it – is **homage**. This has two forms, in actions and substance on the one hand and in words on the other. As far as this aspect is concerned, we may conclude that the two forms are functionally equivalent. There are, not surprisingly, many who would believe that they are in fact identical, and they therefore wonder whether there is anything lacking at all in a world where sacrifices do not take place. I tend not to agree with that assessment; there is, I believe, something more real, more experiential, and therefore expressing a greater and more vivid commitment in physical sacrifice than in mere words. I was therefore careful to use the term “functionally equivalent,” by which I meant that the two forms embody the same basic meaning. The prayers themselves express this equivalency when we say in the *Shemoneh Esrei*, "May the burnt-offerings and the prayers of Israel be accepted by you with love, and may the service of Israel Your people be continually acceptable to You."

There is, however, another aspect of *korbanot*. I discovered this aspect quite by accident a few years ago. I was browsing in the library when I came across a typewritten monograph on *Sefer Vayikra* in English. Reading the first section, I was struck by a verse, quoted in English, which I did not recognize. Opening up a *Chumash*, I discovered that the verse in question was a quite familiar one, repeated often throughout *Vayikra*: “*Ve-hiktir ha-kohen et ha-kol ha-mizbecha olah rei’ach nicho’ach la-Hashem*.” The unrecognized translation of the beginning of the verse was, "The priest shall turn all of it into smoke on the altar…." *Le-haktir* is translated as "turn into smoke."

After my initial astonishment, I realized that the translation was correct. *Le-haktir* does not mean “to burn.” The verb used to describe how to get rid of *notar*, leftover meat from a sacrifice, is “*le-srof*.” When we refer to burning *chametz*, no one says that he is “*maktir*” it! A minute of reflection makes clear that *saraf* is a negative action, one of destruction and elimination. *Hektir* is a positive action, not designed to eliminate the fuel, but rather to offer it or do something else positive with it. The second common use of the verb *le-*haktir (*le-haktir ketoret*) is to produce incense. The root of “*le-haktir*” – K-T-R – means smoke in Arabic (and steam in modern Hebrew), so *le-haktir* does literally mean "turn into smoke." The sacrifice on the altar is not being destroyed through fire (*saraf*), but is being turned into smoke through the use of fire – and then it becomes an "offering of pleasant odor before God."

There are two parts to an animal sacrifice. The first part, which dominates the discussions in *Masekhet Zevachim*, is the sprinkling of the blood on the altar (*zerikat ha-dam*). This is defined by the Sages as bearing the role of atonement. The second part, which we probably more naturally associate with the idea of sacrifice, is the burning of the meat and fats on the altar (*haktara*). Knowing now what this word really means, we can understand the significance of this aspect. *Korbanot* turn meat into smoke; they transform **the material into the spiritual**. Smoke represents – definitely to the ancient mind, but to ours as well, despite the scientific training we have received – the spirit, the non-material, like wind (*ruach*, which also means spirit). Smoke disappears into nothing visible and rises up towards the heavens. Indeed, the verse says that this causes a pleasant smell – *rei'ach nicho’ach*. *Rei'ach* equals *ruach* equals the spiritual.

Sacrificing an animal or other possessions of ours creates a real bridge between two worlds that are logically unbridgeable – the transcendant heavens, spiritual purity, and the physical world, coarse and material. The *midrash* states that the heavens never touch the earth, not even when God descended on Mt. Sinai, and the earth never touches the heavens, not even when Moshe ascended unto God. But sacrificing, actually turning our possessions into smoke, creates a link, a bridge, whereby the former become the latter. The two totally dissimilar worlds are linked and intertwined, one becoming the other. It is not surprising that the Ramban declares that the *korbanot* create the bridge whereby God's blessings descend to the world – whereby the spiritual becomes the physical. A bridge, after all, is two-way.

We can understand how verbal prayer is a worthy substitute for the *avoda* aspect of sacrifices, for the sprinkling of the blood, for expressing commitment, for self-dedication. Prayer is just as much service as is sacrifice, even if it be only in the verbal or mental sphere. But this second idea, turning the physical into the spiritual, cannot be accomplished by prayer. For this you need actual materiality to be burned, to be transformed, to rise up and leave its earth-bound corporeality and ascend *le-rei'ach nicho’ach*. Avraham has been promised that the sacrifices are the guarantee of the gift of the land to his children. Which aspect of sacrifices gives that guarantee, even if his children are sinning? Of course, it is the *haktara* aspect. The Land of Israel is a real earthly land that is the seat of God's presence **in** the world. That God should dwell among us, that we should dwell in His land, depends on the possibility of the bridge between heaven and earth, that the two realms not be unbridgeable. But if there are no sacrifices, then indeed there is no bridge, and we are exiled to an island adrift, with no way to connect to the realm of God.

The solution is not obvious. Reciting the verses is not an act of transforming the physical into the spiritual. God, however, has promised: Recite these verses and I will view it **as though** you have actually and really burnt the meat on the altar. I will create the bridge even without the substance of it. How that works, I really don't know. It is somehow in the power of the actual words of the Torah to become reality. The word is the real (consider the statement "with ten utterances God created the world"). But through God's promise to Avraham and the covenant between them, we can accomplish the integration of the worlds even without actual sacrifices. This is not *Shemoneh Esrei*, it is not prayer, and it is not *avoda she-balev*. If Rabbeinu Yona is correct and it is a daily obligation, and that is why it is in our *siddurim*, the *parashat ha-korbanot* is an incredible opportunity to transform our world, both personally and communally, in this bereft world of *churban*.

Since realizing this, I have been punctilious to include at least the *parashat ha-tamid*, the sacrifice designated by the Torah as "My bread for the fire," every day at the beginning of *Shacharit*. It is our way of continuing the *brit bein ha-betarim*. It is the remnant of the bridge created by that covenant between the spiritual realm and the material world.