

Shelach

“If you unwittingly fail to observe any one of the commandments that Hashem has declared to Moshe, anything that Hashem has enjoined upon you through Moshe—from the day that Hashem gave the commandment and on through the ages: If this was done unwittingly, through the inadvertence of the community, the whole community shall present one bull of the herd as a burnt offering of pleasing odor to Hashem, with its proper meal offering and libation, and one he-goat as a sin offering. The priest shall make expiation for the whole Israelite community and they shall be forgiven; for it was an error, and for their error they have brought their offering, an offering by fire to Hashem and their sin offering before Hashem.” (Bamidbar 15:22-25)

At the end of this week’s parsha, the Torah instructs us as to the proper procedure for when the nation sins as a group, misguided by its leadership. The Sages tell us that these verses are referring to when the judges and leaders of the generation mistakenly permit some form of idolatrous worship. The leaders of the nation, the Nesiim, are to offer a sacrifice in their roles as representatives of the people, atoning for this grievous misdeed.

R. Shmshon Raphael Hirsch notes that this seems to conflict with an earlier description of communal atonement, in Vayikra (4:13-15): “If it is the whole community of Israel that has erred and the matter escapes the notice of the congregation, so that they do any of the things which by Hashem’s commandments ought not to be done, and they realize their guilt—when the sin through which they incurred guilt becomes known, the congregation shall offer a bull of the herd as a sin offering, and bring it before the Tent of Meeting. The elders of the community shall lay their hands upon the head of the bull before Hashem, and the bull shall be slaughtered before Hashem.”

Here, only one offering is described; in our parsha there are two: a burnt-offering and a sin-offering. Furthermore, our parsha mentions the burnt-offering before the sin-offering, and our Sages tell us that the burnt-offering was indeed offered first. This implies that the burnt-offering is actually part of the atonement for the sin.

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R. Hirsch explains that idolatry is not like other sins. Thus the Sages comment on the words “any one of the commandments (lit. all of the commandments)”: “Which sin is equivalent to all the others? You must say avodah zarah, idolatry.” When the Jewish people worship idols, they deny the validity of all of the Torah--whether intentionally or not. It is necessary for them to seek a broader sort of atonement. The burnt-offering, which is the quintessential korban, symbolizes the most essential and basic level of Judaism: our individual connection to God. We must begin with that, and only then can we proceed to atone for our sin.

“I don't want your Garden of Eden, I don't want your World-to-Come, I just want You!”

R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Asher Coleman

