



A Prehistory of the Sacrifices

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The laws of Leviticus appear to be entirely separate from the narrative and themes of the Torah so far. Exodus, by contrast, picks up directly from the narrative of Genesis, and—as we have seen—even the case laws in Exodus sometimes make subtle references to earlier stories.¹ But when we enter Leviticus, we feel ourselves to be in another kind of book entirely. There is no narrative at all in here the first *parashah*. Instead, the book opens by listing the various types of *korbanot* (sacrificial offerings), and the precise details involved in their ritual preparation. Speaking directly to the priest, absorbed in the procedural realm of the *mishkan* (tabernacle), it is as if this middle book of the Torah is detached from the world that has come before it.

Yet even here, in the intricacies of the sacrificial system, the meaning of the text is informed by its relationship to earlier narratives. For *korbanot* do not appear in the Torah for the first time here in Leviticus. A look back at where a particular offering has appeared previously in the Torah can therefore offer context and provide a deeper understanding of the meaning and purpose of this *korban*.

¹ In particular, see what I wrote for Parashat Mishpatim, “Law as Commentary,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/law-commentary>.



This approach is particularly helpful in the case of the first three of the *korbanot* mentioned in Leviticus: the *olah*, *minḥah*, and *shelamim*.² The Torah gives no explanation of what situation would prompt someone to bring these particular offerings. They are simply named, as in verse 3, “אִם עֹלָה קָרְבָּנוֹ” - If one’s *korban* is an *olah*.” The word literally means “goes up”; hence, it is alternately translated as the “elevation” or “burnt” offering because it all gets burnt and goes up in smoke. But when does a person bring an *olah*?

Well, when has an *olah* been brought before? The first person we have on record offering this kind of sacrifice is Noah. After the Flood has receded and he comes out of the Ark, we read:

בראשית ח:כ

וַיִּבֶן נֹחַ מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה וַיִּקַּח מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה וּמִכָּל הָעוֹף הַטְּהוֹר וַיַּעַל עֹלֹת בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ.

Genesis 8:20

Noah built an altar to the Eternal, and took from every pure animal, and from every pure bird, and brought **olot** upon the altar.

We can already begin to speculate on what might have compelled Noah to bring this offering: surely it was meant to express some sense of gratitude to God for having survived the global catastrophe of the Flood.

But we can push past the particulars of the Noah story by comparing it to another instance of an *olah* offering. The other figure in Genesis who offers an *olah* is Avraham. Our first

² The five types of *korbanot* covered in Parashat Vayikra are: the *olah* (elevation-offering); the *minḥah* (meal-offering); the *shelamim* (the well-being offering); the *hattat* (the sin offering); and the *asham* (the guilt offering). For last two of these, the sin and guilt offerings, not only do their names suggest when they might be given, the Torah explicitly names the reasons for giving them (that is, generally speaking, in order to be forgiven for having unintentionally transgressed one of God’s *mitzvot*).



patriarch's *olah* was initially to be offered not in the form of an beast or a bird, but his own son:

בראשית כב:ב

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח נָא אֶת בְּנֶךָ אֶת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֶּתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ אֵל אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לַעֲלֹה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלַי.

Genesis 22:2

And God said, “Please take your son, your only son, whom you love—Yitzẖak—and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as an ***olah*** on one of the mountains I will point out to you.

Avraham takes his son and immediately sets off to follow God’s instruction. When they come to the mountain, Avraham builds an altar, lays out the wood, and then binds his son and places him on top. But as he takes up the knife to slaughter his son, suddenly an angel calls to him from the heavens and tells him to stop. Avraham has proven that he fears God, and Yitzẖak’s life will be spared. Avraham’s first response is not to vocalize his gratitude to God, but to continue with the task of bringing an *olah* offering:

בראשית כב:יג

וַיֵּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה אֵיל אֲחֵר נֶאֱחָז בְּקַרְנָיו וַיִּלֶּךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לַעֲלֹה תַחַת בְּנוֹ.

