

Parsha Ponders

Tzav | April 1, 2020 | 9 Nissan 5780

Elevation with ash removal¹

צו את-אהרן ואת-בניו לאמר זאת תורה העלה היא העלה וגו' ואש המזבח תוקד בו: ולבש הכהן וגו' והרים את-הדשן וגו' והאש על-המזבח תוקד-בו וגו'

Command Aharon and his sons, saying: “This is the law of the *Olah* offering. It is the *Olah*...the fire of the altar should be ignited by it. The Kohen will adorn...he will lift the ash [off the altar]...The fire on the altar shall remain burning...²

The *Olah* offering is one of the many kinds of offerings in the Temple. It’s called an *Olah* offering because of what makes it unique. It’s entirely consumed by the altar fire. No person is permitted to eat from its flesh. *Olah* means elevation, as the offering is considered to entirely elevate towards Heaven. The Torah states that it is about to detail the laws of the *Olah* offering, and then proceeds to discuss something else entirely. There’s a *mitzvah* for the Kohen to scoop up the ash from the altar once a day and place it on the side of the altar. This is known as *terumas hadeshen*. There’s also a *mitzvah* to put wood on the altar so the fire doesn’t extinguish. Instead of the Torah describing the laws of the *Olah*³, it details these two *mitzvos*. Why then does it give this seemingly misleading introduction?

Perhaps the Torah wanted to connect the *Olah* offering to the *mitzvah* of *terumas hadeshen*. This was to give a proper perspective on offerings in general. A person might erroneously think that offerings are some sort of gift or bribe to G-d. Maybe Hashem benefits from offerings in some way. This is an especially appealing thought regarding the *Olah* offering, which is entirely given to Hashem. However, we have a plethora of verses to the contrary. Hashem tells us that He has no inherent need for offerings⁴. He has no delight in them⁵. He has no claim against our animals⁶. He asks rhetorically: “Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?”⁷ It is clear that offerings aren’t for Hashem’s benefit⁸.

Nevertheless, we see the non-Jewish prophet Bilaam erred with this. He is described as the wisest of the nations⁹, with no philosopher being able to compete¹⁰. He thought he could bribe Hashem into cursing the Jewish people. To do so, he offered bulls and rams on seven altars¹¹, to correspond to the seven

¹ Based on Be'er Yosef to Leviticus 6:2-5

² Leviticus *loc. cit.*

³ As well, the Torah already told us most of the laws of the *Olah* offering in Leviticus Chapter 1

⁴ 1 Samuel 15:22

⁵ Isaiah 1:11

⁶ Psalms 50:9

⁷ Ibid v. 13

⁸ The Be'er Yosef also brings proof from Micah 6:7

⁹ Bereishis Rabbah 93:10. See Bamidbar Rabbah 20:14 and Midrash Tanchuma 4:7, which describe him as the wisest of the wise

¹⁰ Bereishis Rabbah 65:20. See similarly Eichah Rabbah *Pesichta* § 2

¹¹ Numbers 23:4

altars previously built by the righteous¹². We see then that it's not so farfetched for someone, even someone very smart, to make this simple yet catastrophic mistake¹³.

To remove the possibility for such a mistake, the Torah juxtaposed the *Olah* offering to the *mitzvah* of *terumas hadeshen*. There's no room to err with this *mitzvah*. It entails no financial burden. It's very easy to perform. Some ash simply has to be scooped up and placed next to the altar. Nevertheless, there are many details to this *mitzvah*. It must be that this *mitzvah* is simply to fulfill Hashem's will. We have to be cautious to serve Him according to the *mitzvos* which He commanded, even if we don't fully understand their purpose. Since He willed it, we must perform it.

The *mitzvah* of *terumas hadeshen* is teaching us this lesson not only for itself, but regarding the entire Temple service. Even the *Olah* offering, which is burned entirely for Hashem. All of these *mitzvos* aren't a gift to Hashem, and He doesn't benefit from them. They are simply brought and performed because that is Hashem's will. This is what He commanded. Really, these *mitzvos* are for *our* benefit, as fulfilling them gives us reward and merit¹⁴. This is all part of Hashem's Infinite kindness towards his people¹⁵.

Good Shabbos

¹² The Be'er Yosef quotes Midrash Tanchuma Tzav § 1 that Bilaam built seven altars to correspond to the seven built since the creation of Adam. This also appears in Tanchuma Yashan Tzav § 1. Bamidbar Rabbah 20:18 elaborates that the seven were built by Adam, Hevel, Noach, Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and Moshe. Cf. Rashi ad. loc., who says the seven altars corresponded to the seven that Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov established

¹³ See Be'er Yosef to Numbers 22:9 (<https://parshaponders.com/balak-5777>), who further discusses the foolishness of Bilaam, despite his great wisdom

¹⁴ See Makkos 3:16

¹⁵ See the Be'er Yosef, who uses this to explain the Midrash Tanchuma loc. cit., which says Hashem didn't want to accept Bilaam's offerings. He only wants offerings from the Jews. See there as well, where the Be'er Yosef also explains the juxtaposition to the *mitzvah* of keeping the altar fire ignited