Chapters 1–7 outline the biblical sacrificial system, as the Israelite priesthood administered it. The laws of the Torah did not permit Israelites to atone for intentional or premeditated offenses by bringing a sacrifice. There was no ritual remedy for such violations. In such instances, the law dealt directly with the offender, imposing punishments and acting to prevent recurrences. Gaining atonement through ritual sacrifice was restricted to situations in which a reasonable doubt existed about the willfulness of the offense. Even then, restitution was required if another person had suffered any loss or injury.

These chapters describe the basic kinds of sacrifices and list the several classes of offerings to be presented to God in the sanctuary. Chapters 1–5, addressed to individual Israelites and their leaders, recount what may be offered—including animals, birds, and grain. They establish the proper procedures for presenting the various sacrifices, a function performed primarily by priests but that occasionally required the participation of those who brought the sacrifices. Chapters 6 and 7 constitute a professional manual for the priesthood and provide “an instruction” (a torah) for each of the major classes of sacrifices. In most cases, sacrifices served to remove the charges against the offenders, restoring them to a proper relationship with God and to membership in the religious community.

In most ancient societies it was believed that gods required food for their sustenance, relying on sacrifices for energy and strength. The Torah preserves the idiom common to ancient religions. However, it has a different understanding of the process: God desires sacrifices not out of the need for sustenance but out of longing for the devotion and fellowship of worshipers.

THE BURNT OFFERING (olah) (1:1–17)

Chapter 1 deals with the sacrifice called “burnt offering” (olah), which was burned to ashes in its entirety (except for its hide) on the altar of burnt offerings. It was brought on various occasions, of-

Leviticus is a difficult book for a modern person to read with reverence and appreciation. Its main subject matter—animal offerings and ritual impurity—seems remote from contemporary concerns. Yet almost half of the 613 mitzvot of the Torah are found in this book, the text with which young children traditionally began their Jewish education. Our concern in reading Leviticus should be more than historical (“this is what our ancestors used to believe and practice”). It should be an effort to understand the religious needs that were met by these practices in ancient times, needs that we still confront today, and the religious ideas that were taught in the process.

The modern temper tends to discount prescribed ritual in favor of spontaneous religious expression. Yet something in the human soul responds to ritual, whether it be the formality of a traditional wedding or the rituals of a sporting event or a public meeting. There is something comforting about the familiar, the recognizable, the predictable. There is something deeply moving about performing a rite that is older than we are, one that goes back beyond the time of our parents and grandparents. At crucial times, it is important for us to know that we are “doing it right.” There is power in the knowledge that we are doing what generations of people before us have done in similar situations, something that other people in other places are doing at the same time and in the same way. And rituals, including prescribed prayers, tell us what to do and say at times when we cannot rely on our own powers of inspiration to know what to do or say. “Ritual is a way of giving voice to ultimate values. Each of us needs a sense of holiness to navigate the relentless secularity of our lives” (Schorsch). For the Israelites of biblical times, it must have been gratifying to know what to do when they wanted to approach God at crucial moments of their lives, in need or in gratitude.

Discomfort with sacrificing animals as a way of worshiping God is hardly a modern phenomenon. The biblical prophets criticized the sacrificial system for its tendency to deteriorate into form without feeling. The Midrash
envisions God saying “Better that they bring their offerings to My table than that they bring them before idols” [Lev. R. 22:8]. All religions of biblical time were based on sacrificial worship, and the Israelites could not conceive of religion without it.

Maimonides believed that God did not savor this manner of worship, lest people assume that they were feeding God—who would go hungry without their gifts. Abravanel, too, suggests that God never intended to call for animal offerings. After the Israelites worshiped the Golden Calf, however, God recognized the inability of people to deal with a totally abstract notion of the divine and at that point ordained the details of the sacrificial system. Just as God does not need our prayers although we need to pray, God does not need our sacrifices although we need to offer them to feel God’s nearness. We recognize this feeling in the eagerness of people to offer donations to charity to accompany their prayers or memorial observances. “The cult [i.e., organized worship through sacrifice] is not man’s kindness to God but God’s kindness to man” [Kaufmann].

Although Leviticus outlines the technical procedures for the various offerings, the Book of Psalms offers us insights into the spiritual-emotional dimension of the sacrificial system. In Psalms, it becomes clear how privileged the Israelite worshiper felt to be able to come into God’s presence. “O God, deliver me by Your name; / by Your power vindicate me; / . . . Then I will offer You a freewill sacrifice” [Ps. 54:3,8]. “O people, bless our God, / . . . I enter Your house with burnt offerings, / I pay my vows to You” [Ps. 66:8,13]. “One thing I ask of the Lord, / . . . to live in the house of the Lord / all the days of my life, / . . . I sacrifice in His tent with shouts of joy” [Ps. 27:4,6].

The destruction of the Second Temple and the abrupt end of the sacrificial system in 70 C.E. was traumatic for Jews, depriving them of the accustomed way of reaching out to God. By that time, however, the synagogue had already evolved as a place for worshipping God through prayer and study. Piety, good deeds, and obedience to the Covenant would take the place of animal offerings. Over the course of centuries, Jews learned to invest their prayer and religious deeds with the same feeling of nearness to God that the temple altar had evoked. Today, hardly any liberal Jew would choose a return to the sacrificial system.

It may well be that animal offerings were an instinctive gesture on the part of human beings to express gratitude, reverence, or regret. The Bible pictures Cain, Abel, and Noah offering sacrifices without being commanded to do so. People must have felt that their prayers of gratitude or petition would seem more sincerely offered if they gave up something of their own in the process. Presumably, this is why game and fish were unacceptable as offerings. “I cannot sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that have cost me nothing” [2 Sam. 24:24]. The offerings of first fruit, the firstborn of the flocks, and the symbolic redemption of the firstborn son may have been ways of recognizing that these gifts ultimately came from God, ways of conveying the faith that more blessings would be forthcoming so that these could be given up.

Why did young children begin their Jewish studies with Leviticus? “Children are pure; therefore let them study laws of purity” [Lev. R. 7:3]. It also has been suggested that Jewish learning began here to teach from the outset that life involves sacrifice. One contemporary writer suggests, “In sacrifice, we could for a fleeting moment imagine our own death and yet go on living. . . . No other form of worship can so effectively liberate a person from the fear of living in the shadow of death.”

Some scholars believe that Leviticus was originally a set of instructions for kohanim, priests officiating at the altar and presiding over rituals of purification, detailing how they were to perform their duties properly. This professional guide became one of the five books of the Torah as part of the process of democratizing the Israelite faith, making all Israel “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” [Exod. 19:6]. There would be no secret lore accessible only to the clergy.

CHAPTER 1

1. The Lord called to Moses Moses was afraid to approach the Tent of Meeting, intimidated by its holiness. God had to call him and reassure him that, although the Tent and the tabernacle were holy and had to be treated with due reverence, they existed to benefit Israel, not to threaten them (Ramban). In another interpretation, Moses thinks that his mission has been completed. The Israelites are out of Egypt, he has brought the tablets of the Pact down from the mountain and has supervised the construction of the Tabernacle. God summons him to declare that much more must be done, guiding the Israelites to sanctify their daily lives.

Even the religion of the Torah is not com-
from the Tent of Meeting, saying: 2. Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them:

When any of you presents an offering of cattle to the Lord, he shall choose his offering from the herd or from the flock.

3. If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall make his offering a male

ten together with other offerings. No part of it was eaten, either by priests or by donors. The **olah** could consist of male herd cattle (vv. 3–9), male flock animals (vv. 10–13), or certain birds (vv. 14–17). This range of choices—from expensive to inexpensive—enabled Israelites of modest means to participate in religious life, because they could present less costly offerings at the sanctuary.

The procedures for all burnt offerings were similar. The sacrifice was presented at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the donor laid his or her hand on the creature (thereby designating it for a particular rite), and blood from the sacrificed animal or fowl was dashed on the altar in appropriate ways.

1. **Tent of Meeting** Hebrew: *ohel mo'ed*, the portable tent structure that housed the Ark and the objects connected to the sacrificial system (see Exod. 25:1–27:21, Exod. 35–40). In other texts, this complex is called *mishkan*.

2. **the Israelite people** Hebrew: *b’nei yisra’el*, often translated literally as “the children of Israel.” “The Israelite people” reflects the concept of peoplehood basic to the biblical idea that nations, like families, are descendants of common ancestors with a common genealogy.

**offering** Hebrew: *korban*, which designates anything presented to God as one approaches the sanctuary. A *korban* could consist of artifacts and vessels, votive objects (brought in fulfillment of a vow), or sacrificial animals and fowl, as is the case here.

