

## The Pollution of Non-Acts

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### Parashat Vayikra 5781

This week we begin the book of Vayikra/Leviticus, which has a strong focus on the priests and the Torah (teachings) of sacrifices.<sup>1</sup> Our *parashah* teaches the rules and purposes of five sacrifices, including the purification offering (Hebrew: *hattat*). When I grew up, the English translation of the *hattat* sacrifice was generally “a sin offering” based on the association of the name *hattat* (חַטָּאת) with the Hebrew word *heit* (חַטָּה), meaning sin. Even today, the Jewish Publication Society translation calls it a guilt offering. Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom convinced me that the word *hattat* is related to *lehatei* (חַטָּתֵי), meaning, to purify. This offering is therefore more properly called a purification offering.<sup>2</sup> The question is: purification of what?

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<sup>1</sup> I want to acknowledge the profound influence on my understanding of Leviticus by the scholarly work of Jacob Milgrom, especially in his masterpiece, his commentary on the book of Leviticus in the Anchor Bible series, volume 1 on chapters 1-16. With an amazing combination of rabbinic and medieval commentaries and modern critical studies, including cognate studies of other Mesopotamian religions, he shed new light on hundreds of passages. He has a feel for literary structures and specific details. Most of all, he opened my eyes to the central themes of the book of Leviticus—that there is a struggle between life and death in the world and humans are asked to throw the weight of their actions on to the side of life. This in turn influenced me deeply as I developed my forthcoming book on Judaism as the religion of life in which God invites humans to partner in the work of filling the world with life and repairing it to sustain life at the highest level. There will be more references to Milgrom in these essays throughout Leviticus.

<sup>2</sup> See Milgrom, *Leviticus* vol. 1, pp. 226-292.



You might have thought that the *hattat* brings purification from sin, so that the difference in name is merely semantic. But in fact this sacrifice is also brought for other reasons. Many of the cases requiring a *hattat* have to do with a person having become impure through contact with a dead animal but not going through purification as soon as possible.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the person has increased or extended the sway of impurity in biblical Israel. What has impurity to do with sin? Why bring an offering for being in a state of impurity? It makes some sense that a problem of impurity would be followed by a purification offering, but what is the connection to sin?

I want to call special attention to one of the cases that requires a *hattat*. A person witnesses a crime and hears a public exhortation asking witnesses to step forward and report what happened. The person saw the crime, but, despite the exhortation, still decides not to step forward as a witness. That person is guilty, and required to bring a *hattat* offering to clear himself of his guilt. We are not dealing here with any sinful **act**. We are dealing with a non-act, a decision to be a bystander and not get involved, even though the person knows the culprit. The guilt stems from not having acted to balance this crime with justice (or prevent future crimes) by witnessing, but choosing not to act. Still, this person is not impure and committed no act of sin. What, then, is this person being purified from?