Genesis 22:13

When Avraham looked up, he saw—behold!—a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Avraham went and took the ram and offered it up as an ***olah*** in place of his son.



We can begin to establish a pattern here. Both of these *olot*, Noah's and Avraham's, are offered after passing through a threat of death and surviving. Both put forth animals as substitutes for the human lives that might have been lost. And both result in a promise from God to either bless humanity (in Avraham's case) or at least not to curse them again (in Noah's).

Returning to Leviticus, then, we may presume that someone who brought an *olah* to the *mishkan* might also have passed through some great trial and, in a mixture of relief and continuing trepidation, was hoping to ward off the possibility of further calamity.

Can we do similar work with the *minḥah*? The first such offering takes us back again to the early chapters of Genesis:

בראשית ד:ג

וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ יָמִים וַיָּבֹא קַיִן מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה מִנְחָה לַה'

Genesis 4:3

After many days, Kayin brought from the fruit of the soil a *minḥah* to the Eternal.

Kayin is expressing his gratitude for the produce he has been able to cultivate from the ground. So he offers some of it to God, as a kind of a tribute. His brother, Hevel, sees Kayin's offering and brings forth one of his own, also referred to as a *minḥah*:

בראשית ד:ד

וְהֶבֶל הֵבִיא גַם הוּא מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאנוּ וּמִחֲלִבָּהּ וַיֵּשֶׁעַ ה' אֶל הֶבֶל וְאֶל מִנְחָתוֹ.



Genesis 4:4

And Hevel—he, too, from brought the first of his flock. The Eternal paid heed to Hevel and **his *minhah***.

The general principle seems to be that when one receives abundance from one's labors, it is good to thank God by giving some of that bounty back through a *minhah* offering.

But there is another, very different kind of *minhah* that is offered in Genesis, one given not to God in thanks for abundance, but to a powerful human being, in an attempt to placate him. Ya'akov gives one of these in preparing to re-encounter his brother Esav, whom he fears still wishes to kill him³:

בראשית לב:יד

וַיִּקַּח מִן הַבָּא בְיָדוֹ מִנְחָה לַעֲשׂוֹ אָחִיו

Genesis 32:14

He selected from what had come into his hands a *minhah* for his brother Esav.

Again the *minhah* is an offering of a portion of the abundance that someone has labored to grow, but this time it is being offered as a tribute to a human being, rather than to God. Does this have anything to do with the *minhah* offerings to God? Ya'akov's description of it seems to indicate that there is a parallel:

³ Ya'akov offers another to Yosef, when he tells his sons to “קחו מִזְמַרְת הָאָרֶץ בְּכֵלֵיכֶם וְהוֹרִידוּ לְאִישׁ מִנְחָה - Take with you some of the choice products of the land in your baggage, and carry them down as ***minhah*** for the man...” (Genesis 43:11).



בראשית לג:

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל נָא אִם נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְלִקְחָתָּ מִנִּי מִנְחָה כִּי עַל כֵּן רָאִיתִי פָנֶיךָ כִּרְאֹת פְּנֵי אֱלֹקִים
וַתִּרְצֵנִי

Genesis 33:10

Ya'akov said [to Esav], "No, please; if I have found favor in your eyes, accept from me this *minḥah*; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably.

This *minḥah* is not only an expression of thanks for what one has, but also an attempt to “find favor” in the eyes of someone more powerful. Perhaps in describing the encounter with Esav as something “like seeing the face of God,” Ya'akov is presuming that the purpose of a *minḥah* offering is to gain some intimacy with the receiver.

The *minḥah* offering in Leviticus, then, can also be understood as an attempt to maintain or strengthen one's relationship with God—not just as a thanks for what one has gained, but also in hopes of continuing to receive God's favor.

Finally, what about the *shelamim*? The root of the word means “whole,” and can be used to indicate many different kinds of wholeness, including: peace, payment, completeness, and satisfaction. But when and why would someone bring an offering in response to a sense of wholeness?