**cattle . . . herd . . . flock** In many of the Bible’s legal statements, a general category is given first, followed by particulars. Here the general category is livestock (*b’hemah*), further specified by the two usual classes: “from the herd (*bakar*) or from the flock (*tzon*)”.

3. **If his offering is a burnt offering** The conditional word “if” (*im*) frequently introduces cultic laws (rules for organized religious worship) in the Book of Leviticus. Here it precedes each of the options available to those who offer sacrifices—the choice of which type of sacrifice to bring as well as the choice of which animal, fowl, or grain will constitute the offering. “Burnt offering” is designated by the Hebrew word *olah*, derived from the verb meaning “to ascend” (מלא). This offering may have been called *olah* because its flames and smoke “ascended” to heaven. The sacrifice, in its altered form, reaches God who was perceived as breathing its aromatic smoke, so to speak. Its purpose was to offer a gift to God to secure a favorable response. Frequently, the *olah* complete. Each generation must find new ways to make God present in new situations that the Torah could not have foreseen.

2. **When any of you presents an offering** Literally, “When a man [adam] presents an offering.” May your offerings be like those of Adam, belonging to you and not stolen, offered solely to express your love of God and not to impress your neighbors [Lev. R. 2:7]. The word for “offering” (*korban*) comes from the Hebrew root *זֶרֶם*, meaning “to bring close” or “to come close.” When we give a gift to someone we feel close to, we feel even closer for having given the gift. The *korban* both reflects and reinforces the Israelite’s bond to God. The point of the sacrifice is not to feed or to bribe God but to come close to God.

The opening words of the Hebrew text are singular, but the Torah soon shifts to plural. This reflects the essence of the religious experience. A Hasidic master taught that we enter the sanctuary as individuals but the experience of worship leads us to transcend our separateness and become part of the community.

3. The *olah* is purely a gift to God, with no specific benefit to the donor anticipated, except the satisfaction of having brought the offering to God. Whether brought out of a sense of reverence or out of a sense of guilt, it expresses the idea that everything we have comes...
without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, for acceptance in his behalf before the LORD. 4 He shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, that it may be acceptable in his behalf, in expiation for him. 5 The bull shall be slaughtered before the LORD; and Aaron’s sons, the priests, shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar which is at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. 6 The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into sections. 7 The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and lay out wood upon the fire; 8 and Aaron’s sons, the priests, shall lay out the sections, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire upon the altar. 9 Its entrails and legs shall be washed with water, and the priest shall turn the whole into smoke on

was the first sacrifice in rites that included other offerings as well. In many instances, the olaḥ was followed by the shared sacred meal (sezāḥ).

for acceptance in his behalf The sacrifice is accredited to the donor as proper. When a sacrifice is not considered proper, the opposite is said of it: “not acceptable, discredited.”

before the LORD This refers to a defined sacred area. Sometimes it was the zone beginning at the rear of the altar of burnt offerings in the sanctuary courtyard that continued to the interior of the tent; at times it was a large space near the entrance of the courtyard. Priestly law strictly limits its sacrifice to a particular area and to the legitimate altar.

4. He shall lay his hand This symbolic act, “the laying on” of hands (known in later Hebrew as s’mīkhah), indicated ownership and served to assign a sacrificial animal or fowl solely for use in a specific rite. The offering, once assigned in this way, was sacred and belonged solely to God.

that it may be acceptable in his behalf The olaḥ sacrifice served as protection from God’s wrath. Proximity to God was dangerous for both the worshipers and the priests, even in the absence of a particular offense. The favorable acceptance of the olaḥ signaled God’s willingness to be approached.

5. against all sides of the altar This refers to the altar of burnt offerings (mentioned by name in Lev. 4:7, and described in Exod. 27:1–8).

6. shall be flayed and cut up into sections Sacri
cfial animals usually were sectioned before being placed on the altar. The only exception was the paschal lamb. It was roasted whole (Exod. 12:9).

8. with the head and the suet The head of the animal had been severed. Suet is a type of hard organ fat.

9. turn the whole into smoke The burned parts of the sacrifice rise as smoke when they are consumed by the altar fire. Likewise, the word for

from God, given to us only on loan [Tanḥ. Tzav]. It is called olaḥ (from the root “to go up,” as in aliyaḥ) not only because it goes up in smoke but because it elevates the soul of the person who performs this act of generosity.

without blemish What renders an animal unfit in the sight of God does not disqualify the human being who offers it. The offering must be unblemished, as a sign of respect for God’s altar and to discourage people from bringing their lame and sick animals in a pretense of piety. An afflicted, broken soul, though, could bring an offering and might even be closer to God for having experienced pain and rejection. “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted” (Ps. 34:19). “You will not despise / a contrite and crushed heart” (Ps. 51:19, cited in Lev. R. 7:2).

9. of pleasing odor to the LORD The notion that God actually smells the aroma of the offering is rejected emphatically by rabbinic

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the altar as a burnt offering, a gift of pleasing odor to the Lord.

10 If his offering for a burnt offering is from the flock, of sheep or of goats, he shall make his offering a male without blemish. 11 It shall be slaughtered before the Lord on the north side of the altar, and Aaron’s sons, the priests, shall dash its blood against all sides of the altar.

12 When it has been cut up into sections, the priest shall lay them out, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire upon the altar. 13 The entrails and the legs shall be washed with water; the priest shall offer up and turn the whole into smoke on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a gift, of pleasing odor to the Lord.

14 If his offering to the Lord is a burnt offering of birds, he shall choose his offering from turtledoves or pigeons. 15 The priest shall bring offerings of birds, he shall choose his offering from turtledoves or pigeons. 16 He shall remove its crop with its contents, and cast it into the place of the ashes, at the east side of the altar as a burnt offering, a gift of pleasing odor to the Lord.

incense (k’toret), in Hebrew and in other Semitic languages, derives from the word for smoke because it rises in the form of smoke.

**gift** Hebrew: *ishb*, translated in the past as “offering by fire”—as if derived from *esh* (fire). Based on an Ugaritic cognate, we now know the meaning of the biblical term more accurately.

**pleasing odor** Hebrew: *rei-ah niho-ah* (a pleasant aroma). Aromatic substances were used routinely in the sacrificial system. This description, anthropomorphic in origin, is the Torah’s way of stating that the sacrifice is accepted.

15. **pinch off its head** The Hebrew verb used for this here means “to break the nape of the neck.” According to rabbinitic tradition, the priest did this with his fingernail, after which he severed the neck.

16. **remove its crop** The crop (an enlargement of the gullet, or esophagus) was too dirty to be placed on the altar. Therefore, it was consigned to the ash heap, near the altar. The entrails of animals sacrificed as burnt offerings had to be washed before being placed on the altar, to ensure that nothing offensive was offered to God (see v. 9).

commentators. “Far be it that the Almighty should smell or eat. The verse would tell us that the worshiper is as pleasing to God as a sweet odor is to a human being” (Ibn EzrA). “What is pleasing to God is not the aroma but the fact that Israel is doing God’s will” (Rashi). Cassuto takes the phrase to mean that God accepts with pleasure the motives of the donor. According to Eliezer Ashkenazi, “Should the worshipers imagine that they have atoned for their sins by bringing a sacrifice, the Torah informs them that the sacrifice is merely a foretaste of proper behavior in the future, even as the smell of food is only an anticipation of the meal.” And in an ancient passage that chillingly foreshadows 20th-century events, the Midrash states: “God smells the odor . . . of the burning flesh of Jewish martyrs” and is moved by that expression of their devotion (Gen. R. 34.9).
the altar. \(\text{verse 17}\) The priest shall tear it open by its wings, without severing it, and turn it into smoke on the altar, upon the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt offering, a gift, of pleasing odor to the Lord.

\(\text{verse 2}\) When a person presents an offering of grain to the Lord, his offering shall be of choice flour; he shall pour oil upon it, lay frankincense on it, \(\text{verse 2}\) and present it to Aaron’s sons, the priests. The priest shall scoop out of it a handful of its choice flour and oil, as well as all of its frankincense; and this token portion he shall turn into smoke on the altar, as a gift, of pleasing odor on the altar. The rest of the \(\text{minhah}\) was prepared in one of the accepted ways, to be eaten by the priests in the sacred precincts of the sanctuary.

Verses 14–16 digress somewhat from the pattern of the chapter as a whole. They ordain a special \(\text{minhah}\) of first fruits (\(\text{bikkurim}\)), which consisted of nearly ripe grain from the new crop. This grain was roasted and made into groats.

