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## Parshat Tzav: God Desires Our Broken Hearts Rabba Yaffa Epstein

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2015

This week's Parsha opens with the instructions for how to offer a *Korban Olah*, a burnt offering.

*Vayikra 6:2 states:*

*Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the burnt offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it.*

*צו את אהרן ואת בניו לאמר זאת תורת העולה הוא העלה על מוקדה על המזבח כל הלילה עד הבקר ואש המזבח תוקד בו.*

The *Korban Olah* is completely burnt up, completely dedicated to God and its ashes are left on the *mizbeach*, the altar, all night until the morning. In a time of sparse resources, the idea of giving an entire animal to God, without any human benefit teaches us that this *Korban* is one of real sacrifice and complete devotion. It demands intense commitment on the part of the giver.

Interestingly, the Midrash Rabbah in *Vayikra 7:3* tells us that the *Korban Olah* is offered as atonement for a very specific transgression.

*Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said – The Olah comes to atone for Hirhur Halev, the thoughts of our heart.*

*אמר רבי שמעון בן יוחאי לעולם אין העולה באה אלא על הרהור הלב.*

The concept of *Hirhur Halev* is classically understood to mean thoughts of sin. The *Olah* therefore comes to atone not for our transgressive actions, for which we have other sacrifices and paths to atonement, but rather for our thoughts and desires to sin.

What is the connection between a completely burnt offering and our thoughts of sin? Perhaps the answer lies in the word *Halev* – the heart. The Midrash is interested in exploring the idea that the *Olah*, a sacrifice that represents total dedication to God, is deeply connected to our emotional commitment to God. Serving God is not simply about our behaviors, but rather we must be emotionally engaged and involved in our service of God.

Mizmor Tehillim 51 describes the process of King David pleading with God for forgiveness after his sin with Batsheva. In one of the most famous passages in psalm, he says “*You do not want me to bring sacrifices; You do not desire burnt offerings; True sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; God, You will not despise a broken and crushed heart.*”

Here King David understands that our true offerings to God are those of the heart; those that are emotional and spiritual, not simply behavioral. Further, God wants those hearts that are broken, not our whole and perfect heart, but rather, our broken heart, our broken spirit.

In another passage in *Vayikra Rabbah 7:2* we are taught:

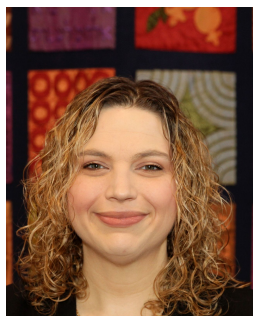
*'Rabbi Alexandri said, "If an ordinary person uses broken vessels, it is a disgrace for him, but the vessels used by the Holy one Blessed be He are all broken, as it is said "God is close to the broken hearted."*

*אמר רבי אלכסנדרי: ההדיוט הזה אם משמש הוא בכלים שבורים גנאי הוא לו, אבל הקב"ה כלי תשמישו שבורים, שנאמר (שם לד): קרוב ה' לנשברי לב. (שם קמז): הרופא לשוברי לב. (ישעיה נז): ואת דכא ושפל רוח זבחי אלהים רוח נשברה לב נשבר.*

Rabbi Alexandri teaches us that God sees things differently than we do. While human beings see brokenness as something negative, God utilizes those things that are broken, those things that are imperfect. This Midrash expresses a beautiful idea; Hashem desires to be in relationship with the Human not despite our being broken, but actually because of it.

A similar idea can be found on Seder night. There is a moment in the Seder, at Yachatz, where we take the middle matzah of the three matzot on our table, and we break it in half. This action, the breaking of the innermost Matzah, which can be likened to our innermost thoughts, our *Hirhurei Lev*, instructs us that in order to experience the transformative power of redemption, we must first break open our hearts and make ourselves into broken vessels. Once we can accept our own brokenness, that is when we can truly tell our story, and through the recounting of our salvation, both the negative and the positive pieces of it, we become complete<sup>1</sup>.

The *Olah*, and Seder night convey the same message. Both ask us to acknowledge and understand that we are imperfect broken vessels. Both ask us to bring our brokenness into conversation with repentance, and with redemption. We lay our broken hearts on the *mizbeach*, and on the Seder table, in complete offering, and through that, we ourselves become whole, and are able to be fully in relationship with the Divine.



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<sup>1</sup> A similar idea is expressed by Rabbi Eliahu Klein, in *The Mystical Haggadah*, pp. 45