There is only one earlier mention of a *shelamim* offering: at the end of Parashat Mishpatim. The Children of Israel have just witnessed the revelation at Mount Sinai and received the first major code of laws. Moshe leads them in a ceremony that is both an affirmation and a celebration, and he begins by building an altar at the foot of the mountain:



שמות כד:ה

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת נְעָרָיו בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת וַיִּזְבְּחוּ זִבְחִים שְׁלָמִים לַיהוָה פָּרִים.

Exodus 24:5

He sent some young men among the Israelites, and they offered **olot** and sacrificed bulls as **zevachim shelamim** to the Eternal.

The people have just had a transcendent experience. They have been given a new set of principles to live by, and they have been brought into a covenant with God. Surely this represents an unparalleled sense of completion and well-being. If anything merited a “wholeness” offering, it was this glorious moment.

Note, however, that Moshe and his appointees did not only offer *shelamim* offerings; they also offered *olot*. That is a curious mixture. Haven’t we learned from Noah and Avraham that the *olah* was offered after passing through a terrible threat of death and destruction? Why would Moshe signal a note of high anxiety here alongside these spirited declarations of well-being?

But of course, that is precisely the point. The revelation at Mount Sinai was exhilarating and indeed, fulfilling. It brought our people into a new reality, and a greater sense of purpose in the world. It brought them into contact with God. It made them whole.

But it was also a terrifying experience. The people were overwhelmed and worried they would die (פן נמות) if they heard any more of God’s voice (Exodus 20:16). They asked Moshe to speak to God for them from then on, and he agreed. Never again did they wish to face this kind of terror. So indeed, it was also a time to offer *olot*.⁴

⁴ It is worth noting here that Yitro also offers a combination of “עֹלָה וְזִבְחִים” - an *olah* and *zevachim*, earlier, in Exodus 18:12. If we follow Rashi’s opinion that this scene took place after the revelation at Mount Sinai, this would be a parallel to Moshe’s sacrifices, an acknowledgment of the wonder and the danger of revelation. If we



As we trace the history of each of the *korbanot* back into the earlier books of the Torah, we begin to learn the language of the sacrificial system. Each *korban* represented a unique expression of sentiment, designed to respond to some significant human experience. We can therefore come to read the offerings as we might read letters or notes, each one projecting a particular frequency, which can then be translated into a kind of prayer. Those notes might even be combined, two or three sounding at once in the form of multiple offerings, as we attempt to process the sometimes conflicting emotions that make up the content of our spiritual lives.

And so, as we read through the *korbanot* of Parashat Vayikra, even centuries after the sacrificial system has ended, we can imagine the kinds of experiences in our own lives that each of these offerings was meant to address. When we read about the *shelamim*, and recall that first great feeling of wholeness our people experienced around Mount Sinai, perhaps we will imagine ourselves in other moments of well-being and completion, when we ascended to a new level of awareness: a wedding, a graduation, a *siyyum*. Perhaps when we come across the *minḥah*, we will consider those moments of great fortune and abundance in our lives that might easily slip away as we forget to offer gratitude for what we have and to prepare for the next challenge: what kind of *minḥah* can we give when we get a new job, a new car, or a new apartment? Finally, when we remember the *olot* offered by Noah and Avraham, after they came so terrifyingly close to death, perhaps we will wonder what kind of equivalent prayer we might offer after a car-accident, a global pandemic, or the freeing of a hostage?

Leviticus thus becomes not just a repository of ancient Temple rituals, but a book that attempts to give us tools for mapping out the complex journey of the human soul.

take the Torah's chronology at face value, however, Yitro is clearly responding to what he has just heard from Moshe about "everything that the Eternal had done to Pharaoh and Egypt for Israel's sake, and all the hardships that befell them on their journey, and that the Eternal had saved them" (Exodus 18:8)—another combination of sentiments of relief and well-being.

