

Parashah Seventy-Seven

Leviticus 4:1–35; Ezekiel 18:1–18; Revelation 5:1–14

notes by Tim Hegg

In our section this Shabbat we are looking at the required sacrifices for sins committed which are labelled “unintentional.” I would suggest that there are essentially three broad categories into which the sins listed in the Torah might be grouped: 1) those done unintentionally (בְּשִׁגְגָה), 2) those done intentionally but out of weakness of soul, and 3) those done out of rebellion (what the Torah calls a “high hand”, בְּיַד רְמָה). Intentionality exists in categories 2 and 3, but with a slightly different nuance. The sins committed out of weakness are done with intention, but not with a heart fully given over to rebellion. The sins of a “high hand” however, are those done with a full recognition that such actions are clearly wrong, yet the person continues to commit these sins, turning their back upon God without remorse and guilt. The sin of a high hand is described in Numbers 15:27-36. While sins falling in categories 1 and 2 may be atoned for, sins of overt rebellion have no expiation. They correspond to what the Apostles called “apostasy” (Acts 21:21; 2Thess 2:3), and perhaps what Yeshua describes as the “unforgiveable sin” in Matt 12:31–32).

But it should be remembered that one may also repent of the sin of rebellion and such repentance is always received by the Almighty. Yet one must reckon with the fact that repentance is a gift of God (cf. Acts 5:31; 2Tim 2:25) and not something that the sinner is able to initiate on his own. Persistent rebellion against God may result in the situation in which repentance no longer granted and therefore divine forgiveness of sin is impossible.

Our text may be divided into three sections: **1)** Sins done unintentionally by the community or the High Priest (who represents the community) vv. 1-21. This may involve ignorance of the exact requirements or procedure of the Law (1-12) or following what was taught even though it was in error (13-21). Such sin still required a sin offering of a bull (same for High Priest/Corporate). The blood was sprinkled before the veil seven times as well as being put on the horns of the altar of incense. The remainder of blood was poured out at the base of the altar of sacrifice, the fat burned on the altar, and the remainder of bull was burned outside the camp (like on Yom HaKippurim)

2) The second section speaks of sins done unintentionally by an individual leader (vv. 22-26). This requires a sin offering of a male goat, the blood applied to the horns of the bronze altar and the remainder of blood poured out at the base of the altar. The fat was burned on the altar and the remainder of the sacrifice was to follow the pattern of the Peace Offering (cf. also 6:17–7:10).

3) The third section deals with sins done unintentionally by a non-leader (vv. 27-35). This requires a sin offering of a female goat or lamb. The blood was applied to the horns of the bronze altar and the remainder of the blood was poured out at the base of the altar. The fat was burned on the altar and the rest of the sacrifice was to follow the pattern of the Peace Offering.

In distinction from the previous three chapters, the sacrifices outlined in our current text are required, not voluntary. They are specifically said to be for sin done “unintentionally,” בְּשִׁגְגָה, *vish-gagah*. The word שִׁגְגָה means (according to *KB* and *BDB*) “sin of error, inadvertence,” something done as a “mistake.” The word is used 14 times in the Torah (only in Lev and Num) and twice outside of the Torah (Josh 20:3, 9). We may use the occurrences of the word to help define its meaning:

- Lev 5:15 combines it with the phrase “acts unfaithfully” (מַעַל)
- Num 15:24 combines it with the phrase “without knowledge”
- Num 35:11 uses the term in connection with the cities of refuge to which a person may flee if he has killed someone “unintentionally.” (cf. Josh 20:3, 9)

The traditional Rabbinic understanding of the term “unintentional” was that this involved sins that resulted from carelessness. Most of the *mitzvot* that HaShem has given to us require some measure of preparation. Undisciplined living may often put a person into the situation where the *mitzvot* are carried out incorrectly or even neglected. Yet this differs from the person who willfully, out of a spirit of rebellion, breaks the commandments or simply refuses to fulfill them. It also differs from the mere accidental breaking of a commandment, for such an accidental error by its very nature could not be avoided. Since, however, the unintentional trespass does blemish the soul, there is a requirement for purification. If the sinner had ordered his life according to God’s instructions and wisdom, he would have prepared himself accordingly to do the will of His Master.