**THE GRAIN OFFERING (\text{minhah}) \(\text{verse 2–16}\)**

Appropriate for a variety of occasions, the grain offering (\text{minhah}) often served as a less costly alternative to animal sacrifices. Both the\text{minhah} and the burnt offering were regarded as “a most sacred offering,” a status that imposed special restrictions.

Various types of \text{minhah} offerings, usually with the same ingredients, are listed according to their methods of preparation. The \text{minhah} was made of the choice part of wheat taken from the inner kernels (semolina). Olive oil was mixed into the dough or smeared on it, and frankincense—a costly fragrant resin native to a tree in southern Arabia and Somaliland—was applied, to enhance the taste. The \text{minhah} could be prepared on a griddle, in a pan, or in an oven. A fistful of the dough, with the oil and frankincense added, was burned on the altar. The primary meaning of the term \text{minhah} is “tribute” or “gift.” It is used in the Bible to reflect the subservient relationship of the worshiper toward God and to convey the notion that it is a duty to present gifts to God, often in the form of sacrifices.

**1. a person** Hebrew: \text{nefesh}, here an individual as part of a group.

**offering of grain** The fistful of grain represents the complete offering from which it was taken.

**2. handful** A minute quantity.

**token portion** The fistful of dough represents the complete offering from which it was taken.

**CHAPTER 2**

In Lev. 1:2, the text reads, “when any of you [\text{adam}] presents an offering.” In chapter 2, introducing the grain offering, typically brought by a poor person, the text reads “When a person [\text{nefesh}] presents an offering.” The Hebrew word \text{nefesh}, a synonym for “person” in biblical Hebrew, later came to mean “soul.” This prompted a comment in the Talmud: “When poor people bring an offering, however meager, God credits them as if they had offered their own soul” [BT Men. 104b]. What sort of sacrifice does a soul offer? When we give up our unworthy dreams and ambitions, or when a person yearning for wealth decides to be content with a modest income rather than gain riches by unethical means, that is the sacrifice the soul brings to God’s altar [Lev. R. 3:1].

Kook, a chief rabbi of Palestine and a vegetarian, envisioned a time when the Temple would be rebuilt and only the grain offering would be brought, for no animals would be slaughtered in God’s name: “None shall hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain” (Isa. 11:9).
591 LEVITICUS 2:3 VA-YIKRA

3. a most holy portion  Hebrew: *kodesh ko-

dashim*; literally, "most holy of the holy offerings."

4. baked ... unleavened cakes... unleavened wafer*

5. on a griddle  Cakes prepared on a griddle

6. in a pan  The cakes were prepared in a pan

7. The priest shall remove  This parallels the statement of

8. The offering that is made in any of these ways, it shall

9. The priest shall remove the token portion from

10. And the remainder of the grain offering shall be for

11. No grain offering that you offer to the L ord

Near Eastern religions. In a few cases, the complete sacrifice was consumed by the altar fire. Quite often, however, large portions of the offerings were to be eaten by the priests and, in some cases, by the donors of the offerings as well. This was regarded as indispensable to the ritual process, because it was important to celebrate a sacred meal in the presence of God. Failure to eat the appropriate portion of the sacrifices in the proper place and within the proper span of time would render the sacrifices ineffectual. Thus there were two dimensions to a sacrifice (other than the *olah*, which was completely burned): the portions on the altar or table that were received by the deity, and the portions later consumed by the priests and the donors. Without both dimensions, the sacrifice was incomplete.
honey may be turned into smoke as a gift to the LORD. If you bring them to the LORD as an offering of choice products; but they shall not be offered up on the altar for a pleasing odor.

You shall season your every offering of grain with salt; you shall not omit from your grain offering the salt of your covenant with God; with all your offerings you must offer salt.

If you bring a grain offering of first fruits to the LORD, you shall bring new ears parched with fire, grits of the fresh grain, as your grain offering of first fruits. You shall add oil to it and lay frankincense on it; it is a grain offering.

And the priest shall turn a token portion of it into smoke: some of the gits and oil, with all of the frankincense, as a gift to the LORD.

If his offering is a sacrifice of well-being—
If he offers of the herd, whether a male or a female—
libations poured over the altar and consumed by fire.

12. choice products Literally, “first fruits.” Although honey and leaven are unsuitable as burned altar offerings, they are suitable as offerings set before God. The Israelites were permitted to enjoy the bounty of the land, but first they were required to offer God some of what was His. Such offerings were simply given to the priest rather than burned on the altar.

13. the salt of your covenant with God Salt was the preservative par excellence in antiquity. According to priestly law, all sacrifices had to be salted. In the case of meat, salt functioned to remove whatever blood remained after slaughter. The unexpected use of salt in grain offerings probably reflects the normal tendency toward uniformity in ritual.

14. first fruits Hebrew: bikkurim, from the same root as the word for “firstborn” (b’khor), which refers to both animals and humans. Birth and growth were perceived as dimensions of the same process in all of nature.

new ears Hebrew: aviv, grain just before ripening, when the kernels, not yet darkened, are still greenish in color. Aviv is also the name of the spring month when grains ripen.

THE OFFERING OF WELL-BEING
(zevah sh’lamim) (3:1–17)

This chapter deals with the third type of offering in Israelite worship, zevah. The most frequent zevah was zevah sh’lamim (designated by Baruch Levine as the “sacred gift of greeting” and rendered here as “offering of well-being”).

Some of the same animals used for the burnt offering (Lev. 1) could also be used for zevah. The same altar was used for both types of offerings as well as for the grain offering (Lev. 2). Zevah, however, had a special character. Whereas the burnt offering (olah) was completely consumed by the altar fire, entirely given over to God, zevah was

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH
2:11 leaven Throughout Pesah we are commanded to refrain from eating or benefiting from leavened food (hametz). “Hametz” is defined as food prepared from any of five species of grain—wheat, barley, oats, spelt, and rye—that has been allowed to rise through contact with a liquid for more than 18 minutes or with a leavening agent, such as yeast. Among Ashk’nazim, many rabbis added restrictions forbidding the use of rice, millet, corn, and legumes (kitniyot), although their derivatives (such as oil) are permitted by most authorities. See Comment to Deut. 16:3.
female, he shall bring before the LORD one without blemish. 2 He shall lay his hand upon the head of his offering and slaughter it at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; and Aaron’s sons, the priests, shall dash the blood against all sides of the altar. 3 He shall then present from the sacrifice of well-being, as a gift to the LORD, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is about the entrails; 4 the two kidneys and the fat that adheres to the kidneys, the liver, close to the right kidney. 5 Aaron’s sons shall turn these into smoke on the altar, with the burnt offering which is upon the wood that is on the fire, as a gift, of pleasing odor to the LORD.

a sacred meal shared by the priests and by donors of the offering. Only certain fatty portions of the animal were burned on the altar, as God’s share. The grain offering (minhab) could be eaten only by priests. Thus zevah represents a distinctive mode of sacrifice, affording worshipers the experience of sharing a sacred meal with the priests.

1. sacrifice of well-being The term translated as “well-being” (sh’lamim) has various meanings, like the verb לְשָׁלֵם from which it is derived. The usual translation, “sacrifice of well-being,” is based on the meaning of shalom as “well-being, wholeness.” Another view, understanding it as “sacred gift of greeting,” reflects the specific role of this sacrifice as an offering made when one came to greet God at a sacred meal.

3. fat The Hebrew word heilev here refers specifically to fat that covers or surrounds the kidneys, the liver, and the entrails—not to ordinary fat that adheres to the flesh of an animal. Like blood, heilev is forbidden for human consumption. From the perspective of the sacrificial system, a food’s desirability depends entirely on its symbolic value. Hence, although normally not regarded as choice food for humans, heilev was considered to be a desirable gift for God.

4. protuberance on the liver The “protuberance” refers to the fingerlike projection from the liver, close to the right kidney.

5. with the burnt offering The altar of burnt offerings was used for both the olah and the zevah sh’lamim.

CHAPTER 3

This category of offering was brought by a person who had something to celebrate. Hoffman emphasizes that zevah sh’lamim is always an individual, never a communal, offering because the feelings of gratitude and well-being from which it flows are very personal. It is called sh’lamim (from shalam, “whole,” and shalom, “harmony”), because it is motivated not by guilt or obligation but by a sense of wholeness in the donor’s life, a sense of being at peace with one’s family, with the priests of the Temple, and with God. One commentator derives the name from the fact that “it brings peace between the individual and neighbors who are invited to join in the feast.”

