

*Based on the works of THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE  
Adapted by YANKI TAUBER*

# THE INSIDE STORY

A CHASSIDIC PERSPECTIVE *on* BIBLICAL EVENTS,  
LAWS, *and* PERSONALITIES



LEVITICUS

## ABRAHAM'S THREE ALTARS

*If his korban is an ascent-offering... he shall bring it in goodwill to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, before G-d.*

Leviticus 1:3

*And if his korban is a peace offering...*

Leviticus 3:1

*A soul who commits a betrayal, and sins unintentionally... shall bring as his guilt offering to G-d...*

Leviticus 5:15

**T**he first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus are devoted to the laws of the *korbanot*, the animal and meal offerings brought in the Holy Temple.

When the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, the primary mode of man's worship of G-d was the *korban*. The word *korban* means "brought near": a *korban* is something brought close to G-d, as well as something that brings the person who offers it close to G-d. These offerings were brought in fulfillment of a vow, to atone for a wrongdoing, to express gratitude, or simply as a gift to G-d. There were also daily offerings and special Shabbat and Festival offerings brought by the community as a whole. Every significant occasion on the communal calendar, and every event and experience in an individual's life, had its expression in a *korban*.

## THREE TYPES OF OFFERINGS

The *korbanot* fall under three general categories: (a) the *shelamim*, or “peace offering”; (b) the *chatat*, or “sin offering”; (c) the *olah*, or “ascent offering.”

The “peace offering” was brought as a donation to G-d, or to celebrate a joyous occasion.<sup>1</sup> Parts of it were burned on the altar,<sup>2</sup> and specified portions were given to the *kohanim* (priests);<sup>3</sup> but the bulk of the *korban* was eaten—under special conditions of ritual purity—by the person or persons making the offering. Indeed, one of the reasons for the name “peace offering” is that there is something in it for everyone: G-d receives His part, the *kohanim* theirs, and the owner gets to enjoy the very gift he or she consecrated to G-d.

The “sin offering” (which also includes a related category, the *asham* or “guilt offering”) was brought in order to atone for a person’s transgression of a divine command<sup>4</sup> or to achieve the reparation of certain negative states.<sup>5</sup> These were eaten by the *kohanim* after the prescribed parts were burned upon the altar.<sup>6</sup>

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- 1 Such as the *shalmei simchah*, brought by all who made the thrice-yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot; or the *korban todah*, brought in thanksgiving for a personal salvation.
  - 2 Specified veins of fat (called *chalavim* and *eimurim*) in an animal offering, and a fistful (*kometz*) of dough or bread from the meal offerings.
  - 3 The breast and the right hind leg in an animal offering, and selected loaves from the accompanying meal offering.
  - 4 The standard sin offering atoned for unintentional transgressions. In certain cases, the Torah prescribes a *chatat* or *asham* for an intentional transgression.
  - 5 E.g., the “sin offering” and “guilt offering” brought by a healed *metzora* (leper), or a by *nazir* who had become ritually impure.
  - 6 With the exception of the five “burnt *chataot*” which were wholly burned upon the altar.

The *olah*, however, was a pure offering, serving no function other than to express the person's commitment to G-d. It was wholly consumed by the fire that burned upon the altar.

The three types of *korbanot* reflect three fundamental elements of our relationship with G-d: our dependence upon G-d for our daily needs; our striving to rise above our deficiencies; and our commitment to serve G-d.

### THE PRECEDENT

In the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of the book of Genesis, the Torah describes a series of three altars built by the first Jew, Abraham, in different locations in the Holy Land after his arrival there. In his commentary on Genesis 12:6, Nachmanides writes:

*Understand this rule regarding all the following chapters [of the Torah]... Everything that happened to the Patriarchs is a signpost for their children. This is why the Torah elaborates in its account of their journeys, their well-digging, and other events which one might think superfluous and insignificant: these all come to instruct the future. When something happens to one of the three Patriarchs, one understands from it what is decreed to occur to his descendants.*

Regarding the three altars built by Abraham, in each case the Torah emphasizes that "he built *there* an altar,"<sup>7</sup> implying that the reason for the altar's construction relates to an event that took place at that locality. The first altar erected by Abraham was in "the vicinity of Shechem," where G-d had appeared to him and

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 12:7, 12:8, and 13:18.

informed him that “To your descendants I will give this land.”<sup>8</sup> The altar, explains Rashi, was to express Abraham’s gratitude to G-d for “the promise of children, and the promise of the land.”<sup>9</sup>

Abraham built a second altar between “Beth-El to the west and the Ai to the east.”<sup>10</sup> This was the site where, centuries later, the people of Israel suffered defeat in battle as a result of Achan’s transgression of the divine command not to take anything from the booty of the conquered city of Jericho.<sup>11</sup> Abraham, says Rashi, “prophesied that his descendants were destined to stumble there as a result of Achan’s sin, and he prayed there for them.”<sup>12</sup>

The third of Abraham’s altars was built upon his arrival in “the Plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron,”<sup>13</sup> where Abraham was to live for many years. Regarding this altar, however, Rashi does not give any reason for its construction, although there is no shortage of events of great significance in Jewish history connected with the city of Hebron. The verse states, simply, that “he built there an altar to G-d,” and, unlike the first two altars, Rashi feels no need for any further explanation.<sup>14</sup>

## THE HOLY MEAL

With his three altars, Abraham was establishing the precedents for three basic elements in our relationship with G-d.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12:6–7.