Examples of such “careless” sinning are most likely known to each of us. I remember one Pesach some years ago I was at a meeting with people who were not keeping the festival. There on the table as I entered was a plate of cookies, and without a moments hesitation I took one to have with the cup of tea I had just made. After eating the cookie I suddenly stopped and realized what I’d just done—eaten *chametz* (leaven) during the days of *Chag haMatzot!* I had failed to follow the commandment, not intentionally, but out of reflex and carelessness. Yet had I prepared myself diligently for the day before leaving my house, I might have been more careful—more alert to the *Chol haMoed* (remainder of the Festival) which I was observing.

Errors or sins as a result of carelessness may also obtain in the area of ignorance. Ignorance of the Torah provides no valid excuse for breaking or neglecting it, but ignorance is still distinguished from outward rebellion. Ignorance may be the result of immaturity, or it may be the result of carelessness. It is the requirement of each of God’s children to study and learn what God has revealed about Himself and about what He desires for each of His children to be and to do. Failure to know God’s word will inevitably lead to sin, even if it is unintentional.

No one is above this human weakness of carelessness. Our text begins with the anointed Priest, here no doubt referring to the High Priest. In fact, the details of the offering he is to bring to atone for his unintentional sin parallel the offerings on Yom HaKippurim, the day when he alone goes into the Most Holy Place. Here, the blood is brought into the Holy Place and put on the horns of the altar of Incense, a mini-drama of the Day of Atonement when the blood is brought into the Most Holy Place and put upon the mercy seat of the Ark. And, like on Yom Kippur, the carcass is burned outside of the camp. The parallels to Yom Kippur remind us that the *Cohen HaGadol* (High Priest) represents the people, and is therefore called to a high standard. His actions may “bring guilt upon the people” (v. 3) because he stands as their representative before the Lord.

The same procedure is prescribed in the next section for the congregation as a whole, when as a congregation an unintentional sin is committed. How might this have occurred? Most of the Sages interpret this as being the case when the ruling elders (Sanhedrin) made a *halachic* decision which they later discovered was in error or contrary to Torah. Yet since the majority of the people had followed the ruling, the nation as a whole is required to bring a sacrifice (through the representation of the elders) for their unintentional sin. If this is a reasonable interpretation (and it certainly seems possible), then we derive a number of principles from it. First, even though we may be following what we’ve been taught, if that teaching is wrong, we are still culpable. We cannot expect the defence “but this is what the Pastor said” to stand in the court of HaShem. Secondly, those who teach or lead must take seriously what James teaches (3:1), that we will receive the stricter judgment. Leading people to God and His truth is a high privilege and one that must be taken seriously. Two things are desperately needed for a person who is given the responsibility to teach and lead within a given community—a personal, growing, and vibrant relationship with God, and a diligent, careful, and serious study of the word of God. Either one without the other will inevitably result in misleading the people into error.

We should also note that throughout this passage, indeed, throughout the laws of sacrifice, a common theme reappears time and time again—God’s principles of representation. The innocent animal represents the sinner through the leaning of hands upon the animal’s head. Furthermore, the *Cohen HaGadol* represents the nation, as do the elders in the case of congregational sin. Here, then, we have once again a fundamental rule of God’s salvation plan: He has appointed some to represent others. This ultimately is fulfilled by Yeshua who died as a sacrifice, representing us vicariously as the only sacrifice for sin that is fully acceptable to God.

Sacrifices for the individual ruler, and finally, for the common person, are also outlined in our text. In each case, from the *Cohen HaGadol* to the common person, the procedure for the sin offering for unintentional sin becomes less and less costly. For the common man who sins unintentionally, a female goat or lamb is brought. Interestingly, in other instances there is an option of bringing male or female (cf. Lev 3:1 and the Peace Offering), but in this case the female is specified. Since the female animal is less valuable in terms of herd production than the male, this requirement reflects the fact that unintentional sin, while still sin and something with which one must reckon, is not on the same level as sin which is intentional. It therefore carries a sacrifice of lesser value.

What lessons may be derived from our *parashah*? 1) God’s holiness cannot be diminished. Even when sins are done unintentionally, they must be atoned for as sin. Sin requires death because sin robs God of His rightful praise and glory through the creatures He has created; 2) A community may incur guilt through its leaders; 3) God is merciful, for He makes a way for the sinner to return through the offering of an atoning sacrifice. Yet this way of return is the way of humility and repentance, for the person must admit sin, even when it was unintentional; 4) leaders and teachers should take very seriously the work they do, for through faulty teaching God’s people may sin unintentionally. The seriousness of this should be reflected in the manner in which leaders and teachers are appointed by a community.