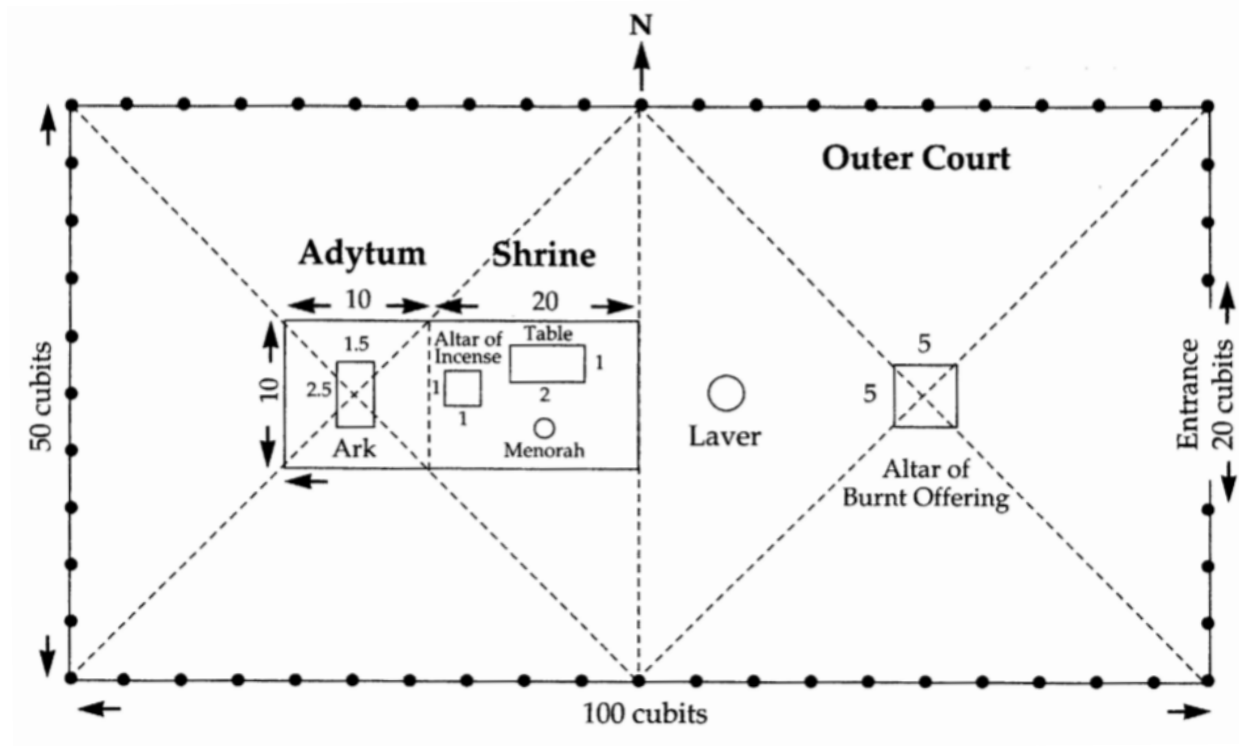
Milgrom explains that the purification offering is not so much for the person who brings the *hattat* sacrifice. Rather, it is for **the sanctuary**, the tabernacle. The tabernacle dwells in the midst of the Jewish people and it represents the presence of God among the people. The shrine is built as follows:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Leviticus 5:2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, p. 135.





*The ground plan of the tabernacle*

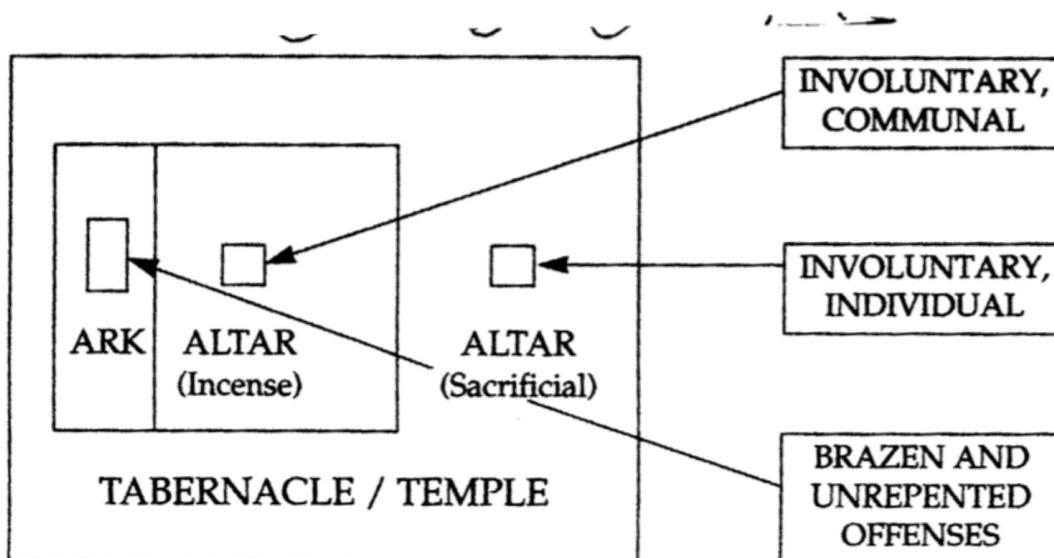
The sinful behaviors of people are not only wrong acts that need correction and repentance from the sinners. They create an atmosphere in the community and culture within which the acts were done.