Some readers of the chapters describing the sacrifices might conclude that they were all meant to atone for guilt, with the animal brought to the altar serving as a vicarious substitute for the person who might feel deserving of death for the sin. But as we see in the first three chapters of Leviticus, the first major categories of offering are motivated by profound reverence and overflowing happiness, not only by guilt.

Later injunctions of the Torah impose the rule that the sh’lamim be eaten on the day when it is brought or the following day at the latest, and that it must be discarded by the morning of the third day (Lev. 7:15, 19:6). One suspects that this is to encourage the donor to invite more friends and poor people to join the celebration. The sense of joy increases with the number of participants.
6And if his offering for a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord is from the flock, whether a male or a female, he shall offer one without blemish.
7If he presents a sheep as his offering, he shall bring it before the Lord and lay his hand upon the head of his offering. It shall be slaughtered before the Tent of Meeting, and Aaron’s sons shall dash its blood against all sides of the altar.
8He shall then present, as a gift to the Lord, the fat from the sacrifice of well-being: the whole broad tail, which shall be removed close to the backbone; the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is about the entrails; 9the two kidneys and the fat that is on them, that is at the loins; and the protuberance on the liver, which he shall remove with the kidneys. 10The priest shall turn these into smoke on the altar as food, a gift to the Lord.

11. as food Hebrew: lehem, not only bread (its literal meaning) but food in general. The sacrifices are referred to as lehem elohim (food for God) in Lev. 21:6. The priests present the offerings to God in the same way as food is served to humans.

12And if his offering is a goat, he shall bring it before the Lord and lay his hand upon its head. It shall be slaughtered before the Tent of Meeting, and Aaron’s sons shall dash its blood against all sides of the altar. 13He shall then present as his offering from it, as a gift to the Lord, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is about the entrails; 14the two kidneys and the fat that is on them, that is at the loins; and the protuberance on the liver, which he shall remove with the kidneys. 15The priest shall turn these into smoke on the altar as food, a gift, of pleasing odor.

All fat is the Lord’s. 17It is a law for all time throughout the ages, in all your settlements: you must not eat any fat or any blood.

6–8. See Comments to Lev. 1.
9. whole broad tail This refers to the large, broad tail of certain species of sheep that are still raised in Israel and neighboring countries.

11. as food Hebrew: hukkah, from the root meaning “to inscribe, incise” (מְנַהֲג). This reflects the practice of inscribing statutes on stone.

for all time The priestly codes often stipulate that a law or regulation applied to a specific instance is meant to be a permanent statute as well.

you must not eat any fat or any blood They belong to God as sacrificial offerings. For the main prohibition against the eating of blood, see 17:10–12.
The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2Speak to the Israelite people thus:

When a person unwittingly incurs guilt in regard to any of the Lord’s commandments about things not to be done, and does one of them—

THE EXPIATORY SACRIFICES (4:1–5:26)

Chapters 4 and 5 contain the laws governing the “purification offering” (hattat) and the “reparation offering” (asham), which are intended to secure atonement and forgiveness from God. These offerings are effective only for unintended offenses. They do not apply to defiant acts or premeditated crimes. Whenever an individual Israelite, a tribal leader, a priest, the High Priest, or the entire Israelite community is guilty of inadvertent wrongdoing or failure to do what the law requires, atonement through sacrifice is required.

The laws of these chapters reflect a deep concern for sanctity. They were intended to maintain the purity of the sanctuary against all forms of defilement that might be caused by the priests or by the people and to ensure the acceptability of all Israelites in God’s sight. Inherent in these laws is a connection between sinfulness and impurity. As in many other ancient traditions, the levitical codes of the Torah associate legal innocence-and-guilt with purity-and-impurity, so that the guilty are also considered impure. Conversely, the forgiven are regarded as purified. Thus the hattat sacrifice can be viewed both as a form of purification and as a ritual for the removal of guilt. Also, sinful acts are frequently the very ones that cause impurity.

THE PURIFICATION OFFERING

For Sins Committed Unintentionally (4:1–35)

2. unwittingly incurs guilt

Ignorance of the law is a mitigating circumstance in both the biblical and the rabbinic traditions. This is especially true in ritual matters. The presumption is that a fully aware and knowledgeable Israelite would seek to obey God’s laws, not to violate them. Unwitting offenses, therefore, could be expiated by ritual means.

The purpose of the hattat was not to bribe God to overlook the sin or to balance it with an act of generosity. Its purpose was to acquaint the donor with one’s own more generous side, so that instead of seeing oneself as weak and rebellious, a person could say “sometimes I am weak and rebellious, but that is not the real me. Often I can be generous and obedient.” It was an opportunity to clear one’s conscience, not a penalty for having done wrong.

In a sense, only a good person can recognize having sinned and be motivated to return to God’s path. The willingness to bring a hattat was in itself a sign of virtue.

2. When a person unwittingly incurs guilt

The Hebrew word nefesh, translated as “person” here and elsewhere in the Bible, is often taken to mean “soul” in postbiblical literature.
If it is the anointed priest who has incurred guilt, so that blame falls upon the people, he shall offer for the sin of which he is guilty a bull of the herd without blemish as a purification offering to the Lord. He shall bring the bull to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, before the Lord, and lay his hand upon the head of the bull. The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord, and the anointed priest shall take some of the bull’s blood and bring it into the Tent of Meeting. The priest shall dip his finger in the blood, and sprinkle of the blood seven times on the horns of the altar of aromatic incense, and lay his hand upon the head of the bull. The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord, and the anointed priest shall take some of the bull’s blood and bring it into the Tent of Meeting. The priest shall dip his finger in the blood, and sprinkle of the blood seven times before the Lord, in front of the curtain of the Shrine. The priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of aromatic incense, and anoint the horns of the altar of aromatic incense with the blood.

3. **anointed priest**  According to the laws of Leviticus, the High Priest is the only priest anointed with oil. This accounts for his title here and in 6:15.

so that blame falls upon the people  The entire community was affected by the errors and possible offenses of the individual in charge of the sanctuary and the priesthood. Here the law refers to offenses that occurred while the priest was performing priestly duties—not to the personal sins of the priest, for which he had to atone independently. Such inadvertent offenses, even where there was no intent to violate the commandments, might immediately arouse God’s wrath and result in divine punishment.

4. **lay his hand upon the head of the bull**  See Comment to 1:4.

6. **in front of the curtain of the Shrine**  The blood rites prescribed here and in verses 16–21 are unusual. Elsewhere, they are reserved for the Yom Kippur ritual, as set forth in Lev. 16.

7. **on the horns of the altar of aromatic incense**  For the design of the altar, see Exod. 30:1–10. For the ingredients of the incense to be used on it, see Exod. 30:34–38. Nothing but incense was to be offered on this altar, which stood inside the tent. Only in this instance, and in the ritual on Yom Kippur (see Lev. 16:18), was sacrifice made outside the tent.

“It is in the soul that the impulse to do wrong begins” [Ramban]. “When a person sins, intelligence departs and for the moment one behaves like an animal.” It is an appropriate response to sacrifice an animal, which symbolizes the expulsion of one’s animal nature [Seifer Ha-Hinnukh]. The Midrash pictures God saying to the soul, “I created you as the most God-like part of the human being [able to distinguish between good and evil]. How could you choose to lead astray those other limbs and organs” [Lev. R. 4:4]? The **hattat** is brought for unintentional violations. Why must we atone for inadvertent sins? Perhaps because we were insufficiently attentive to what we were doing [Hirsch]. Carelessness is no excuse for violating God’s commandments. Inadvertent sins may reflect a lowering of our guard against temptation.

There is a part of us that is inclined to be selfish, to take advantage of others. We must constantly be vigilant against such inclinations. Perhaps we must atone for inadvertent sins because the misdeed, though inadvertent, weighs on our conscience until we do something to atone for it. Because verbal regrets do not strike us as adequate, we must give up something to show our remorse [Seifer Ha-Hinnukh].

3. The anointed priest must atone for his own inadvertent failings in office before he can guide the people to atone for their sins. He must personally be familiar with feelings of guilt and repentance. Therefore, the rule for the **hattat** of the priest is mentioned first here. The Torah and later Jewish law and custom consistently demand that leaders set an example for the community by holding themselves to a higher standard.
which is in the Tent of Meeting, before the Lord; and all the rest of the bull’s blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering, which is at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

8He shall remove all the fat from the bull of purification offering: the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is about the entrails; 9the two kidneys and the fat that is on them, that is at the loins; and the protuberance on the liver, which he shall remove with the kidneys—just as it is removed from the ox of the sacrifice of well-being. The priest shall turn them into smoke on the altar of burnt offering.

