

Korbanos: Gift vs. Obligation

Vayikra begins by laying down the laws of *korbanos*, the Temple offerings or "sacrifices" as colloquially [but quite inaccurately] translated. The second *passuk* details a few general disqualifications that limit what animals may be used for a *korban* in all types of *korbanos*. "Of the cattle" invalidates animals upon whom bestiality has been performed, "of the sheep" eliminates those animals designated for animal worship or those animals who had killed a person, and so on. The exclusions listed are specific to *korbanos* and are derived directly from the grammatical form employed [i.e. the word "of", such as in "of the sheep", implies that some of a given set of animals are acceptable, but not all.]

The very first disqualification that is learned from these *pesukim*, however, presents two difficulties. The very first *passuk* says, "a man who will offer up a *korban*", which is explained to teach us that, "just as the first man [i.e. Adam] did not offer stolen animals [as *korbanos*], for everything belonged to him, so too when you bring a *korban*, you may not bring a stolen [animal as a] *korban*."

This is doubly troubling. First of all, the prohibition of using stolen goods for the purpose of a *mitzvah* applies to all *mitzvos* and could have been taught in the context of any *mitzvah*. Why, then, would this universal disqualification be the first one listed for *korbanos*? Shouldn't something uniquely relevant to *korbanos* have been listed first? Secondly, at first glance it seems to be a stretch, contrived even, to assume that "*adam* - a man" refers specifically to Adam *harishon* and his ownership of all animals in the world. What does this seemingly far-fetched allusion mean?

In order to understand the unique impropriety of stolen *korbanos*, we must define the world of *korbanos* vis-a-vis all other *mitzvos*.

Imagine I hire a workman to fix something in my house and then discover that he used stolen goods to do so. Although I will be very upset and feel that he had committed a terrible wrong, his wrongdoing does not contradict the essence of our transaction. I paid him to fix something, and he did so. But now let us picture someone giving a close friend an expensive stolen item as a gift, or a *chosson* giving a *kallah* a stolen diamond ring. In these cases, the misdeed strikes at the heart of the very gift. The very essence of a gift is giving of oneself to another, i.e. taking the time and effort that I've invested in earning money and giving it to another in the form of a gift. The giving of oneself is totally absent when presenting a stolen gift, and thus such a gift has no redeeming value whatsoever.

The world of *avodas Hashem* has two major components: obligations and voluntary opportunities. *Mitzvos* are, first and foremost, commandments. A person who does a *mitzvah*, even if there are shortcomings in its performance, still has done his duty. But then there are *korbanos*, which are "offerings." Although some *korbanos* are obligatory, the quintessential *korban* is a voluntary offering, the equivalent of a "gift." This is evidenced by the fact that Rashi explains that the very first part of Vayikra is speaking specifically about a voluntary *korban*. This would indicate that the quintessential form of *korban* is indeed the voluntary gift, while the obligatory *korbanos* comprise a special subcategory. It therefore makes sense that the first disqualification listed for *korbanos* is a stolen *korban*, for this negates the essence of the *korban*. It is almost as if the *passuk* is meant to read, "if man offers of himself a *korban*", and if there is no "self" in the *korban* being offered, there is absolutely no *korban* to speak of. Offering a stolen animal is not an ancillary offense, or even the violation of a prerequisite; rather it is a distortion of what a *korban* is supposed to be! Adam was the only person in the world and thus its exclusive owner, and therefore his bringing a *korban* was, by definition, giving of himself, and that serves as the prototype of what a *korban* is supposed to be.

This gives us insight into why the *nevi'im*, when castigating *Klal Yisroel* for their sins, kept harping on their *korbanos*. For when a person is negligent in some of his duties, he is not excused from the rest of his duties, and certainly is not to be faulted for fulfilling them! If one does not wear *teffilin*, he will not be excoriated for wearing *tzitzis*! But *korbanos* are "extra-credit." As such, if a person is negligent in his basic obligations, and yet offers *korbanos*, the *korbanos* are seen as a cynical attempt to curry favor with Hashem instead of doing what is right. If we steal, act unjustly, and do not care for the weak, we are still doing what is right when we blow *shofar* and eat *matzah*; the wrongness of our misdeeds and the correctness of our *mitzvos* are independent of each other. But when we dare offer "gifts" to Hashem while also engaging in wrongdoing, then the negative connotations of our misdeeds corrupt the *korbanos* themselves.

This is something to consider when we are engaged in activities that are *lifnim mishuras hadin*. As long as a person is focused on doing what is required *min hadin*, then his shortcomings do not directly affect his *mitzvos*. But if a person goes *lifnim mishuras hadin* in some areas while being grossly negligent in others, his *lifnim mishuras hadin* becomes a travesty and highlights his wrongdoings, *chas v'shalom*.