Milgrom shows that if one looks at the sins that require a *hattat*,<sup>5</sup> as well as on which altar the sacrifice was brought and where the blood of the sacrifice is spilled, the following pattern emerges. When an individual involuntarily, e.g. unintentionally, commits a sin, s/he generates a moral pollution in the culture of the community. The symbolic language of the sacrifices says that the toxic effect ‘attacks’ the outer court of the *mishkan* and its altar. If the

<sup>5</sup> See Leviticus 4-5.



whole community or its leadership commit an unintentional sin, then the act is a more weighty creator of pollution. As it were, the toxicity penetrates further and ‘attacks’ the altar of incense in the inner sanctuary. Finally, if intentional and unrepented sins are committed, the toxic fallout spreads farther and deeper. The spiritual pollution ‘attacks’ the ark in the Holy of Holies, in the very innermost sanctum of the tabernacle.<sup>6</sup> Here is Milgrom’s illustration:



Unless the individual and the community repent and bring a purification sacrifice to purge the Tabernacle, the pollution caused by sinful acts builds up. At some point, the Divine Presence cannot tolerate such an atmosphere, in which sins are neither checked nor repented and reversed. Ultimately, when the presence of sin reaches toxic levels, the Divine Presence will leave the tabernacle/Temple.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Milgrom’s illustration, *Leviticus*, p. 257.

<sup>7</sup> The tabernacle/*mishkan* is the house of God’s presence in Leviticus. In later centuries, the Holy Temple is the house of God’s presence.



The symbolic language of sacrifices is telling us that a society builds up a culture in which people live and work. If sin is not checked or undone, it becomes dominant. People are living in an environment full of evil and will be affected by it. Then the Divine Presence will leave, leaving behind a useless, empty shell of a building. This is the scene that Ezekiel portrayed in his mystic vision of the chariot of God leaving the Temple. The evil pollution in the society stifled good people and normalized bad behaviors. Israel became a culture of sin and death, which the God of life would not abide. Similarly, Jeremiah describes a Temple hollowed out of holiness and sunk in an atmosphere of oppression and abuse from human to human. God then left the Temple, leaving a void, a lifeless sanctuary without God, for the Babylonians to enter and destroy at will.<sup>8</sup>

What has the case of extended impurity to do with this? Often, impurity symbolically stands for death.<sup>9</sup> Holiness symbolically represents life.<sup>10</sup> This is why people's corpses are not allowed into the tabernacle/Temple. Those extending impurity (instead of removing it through prompt purification and rebirth-to-life rituals) allow expanded presence of death to permeate the community. In rituals (as shown above in ethics and sin), unless impurity is checked, God will leave. In this case, too, a purification sacrifice is required to purge the tabernacle before impurity/death becomes entrenched and dominant.

Our portion teaches us that not only acts of sin, but choosing to bystand, neither to fight nor report criminals, is a grave offense, whose influence spreads and poisons the atmosphere of a community. Similarly, complacency in living with death or death impurity, rather than

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<sup>8</sup> See the books of Ezekiel, especially chapter 1, and Jeremiah, especially chapter 7.

<sup>9</sup> This will be the focus of the forthcoming essay on Parashat Tazria-Metzora.

<sup>10</sup> See my previous essay on Parashat Tetzaveh, "On the Priesthood, Or: Holiness is Living in the Fullness of Life," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/priesthood>.



removing it, crowds out a culture of life and holiness. In the end, God ‘departs’ from a culture of death.

With the aid of Milgrom, we are able to cut through the somewhat remote or baffling symbolic language of the sacrifices and of the animals brought to the altar and of the types of altar. We can see the deeper lesson of the Torah portion: life needs to be constantly affirmed and renewed. Failure in either the ethical (such as bystanding in the face of sin) or ritual realms (such as acceptance of death impurity’s presence without reasserting life) generates an atmosphere where the ability to resist sin or death is debilitated. Without repentance and serious action to stop this process of sin/death entrenching itself, the moral and spiritual oxygen will be sucked out of the community. The final result is that the Divine Presence will depart from such a society.

In bringing the purification sacrifice, the individual, the leader, and the community signal that they want to fight against sin and not allow evil to become normative or dominant. They signal that bystanding is as grave an act as outright sinning, because it allows bad actions to go unchecked and evil to dig itself deeply into the community. In every society, one must end bystanding and get people to step up and fight for the good. In parallel, one must constantly reassert or renew life—or the society may pass the tipping point and slip into a culture of moral or spiritual death.