10But the hide of the bull, and all its flesh, as well as its head and legs, its entrails and its dung—all the rest of the bull—he shall carry to a pure place outside the camp, to the ash heap, and burn it up in a wood fire; it shall be burned on the ash heap.

13If it is the whole community of Israel that has erred and the matter escapes the notice of the congregation, so that they do any of the things which by the Lord’s commandments ought not to be done, and they realize their guilt—when the sin through which they incurred guilt becomes known, the congregation shall offer a bull of the herd as a purification offering, and bring it before the Tent of Meeting to be burned as an incense offering on the horns of the incense altar. All sacrifices other than hattat were to be burned on the altar that stood in the courtyard, facing the entrance to the tent.

10. just as it is removed from the ox of the sacrifice of well-being. The same parts of the animal are placed on the altar for the hattat sacrifice as for the sh’lamim sacrifice. Unlike the latter sacrifice, however, here the rest of the animal is not eaten but destroyed.

11. This rite, like the Yom Kippur ritual, combines two methods of expiation: an offering by fire on the altar for the purpose of placating God, and a ritual by which impurity is removed from the Israeliite camp and physically destroyed.

13. If it is the whole community It is possible for an entire community to be misled or swept away by prejudice or emotion. The voice of the people is not necessarily the voice of God.
ing. 15 The elders of the community shall lay their hands upon the head of the bull before the Lord, and the bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord. 16 The anointed priest shall bring some of the blood of the bull into the Tent of Meeting, and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle of it seven times before the Lord, in front of the curtain. 18 Some of the blood he shall put on the horns of the altar which is before the Lord in the Tent of Meeting, and all the rest of the blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering, which is at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. 19 He shall remove all its fat from it and turn it into smoke on the altar. 20 He shall do with this bull just as is done with the [priest’s] bull of purification offering; he shall do the same with it. Thus the priest shall make expiation for them, and they shall be forgiven. 21 He shall carry the bull outside the camp and burn it as he burned the first bull; it is the purification offering of the congregation.

22 In case it is a chieftain who incurs guilt by

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**15. elders of the community** The “elders” (z’kenim), an ancient institution in biblical Israel, were comparable to councils of elders known from other ancient Near Eastern societies. The elders here act on behalf of the Israelite community in expiating collective offenses against God, as they often were obliged to do.

**16–19.** The rites required to atone for the sins of the whole community are identical to those prescribed for the expiation of the anointed priest, as set forth in verses 3–12.

**20. the priest shall make expiation for them** Expiation by means of sacrificial blood rites is a prerequisite for securing God’s forgiveness. It was formerly thought that the Hebrew word for expiate (kipper) meant “cover over, conceal,” a well-known image (see Ps. 32:1). On the basis of Akkadian usage of the cognate (linguistically related word) kuppuru, it has been established that the verb kipper means “to wipe off, burnish, cleanse.” Expiation is conceived of as cleansing, as wiping away impurity and contamination and, by extension, sinfulness itself. The purification comes from God in response to the proper performance of required rituals undertaken in good faith.

**they shall be forgiven** The word for forgiving (salah) most likely derives from a verb meaning “to wash, to sprinkle with water” in Akkadian. The basic notion is that of cleansing with water, a concept then extended to connote God’s forgiveness and acceptance of expiation.

**21. congregation** Hebrew: kahal; like edah in verse 13, this is a term for the Israelites as a whole. It characterizes a group living together.

**22. a chieftain who incurs guilt** The chieftain, unlike the priest, was a secular leader. He was not, therefore, held directly responsible for

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**22. In case it is a chieftain who incurs guilt** Literally, “when a chieftain incurs guilt.” A ruler must make so many difficult decisions that it is virtually impossible never to harm innocent people in the process. Yohanan ben Zakkai is quoted as saying, “Fortunate is the
doing unwittingly any of the things which by the commandment of the Lord his God ought not to be done, and he realizes his guilt—
or the sin of which he is guilty is brought to his knowledge—he shall bring as his offering a male goat without blemish. 24He shall lay his hand upon the goat's head, and it shall be slaughtered at the spot where the burnt offering is slaughtered before the Lord; it is a purification offering. 25The priest shall take with his finger some of the blood of the purification offering and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering; and the rest of its blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering. 26All its fat he shall turn into smoke on the altar, like the fat of the sacrifice of well-being. Thus the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for his sin, and he shall be forgiven.

27If any person from among the populace unwittingly incurs guilt by doing any of the things which by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, and he realizes his guilt—
or the sin of which he is guilty is brought to his knowledge—he shall bring as his offering a male goat without blemish. 23Or the sin of which he is guilty is brought to his knowledge—he shall bring as his offering a male goat without blemish. 24He shall lay his hand upon the goat's head, and it shall be slaughtered at the spot where the burnt offering is slaughtered before the Lord; it is a purification offering. 25The priest shall take with his finger some of the blood of the purification offering and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering; and the rest of its blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering. 26All its fat he shall turn into smoke on the altar, like the fat of the sacrifice of well-being. Thus the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for his sin, and he shall be forgiven.

27. a male goat Literally, “a hairy goat” (sa•ir). Goats frequently were used for purification offerings. 25–26. The same portions of the sacrificial animal are placed on the altar here as for the sh'lamim (prescribed in 3:3–4). Here, however, some of the sacrificial blood is daubed on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and the rest is poured out at the base of the altar. All of the sacrificial blood involved in both the olah and the sh'lamim sacrifices is dashed against the sides of the altar.

27. any person From here to the end of chapter 4, the form of the hattat sacrifice is essentially the same as the one prescribed for the chieftain (nasi), with one difference: An individual Israelite shall offer a female goat or a female sheep instead of a male animal.

populace Hebrew: am ha-aretz; literally, “people of the land.” In the Bible, it connotes landed gentry, “people of status,” not the populace at large. (In Rabbinic times, am ha-aretz took on the pejorative meaning it has today—an untutored person, an ignoramus. This is probably because it came to refer to someone from the countryside who was unlettered. The Latin word paganus suffered a similar fate.)

generation whose leader recognizes having sinned and brings an offering of purification” [BT Hor. 10b, reading in this verse the word asher, “in case,” as ashrei, “fortunate”]. When the people see the ruler humbling himself to atone for mistakes, they will be more likely to do so themselves. But a leader who denies ever being wrong, who seeks to blame others, will teach the people to behave in the same way. Also, leaders who admit their own human weaknesses will be more compassionate toward the weaknesses of their followers.

27. If any person from among the populace unwittingly incurs guilt Literally, “if a single person sins.” This prompted the comment that the person was led to sin by separating from the community and becoming an isolated individual (Tiferet Sh’mu-el).
to be done, and he realizes his guilt—or the sin of which he is guilty is brought to his knowledge—he shall bring a female goat without blemish as his offering for the sin of which he is guilty. 29 He shall lay his hand upon the head of the purification offering, and the purification offering shall be slaughtered at the place of the burnt offering. 30 The priest shall take with his finger some of its blood and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering; and all the rest of its blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar. 31 He shall remove all its fat, just as the fat is removed from the sacrifice of well-being; and the priest shall turn it into smoke on the altar, for a pleasing odor to the Lord. Thus the priest shall make expiation for him, and he shall be forgiven.

32 If the offering he brings as a purification offering is a sheep, he shall bring a female without blemish. 33 He shall lay his hand upon the head of the purification offering, and it shall be slaughtered as a purification offering at the spot where the burnt offering is slaughtered. 34 The priest shall take with his finger some of the blood of the purification offering and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and all the rest of its blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar. 35 And all its fat he shall remove just as the fat of the sheep of the sacrifice of well-being is removed; and this the priest shall turn into smoke on the altar, over the Lord’s gift. Thus the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for the sin of which he is guilty, and he shall be forgiven.

28. female goat  It is not certain why female animals were required for certain offerings and not for others. Most animal sacrifices consisted of males, probably because fewer males than females were necessary to reproduce the herds and flocks. This pattern is common to most ancient Near Eastern religions.