<sup>9</sup> Rashi, ad loc.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 12:8.

<sup>11</sup> As related in the book of Joshua, chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> Rashi, Genesis ad loc.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 13:18.

<sup>14</sup> This is in contrast with the Midrashic sources (*Midrash Rabbah*, *Bereishith* 39:24; *Midrash HaGadol*, loc. cit.) that suggest various reasons

Abraham's first altar expressed the truth that we turn to G-d because we need Him. Our requests and expectations from G-d are as varied as life itself; but whether we are seeking material support or spiritual fulfillment, the underlying premise is the same: we are involved with G-d because of what *we* get out of the relationship.

This is the element represented by the “peace offering” category of *korbanot*. The peace offering was an offering to G-d, yet its primary effect was the nourishment of the person making the offering. With the exception of the relatively small contributions made to the altar, the offering was “given back”—“from the Supernal Table,” as the Talmud puts it—to its original owners (and to the *kohanim*).<sup>15</sup>

To the spiritually mature individual, this might seem a shallow and selfish conception of our relationship with G-d. But the recognition that everything we are and everything we have is a gift from Above is elementary to every level of spiritual sensibility, including the most sophisticated and altruistic. A person who devotes him- or herself utterly to the service of G-d but does not regard their daily bread as something they require from G-d, lacks a most basic understanding of their relationship with their Creator.

Indeed, the most basic function of prayer—which today fills the role of the *korbanot* in our service of G-d—is that we request our daily needs from G-d, thereby acknowledging that our relationship with G-d is not limited to our spiritual life but also embraces the most rudimentary aspects of our being. Indeed, the

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for the altar built at Hebron. Rashi, however, sees the very point of this altar as not having any reason or objective, as will be explained.

<sup>15</sup> Talmud, *Beitzah* 21a (see Rashi there, s.v. *Kohanim mishulchan gavo'ah*), and *Kidushin* 52b. This is why the meat and bread of the *korban* were “holy,” and could be eaten only in the holy city of Jerusalem and under conditions of ritual purity.

most solemn part of our daily prayers—the *Amidah*—consists primarily of a series of requests for our personal and communal needs for sustenance, health, understanding, forgiveness, and salvation.<sup>16</sup>

### THE STRIVING FOR PERFECTION

After building the altar at Shechem in gratitude for G-d's blessing to him, Abraham built his second altar near Ai to serve as the "signpost" and prototype for the second aspect of our bond with G-d: our recognition of our own deficiency in the face of His perfection.

A key component of our relationship with G-d is the striving to rise above our deficiencies and relate to the divine goodness and perfection intrinsic to the soul that G-d breathed into us. To actualize this divine potential, we must first recognize that we are all "guilty" in our relationship with G-d, whether by overt transgression of the divine will, or by the more subtle meaning of *chatat*, which is "lack" and "failing." On this level—the level represented by the "sin offering"—the purpose of our service to G-d is to atone for our deficiencies, thereby elevating ourselves to worthiness of connection with G-d.

### THE THIRD ALTAR

The common denominator between the "peace offering" and the "sin offering" is that both are the means of achieving something for *us*, be it the attainment of a material or spiritual bequest from G-d, or the elimination of a deficiency. This is alluded to by the

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<sup>16</sup> See the essay, "A Glass of Milk," in vol. II of *Inside Time* (MLC 2015), and the essay, "The Legacy of Cain," in vol. I (Genesis) of *The Inside Story*.

fact that both the “peace offering” and the “sin offering” are given for human consumption—the former by the lay person, denoting its relationship to the procurement of (even) material needs; and the latter by the consecrated *kohen*, indicating that its objective is a loftier and more spiritual gain.

The “ascent offering,” however, was an offering in the ultimate sense of the word: something that we give to G-d for no reason other than to give to G-d.

With his third altar, Abraham established the precedent for the third and ultimate level of relationship with G-d: our self-abnegation to the divine will. On this level, we do not serve G-d because G-d is the source of all of life’s blessings, nor to atone for our own failings and shortcomings, but simply to serve our Creator, without any purpose or motive other than causing pleasure to G-d.

Abraham built his third altar at Hebron, a place that embodies the ultimate connection between G-d and the people of Israel. Our sages tell us that all prayers ascend to heaven via Hebron.<sup>17</sup> Here are buried the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs, whose soul-qualities, encoded in our own spiritual DNA, comprise the cornerstones of our bond with G-d.<sup>18</sup> Hebron is where King David was first crowned sovereign of Israel—a sovereignty whose culmination is the kingship of Moshiach, who will effect the ultimate bond between G-d and humanity. Indeed, the very name Hebron means “bond” and “connection.” This is a bond that serves no end, however lofty, other than the bond itself.




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<sup>17</sup> *Yalkut Reuveni* on Genesis 23:9. See *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 25, p. 98, note 69.

<sup>18</sup> See *Tanya*, chapter 18.