Parsha Ponders

Tzav | March 18, 2022 | 15 Adar 5782

Thoughts of denial[1]

…זאת תורה העלה…

…This is the law of the *Olah* offering…[2]

Of the many offerings that can be brought in the Temple, the one that is entirely consumed in flames is known as the *Olah* offering. While some offerings are brought voluntarily, and some to atone for immoral actions, our Sages teach us[3] that an *Olah* offering is brought to atone for improper thoughts. What's the source for this idea? They tell us that it's an explicit verse, which says: והעלה על-רוחכם היו לא תהיה, אשר אתם אומרים נהיה כגוים, That which goes up in your mind shall never come to pass, that you say that you'll be like all the nations[4]. Now, the word for "that which goes up" is the same word as an *Olah* offering, which entirely "goes up" to Hashem. As such, we see the *Olah* offering associated with thoughts, and in the context of the verse, bad ones. Now, it's hard to call this an explicit verse for this idea. It's more of an allusion than anything else[5].

There's a concept that Hashem doesn't punish us for our thoughts of sin. They aren't considered as if we had committed the act[6]. However, this is not true for idol worship. Thoughts of idol worship are considered like the act itself. Why is there this difference? When a person commits a sin, it's because of their desire to perform it. People aren't perfect. It's not always possible to be in full control of one's thoughts. It's enough that we're punished for committed immoral deeds. If we manage to refrain from bringing our thoughts into fruition, that's already an accomplishment. We won't be punished.

Thoughts of idol worship are of a completely different nature. These thoughts show a lack of belief in the existence of G-d. They deny the validity and authority of the Torah[7]. Just like someone who actively denies Hashem is held accountable, so too someone who mentally denies Hashem, for what is the difference between them? According to this, we can suggest that an *Olah* is only brought for thoughts of idol worship. If we aren't punished for our sinful thoughts, why would we need to bring atonement[8]? Our Sages must be referring then to thoughts of idol worship.

According to this, it's clear how our original verse explicitly demonstrates our Sage's understanding of the *Olah* offering. The verse refers to their thoughts as that "which goes up", the same word for *Olah*. It also rebukes the Jews for desiring to be like all of the other nations. This was essentially a desire to abandon the Torah, and no better than denying Hashem. It was akin to idol worship. We see then that the verse refers to their idol worship in the context of the word *Olah*. An *Olah* is only brought for the thoughts of the mind, which, as has been demonstrated, is specifically idol worship. Good Shabbos

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[1] Based on Divrei Shaul to Leviticus 6:2 [#2], by the author of Shoel UMeishiv. See there, where he provides many other approaches to the idea that an *Olah* is associated with thoughts of the mind

[2] Leviticus *loc. cit.*

[3] Vayikra Rabbah 7:3. The Divrei Shaul later suggests that the *Midrash* argues on Yoma 36a, which says that an *Olah* is brought for failure to perform positive *mitzvos* and לא תעשה שניתק לעשה

[4] Ezekiel 20:32

[5] Yefeh Toar *ad. loc.*

[6] Kiddushin 39b

[7] The Divrei Shaul cites "המורה פמ"א לשלישי". I assume he means Moreh Nevuchim 3:41

[8] I don't really get the logic. There are many types of sins for which there is no punishment, such as sins that are lacking an action. Nevertheless, they still need atonement. We can say the same thing for sinful thoughts