29. at the place of the burnt offering  It is done there in order not to embarrass those bringing a hattat by identifying them as repentant sinners. It would not be apparent to an onlooker whether the individual was bringing a purification offering or a burnt offering.
5 If a person incurs guilt—
When he has heard a public imprecation and—although able to testify as one who has either seen or learned of the matter—he does not give information, so that he is subject to punishment;

2 Or when a person touches any impure thing—be it the carcass of an impure beast or the carcass of impure cattle or the carcass of an impure creeping thing—and the fact has escaped him, and then, being impure, he realizes his guilt;

3 Or when he touches human impurity—any such impurity whereby one becomes impure—and, though he has known it, the fact has escaped him, but later he realizes his guilt;

For Unintended Sins of Omission (5:1–13)

1. public Hebrew: kol; literally, “voice, sound.” Here it has the technical sense of “oral proclamation.” The proclamation urged all who possessed information in a certain case to come forward and testify.

subject to punishment A person who heard the proclamation but who failed to assist the judicial process and withheld evidence was liable to a penalty. (In the ancient Near East, courts and archives generally were located on temple grounds, and this was most likely true of ancient Israel as well. An institutional connection links testimony and related juridical procedures, on the one hand, with expiation for what we usually refer to as religious sins, on the other.) The failure to come forth was a form of negligence; and the omission involved speech, not deed.

2. when a person touches any impure thing The main source for these prohibitions of contact is chapter 11, especially verses 24–31, where their significance is discussed.

then, being impure, he realizes his guilt Better: “insofar as he was impure, he had incurred guilt.” Impurity is the basis of the offender’s guilt.

3. human impurity Hebrew: tum•at adam; the forms of impurity that affect a woman after childbirth (12:2), a person who has a bodily discharge (15:2,19), or a man who engages in sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman (15:24). It also applies to a person who has eaten the meat of an animal that died naturally or was torn by beasts (17:15–16).

and, though he has known it, the fact has escaped him, but later he realizes his guilt Although the fact escaped him, ultimately he knew that he had been guilty; i.e., something originally was ignored or forgotten, then later recalled. Verses 2 and 3 serve to protect the sanctuary and all within it from any impurity carried by an impure person. If the offense had been intentional, contamination of the sanctuary would subject the offender to the more severe penalty of being cut off from the community (7:19–21).

CHAPTER 5

1. We are held responsible not only for the wrong things we do but for the things we should but do not do. During the Sho•ah, as well as in other circumstances, bystanders who did not act to oppose evil caused enormous, irreparable harm. In Jewish law, one who has knowledge about a crime or legal dispute and does not come forward to divulge it is “innocent before a human court but liable in the sight of God” [BT BK 56a]. The asham (reparation offering) is how the Torah seeks to resolve that conflict.
4. an oath  One who neglects to fulfill an oath, or allows the matter to escape notice, offends not only those affected by the oath but also God, in whose name the oath was taken.

5. he shall confess that wherein he has sinned  This is the only explicit reference to confession in all of chapters 4 and 5—for a good reason. In the other cases, which involve second parties, there are indications that the offender was prompted to undertake expiation either by individuals or by the situation. Here, however, we are dealing with private acts and the failure to act, which might never have come to light had the offender not come forth to confess. The motivation for confessing was religious and moral—the desire to be purified and to avert God’s wrath for having failed to fulfill one’s commitments. It was also related to the judicial process.

6. a purification offering  The sacrifice prescribed in this instance consisted of a female from the flock. This was for “sins of omission,” just as the sacrifice prescribed in 4:27–35 was for “sins of commission.” Here, the offender had the option of offering either a sheep or a goat. One who could afford the full hattat sacrifice was to offer it even for sins of omission, which were deemed less severe.

8–9. pinching its head at the nape without severing  The use of sacrificial blood here is similar to the procedure for the hattat generally (as prescribed in 4:25,30), except that in this instance the blood was not sprinkled on the horns of the altar of burnt offerings but on its side (kir).

4. Or when a person utters an oath to bad or good purpose—whatever a man may utter in an oath—and, though he has known it, the fact has escaped him, but later he realizes his guilt in any of these matters—

5. when he realizes his guilt in any of these matters, he shall confess that wherein he has sinned.

6. And he shall bring as his penalty to the Lord, for the sin of which he is guilty, a female from the flock, sheep or goat, as a purification offering; and the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for his sin.

7. But if his means do not suffice for a sheep, he shall bring to the Lord, as his penalty for that of which he is guilty, two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a purification offering and the other for a burnt offering. He shall bring them to the priest, who shall offer first the one for the purification offering, pinching its head at the nape without severing it. He shall sprinkle...
some of the blood of the purification offering on the side of the altar, and what remains of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar; it is a purification offering. And the second he shall prepare as a burnt offering, according to regulation. Thus the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for the sin of which he is guilty, and he shall be forgiven.

And if his means do not suffice for two turtle doves or two pigeons, he shall bring as his offering for that of which he is guilty a tenth of an ephah of choice flour for a purification offering; he shall not add oil to it or lay frankincense on it, for it is a purification offering. He shall bring it to the priest, and the priest shall scoop out of it a handful as a token portion of it and turn it into smoke on the altar, with the Lord’s gifts; it is a purification offering. Thus the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for whichever of these sins he is guilty, and he shall be forgiven. It shall belong to the priest, like the grain offering.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

When a person commits a trespass, being

11. Embellishments of oil and frankincense, prescribed for the grain offering in 2:1 and elsewhere, are not included here. The reason is not entirely clear. Possibly the elimination of costly ingredients was intended to lower the cost of the offering so that all in need of expiation could afford it. Then, too, it might not be appropriate for an offering brought by a sinful person to be so embellished.

ephah See Comment to Exod. 16:36.

THE REPARATION OFFERING (vv. 14–26)

For Sins against the Sanctuary (vv. 14–16)
The law of verses 14–16 applies only to unintentional misuse or destruction of sanctuary property. (Intentional theft of sacred property or damage to it was a crime punishable by death.)

15. trespass Hebrew: ma•al; in the Bible, the word refers to ancient notions of sacrilege and impurity. Here it is an appropriate term for the theft of sanctuary property. The term may also relate to betrayal of trust, such as marital infidelity, acts of deceit, and violation of the covenant between God and the people Israel by the worship of alien gods.

any of the Lord’s sacred things This refers to sanctuary property, not to priestly allocations or tithes, which belonged to the priests and Levites. Misappropriation of what belonged to the

14. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

15. When a person commits a trespass, being
unwittingly remiss about any of the Lord’s sacred things, he shall bring as his penalty to the Lord a ram without blemish from the flock, convertible into payment in silver by the sanctuary weight, as a reparation offering.\(^{16}\) He shall make restitution for that wherein he was remiss about the sacred things, and he shall add a fifth part to it and give it to the priest. The priest shall make expiation on his behalf with the ram of the reparation offering, and he shall be forgiven.

17 And when a person, without knowing it, sins in regard to any of the Lord’s commandments about things not to be done, and then realizes his guilt, he shall be subject to punishment.\(^{18}\) He shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish from the flock, or the equivalent, as a reparation offering. The priest shall make expiation on his behalf for the error that he committed unwittingly, and he shall be forgiven.\(^{19}\) It is a reparation offering; he has incurred guilt before the Lord.

20 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:\(^{21}\) When priests (according to 22:14) required the offender to make restitution and to pay a penalty, but there is no mention of an asham.

convertible into payment in silver That is, the equivalent in silver. The offender had the option of either providing a ram of one’s own or remitting the cost of one so that a proper sacrificial ram could be secured on one’s behalf.

sanctuary weight Hebrew: shekel ha-kodesh, the prevailing standard in ancient Israel at certain periods.

16. add a fifth part to it The penalty of one fifth was a common feature of Temple administration. The provisions of this law are reformulated in verse 24.

For Contingency (vv. 17–19)

17. without knowing it, sins . . . and then realizes The person did not know for certain that he committed an offense; it was only a suspicion. Certain knowledge of an offense would invoke the law of 4:27–35. In cases of uncertainty, however, an asham consisting of a ram was prescribed to avert God’s wrath.

For Deceit with False Oaths (vv. 20–26)

Unlike the careless taking of sanctuary property in 5:14–16, the offenses outlined here were intentional: persons who deliberately misappropriated property or funds entrusted to their safekeeping, or defrauded another, or failed to restore lost property they had located. When sued, these defendants then lied under oath and claimed no responsibility. Without witnesses, the aggrieved party had no further recourse and sustained a great loss. But what if the accused later admitted to having lied under oath—thus assuming liability for the unrecovered property? Such persons were given the opportunity to clear themselves by making restitution and by paying a fine of 20 per-
a person sins and commits a trespass against the Lord by dealing deceitfully with his fellow in the matter of a deposit or a pledge, or through robbery, or by defrauding his fellow, 22 or by finding something lost and lying about it; if he swears falsely regarding any one of the various things that one may do and sin thereby—

23 when one has thus sinned and, realizing his guilt, would restore that which he got through robbery or fraud, or the deposit that was entrusted to him, or the lost thing that he found, or anything else about which he swore falsely, he shall repay the principal amount and add a fifth part to it. He shall pay it to its owner when he realizes his guilt. 25 Then he shall bring to the priest, as his penalty to the Lord, a ram without blemish from the flock, or the equivalent, as a reparation offering. 26 The priest shall make expiation on his behalf before the Lord, and he shall be forgiven for whatever he may have done to draw blame thereby.

This expresses what criminals are required to do, not what they may prefer to do.

25–26. The provisions here are identical to those of the asham prescribed in verses 15–16.

21. trespass against the Lord by dealing deceitfully To cheat another person is to sin against God as well as against that person. “It is worse to rob a fellow human being than to steal from God” (BT BB 88b). Akiva taught that whenever two people enter into an agreement, each is relying on the divine dimension of the other, the part of a person that is the image of God and knows what is right and what is wrong, making God a witness to every transaction. To betray that trust is to deny the divine image in ourselves, and to deny God’s participation in our activities.

robbery . . . defrauding According to the Talmud, robbery (gezel) is defined as taking something that belongs to another person, and fraud (oshek) refers to withholding from another person something that is owed (BT BM 111a). “The reparation offering may not be brought until the violator has returned the property to its rightful owner” (Maimonides).

26. and he shall be forgiven The parashah concludes on this affirming note. As a Hadisic master taught, “The gates of repentance open for anyone who does wrong and then realizes it and seeks to make amends.”

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and seizes him by his genitals, 12you shall cut off her hand; show no pity.

13You shall not have in your pouch alternate weights, larger and smaller. 14You shall not have in your house alternate measures, a larger and a smaller. 15You must have completely honest weights and completely honest measures, if you are to endure long on the soil that the L ORD your God is giving you. 16For everyone who does those things, everyone who deals dishonestly, is abhorrent to the L ORD your God.

17Remember what Amalek did to you on your

IMPROPER INTERVENTION IN A FIGHT (vv. 11–12)

12. cut off her hand In the ancient Near East, it was common to inflict punishment on the part of the body with which an offense was committed. The reason for such a severe punishment is not clear. Some think it may be because of her injuring the man’s genitals and threatening his ability to father children, as is stated explicitly in the Middle Assyrian laws.

show no pity This clause is used in cases where one might be tempted to be lenient, in this case because the woman’s motive—the defense of her husband—was honorable.

HONEST WEIGHTS AND MEASURES (vv. 13–16)

Only honest weights and measures are permitted. The importance of this principle, so crucial for the justice and stability of commerce within a society, was widely emphasized in the ancient Near East.

13. You shall not have Not only may one not use deceptive weights and measures, one may not even possess them.

pouch Where merchants carried their weights.

alternate weights Literally, “stone and stone.” The weights in question were used on balance scales to determine the weight of money and commodities. The standard weight was the shekel, approximately 0.4 ounce (11 g), although it varied in different periods. One may not use the large weight to receive more or the small weight to give less. Ancient Babylonian writings contain many accounts about the violation of this norm. Numerous stone and metal weights of the standard shekel and its fractions and multiples have been found in archaeological excavations.

14. alternate measures Literally, “alternate ephah measures.” The ephah (standing here for all measures) was not a measuring device but a unit of capacity of pottery containers used for grain; see Comment to Exod. 16:36. The size and weight of such large containers made it difficult for buyers or sellers of grain to carry their own jars from place to place to verify the amounts involved in a sale.

15. completely honest Literally, “complete and honest.” In Hebrew, the words appear at the beginning of the verse, where they serve as a contrast to verse 14 and gain an emphatic sense: “only completely honest weights.”

if you are to endure long Long life, for the individual or the nation, is the reward granted by God for obedience to His laws.

REMEMBERING AMALEKITE AGGRESSION (vv. 17–19)

The Amalekites were a nomadic group living in
journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

the Sinai desert and the part of the Negeb that was south of the territory of Judah. Nothing is known of them from sources outside the Bible. Israel’s experience with them must have been particularly bitter to have led to the resolve to wipe them out. The account in Exod. 17:8–16 offers no explanation for that determination, but Deuteronomy does: The Amalekites staged a sneak attack on the defenseless weak lagging at the rear of the migrating Israelites, an attack that showed Amalek to be uncommonly ruthless, lacking in even the most elementary decency. Conceivably, the Israelites thought that the Amalekites had genocidal intentions, and regarded the command to annihilate them as measure-for-measure punishment.

17. The exhortation to remember is echoed by “Do not forget” in verse 19.

what Amalek did to you There is no indication of what prompted the Amalekites to attack. It has been conjectured that they saw the Israelites as a potential threat to their control of the oases and pasturelands in the Sinai and the Negeb. In view of the Amalekites’ later character as marauders, however, it is just as likely that their attack was a plundering raid on a target of opportunity.

18. undeterred by fear of God The Amalekites are not expected to fear YHVH, the God of Israel, whom they do not recognize. That is why the term used here is “fear of God” (elohim, the more general term for the deity), meaning fear of the divine. The Bible knows that non-Israelite religions also teach that the gods punish sin; and when it refers to pagans who are or are not heedful of that belief, it uses the more general term “God” (see Gen. 20:11). The Amalekites lacked the basic principles of morality common to all religions.

stragglers Those traveling at the rear would include the sick and weak who could not keep up with the others. Anyone with elementary decency would avoid attacking them.

19. when God grants you safety Once Israel is securely settled in the Land, with no threat left to its existence, it is to turn its attention to Amalek.

blot out the memory That is, blot out their name, wipe them out. The Israelites are not being commanded here to eradicate all recollection of the Amalekites. Indeed, they are commanded to remember forever what the Amalekites did.

measures, to warn us that when people cheat each other, the national bonds of unity, loyalty, and mutual trust are strained and the nation becomes vulnerable to Amalek (Tanh.).

undeterred by fear of God Literally, “not fearing God.” In Hebrew, this phrase follows “you were famished and weary”; to whom does it refer? To Amalek? Or the stragglers who had lost faith—thus becoming vulnerable to Amalek? If the former, “fearing God” means having empathy for the powerless who are at your mercy [as the Egyptian midwives who “feared God” spared Israelite babies in Exod. 1:17].

18. surprised you Hebrew: korkha, which the Midrash relates to the word for “cold” (kor). The Israelites, leaving Egypt on the way to Sinai, had been confident and enthusiastic. The real sin of Amalek was that he robbed them of their idealism, teaching them that the world could be an unreliable and dangerous place.

19. The commandment to blot out the name and the memory of the wicked may be thematically related to the commandment earlier in the chapter to perpetuate the name of the man who died childless.

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH
25:19. blot out . . . Amalek This verse is the source for the custom of drowning out the name of Haman (by tradition a descendent of Amalek) with raucous noise during the reading of M’gillat Ester on Purim.
This haftarah first presents Saul’s battle against the Amalekites. Then it describes how God rejected him as king for disobeying the divine command of utter extermination of that nation and its livestock. (Centuries earlier, according to Exodus, “Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim” [17:8]. Later, with God’s help, “Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword” [17:13]. That event was inscribed in a document in which the Lord stated, “I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” [17:14].)

In Deut. 25:17–19, read as the concluding (maftir) Torah selection on Shabbat Zakhor, the Israelites are called upon to remember Amalek’s surprise attack against “all the stragglers” who made up the weary and famished rearguard of the people during the wilderness trek from Egypt. In Deuteronomy, it is the people who must remember the enemy and destroy it—not God. It must be done “when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you [oy’vav mi-saviv].”

The Book of Samuel seems to suggest that this time had come, for the summary of Saul’s battles (1 Sam. 14:47) states that the king “waged war on every side against all his enemies [saviv b’khol oy’vav].” It is in this context that the battle against Amalek is mentioned (v. 48).

The haftarah, which follows in chapter 15, provides a fuller, theological perspective that blends the two Torah traditions. God announces that He will now require the Amalekites for their actions against the Israelites “on their way up from Egypt,” a requital that Saul and the nation must exact (15:2–3). God’s own vendetta against the Amalekites (Exod. 17:14) is thus combined here with the people’s responsibility to destroy Amalek for having attacked Israel “on your journey, after you left Egypt” (Deut. 25:17,19). Saul’s incomplete execution of God’s command, together with the subsequent inquest and judgment against him through Samuel, constitute the successive sections of the haftarah.

The haftarah’s repeated use of the words kol (voice) and shama (hear, obey) highlights its emphasis on obedience. The punishment for not obeying the divine word is rejection. Samuel states: “Because you [Saul] rejected the Lord’s command, / He has rejected you as king” (1 Sam. 15:23). This strident and striking language alludes to the onset of the monarchy. After the people had first requested a king, and Samuel had resisted, a divine oracle had declared: “Heed the demand of the people in everything they say to you. For it is not you that they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king” (8:7, cf. v. 21).

The issue in both cases is the authority of divine sovereignty—unmediated by a human king, in the first instance; distorted by the human king, in the second. The people reject God in the first case; God rejects the king in the second (15:23,26). Indeed, it seems that God can accept the substitute of human kingship so long as divine authority remains in place. It is just this that Saul has challenged by his decision to revise or reinterpret the divine command.

There is great pathos in this haftarah—first, because Saul’s sin is not a flagrant rejection of divine authority and second, because his repeated confessions and appeals for divine forgiveness are rejected. The reader is confronted with the austerity and stringency of God’s demands and the brutality demanded of the Israelite nation. Mercy is prohibited; no one and nothing may be “spared.” The war against the Amalekites is presented as a just war, punishing an offense centuries old. Rejection or reinterpretation of the absolute orders is completely out of the question. Whether as an actual event or as a literary case setting an exam-
15 Samuel said to Saul, “I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over His people Israel. Therefore, listen to the LORD’s command!

1 Samuel 15:1–3. According to an early rabbinic tradition, the Israelites were commanded to do three things when they came into the Land: establish a king, build the Temple, and destroy Amalek (Tosef. Sanh. 4:5; Sifrei Deut. 67).

That same remembrance and that act of destruction are articulated in the haftarah. Indeed, because this haftarah is recited just before Purim—when the scroll of Esther is read and Haman the Agagite’s evil plots against the Jews of Persia are recalled—later generations could read into the assertion of divine remembrance an assurance that God remains steadfast to punish Amalek in all generations.

The link between 1 Sam. 15 and the scroll of Esther was drawn already in biblical times. Just as Saul is the son of Kish from the tribe of Benjamin, so Mordecai’s lineage is traced to the line of Saul’s father (Esther 2:5). Just as the Israelite king defeats Amalek and its king, Agag, so the latter-day hero of the Jews foils the plots of Haman “the Agagite” (Esther 3:1,10). Amalek became a symbol of all the enemies of the Jews in all generations. In early midrashic homilies and in liturgical poetry composed for this Shabbat Zakhor in late antiquity, the foe was identified with Edom (the genealogy in Gen. 36:12 gave added proof). Through that identification, Amalek served as a symbol for Rome and for Christianity as well.

As a counterpoint, “Amalek” was later reinterpreted in terms of the evil inclination (cf. Zohar 3:281b) and religious failure. As a result, the eradication of Amalek became a process of psychospiritual development in certain circles. This more personal reading of the tradition, however, never displaced the national-historical one, and the two remain in tension. The carnival quality of Purim celebrations may dangerously mask the serious moral issues. Vengeance is not just the Lord’s; it is also enacted by people.
“Thus said the Lord of Hosts: I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel, for the assault he made upon them on the road, on their way up from Egypt. 3Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!”

4Saul mustered the troops and enrolled them at Telaim: 200,000 men on foot, and 10,000 men of Judah. 5Then Saul advanced as far as the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the wadi. 6Saul said to the Kenites, “Come, withdraw at once from among the Amalekites, that I may not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they left Egypt.” So the Kenites withdrew from among the Amalekites.

7Saul destroyed Amalek from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is close to Egypt, 8and he captured King Agag of Amalek alive. He proscribed all the people, putting them to the sword; but Saul and the troops spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the second-born, the lambs, and all else that was of value. They would not proscribe them; they proscribed only what was cheap and worthless.

10The word of the Lord then came to Samuel: 11“I regret that I made Saul king, for he has

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3. **Spare no one** The Hebrew verb suggests a harsher command: “have no pity.”

4. **mustered . . . enrolled** The narrative is tightly textured. Not only is the theme of “hearing” or “heeding” (shamer) repeated throughout the text (vv. 1,14,19,20,22,24); it also appears through puns. Thus the initial command was to “hear” (sh’mar) the divine word (v. 1); and Saul proceeds immediately to “muster” (va-y’shamma) the troops. Similarly, Samuel says that God “remembers” or “requites” (pakad’ti) the crime of the Amalekites (v. 2; the verb דַּבֶּר serves double duty here). The same verb is used in the reference to Saul’s enrolling the troops (va-yifk’dem).

Telaim In the Negeb (“Telem,” Josh. 15:24).

6. Sauls tells the Kenites to withdraw “from among the Amalekites,” as an act of gratitude for their past favors to Israel. Possibly this refers to wilderness guiding (see Num. 10:29–32); the precise events are nowhere stated. Presumably some Kenites encamped among the Amalekites, an association also found in Balaam’s prophecy (Num. 24:20–21).

11. **I regret** Hebrew: nihamti. This usage sets up an ironic contrast with verse 29. After Saul begs forgiveness, Samuel refuses his appeal, stating that God “does not . . . change His mind [va-yinnahem].” But this change in divine favor
turned away from Me and has not carried out My commands.” Samuel was distressed and he entreated the LORD all night long. 12Early in the morning Samuel went to meet Saul. Samuel was told, “Saul went to Carmel, where he erected a monument for himself; then he left and went on down to Gilgal.”

13When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, “Blessed are you of the LORD! I have fulfilled the LORD’s command.” 14Then what,” demanded Samuel, “is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of oxen that I hear?”

Saul answered, “They were brought from the Amalekites, for the troops spared the choicest of the sheep and oxen for sacrificing to the LORD your God. And we proscribed the rest.” 16Samuel said to Saul, “Stop! Let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night!” “Speak,” he replied.

17And Samuel said, “You may look small to yourself, but you are the head of the tribes of Israel. The LORD anointed you king over Israel, and the LORD sent you on a mission, saying, ‘Go and proscribe the sinful Amalekites; make war on them until you have exterminated them.’ 19Why did you disobey the LORD and swoop down on the spoil in defiance of the LORD’s will?”

Saul said to Samuel, “But I did obey the LORD! I performed the mission on which the LORD sent me: I captured King Agag of Amalek, and I proscribed Amalek, 21and the troops took from the spoil some sheep and oxen—the best of what had been proscribed—to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal.”

22But Samuel said:

“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
As much as in obedience to the LORD’s command?

is precisely what has produced Saul’s despair. Elsewhere, this verb does in fact indicate God’s regret at having created sinful humankind (Gen. 6:6: va-yinnahem), as well as God’s merciful forgiveness of penitents (Jon. 4:2: v’niham).

21. the best Hebrew: reishit. In his second justification, Saul uses a more cultic term for what he earlier called “the choicest” (meitav) of the livestock (v. 15).
Surely, obedience is better than sacrifice, Compliance than the fat of rams.

23 For rebellion is like the sin of divination, Defiance, like the iniquity of teraphim. Because you rejected the Lord’s command, He has rejected you as king.”

24 Saul said to Samuel, “I did wrong to transgress the Lord’s command and your instructions; but I was afraid of the troops and I yielded to them. 25 Please, forgive my offense and come back with me, and I will bow low to the Lord.”

26 But Samuel said to Saul, “I will not go back with you; for you have rejected the Lord’s command, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel.”

27 As Samuel turned to leave, Saul seized the corner of his robe, and it tore. 28 And Samuel said to him, “The Lord has this day torn the kingship over Israel away from you and has given it to another who is worthier than you. 29 Moreover, the Glory of Israel does not deceive or change His mind, for He is not human that He should change His mind.” 30 But Saul pleaded, “I did wrong. Please, honor me in the presence of the elders of my people and in the presence of Israel, and come back with me until I have bowed low to the Lord your God.”

31 So Samuel followed Saul back, and Saul bowed low to the Lord. 32 Samuel said, “Bring forward to me King Agag of Amalek.” Agag approached him with faltering steps; and Agag said, “Ah, bitter death is at hand!”

33 Samuel said: “As your sword has bereaved women, So shall your mother be bereaved among women.”

32. with faltering steps Hebrew verbal stem: ma•ad (to falter). 32. Ah, bitter death is at hand Hebrew: akhen sar mar ha-mavet. The word sar (rendered as “at hand”) is very likely a mistaken scribal doubling (dittography) of the similar-looking word mar (bitter). In fact, a word for sar is missing in the ancient Greek translation (Septuagint). On this basis, the king simply and poignantly cried: “Surely, death is bitter!”
And Samuel cut Agag down before the Lord at Gilgal.

34Samuel then departed for Ramah, and Saul went up to his home at Gibeah of Saul.