

Tzav

Burning Man

And the Kohen who will offer the burnt offering of a man...

Vayikra 7:8

The Torah almost sounds like the Kohen is offering the man, himself. In fact, the verse is actually read by some¹ to be talking about an actual man being offered, albeit metaphysically. We find that Yitzchak's soul actually entered the ram that was offered at the *Akeidah*, and he was slaughtered. It was really him in some spiritual way. Ramban² teaches that when a person is offering a sacrifice, he is meant to envision that he is the one who deserves to be sacrificing his life. That would seem easy enough. But what does it, in fact, mean for a man to offer himself as a sacrifice, as Yitzchak did?

And what sort of sacrifice are we talking about? Our Sages³ teach us that in the heavenly Temple, the angel Michael is there and he is the Kohen who offers up the souls of the righteous. We find that when Hashem told the Jewish people about the Mishkan that they were to build, He told them,⁴ "I will meet with them there, in the partition, and it will be holy through My honor." Rashi⁵ explains that this, in fact, means that the Mishkan will be made holy through the deaths of the noble people Nadav and Avihu, who would die on the day that the Mishkan would be inaugurated.⁶ We learn that it was not coincidental that Nadav and Avihu rushed into their deaths on the day of the inauguration of the Mishkan, but we learn that it was fundamental. When Hashem told the Jewish people about the Mishkan, it was to be a Mishkan that would claim the lives of Nadav and Avihu. That was absolutely basic to the Mishkan. But why?

The Mishkan was built as a place where we could offer our sacrifices to Hashem. It was a place where Hashem could dwell among us, a place where we could relate to Him. The building of the Mishkan was, in fact, an act that brought us atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf. Somehow, we are meant to understand that after we worshiped the Calf, we then needed the correction that would come about by building a Mishkan. That is one thing that atoned for the Jewish people. Aaron's punishment and what brought his atonement for his involvement in the sin of the Golden Calf was losing his children Nadav and Avihu.⁷ In what way did this

1 Rema Mifano, *Assarah Maamaros, Chikur Din* 2:8 and 4:19. See also Yalkut Reuveni to Tzav.

2 Vaykira 1:9

3 Tosafos to Menachos 110a, s.v. *umichael*, quoting a Midrash. See Bamidbar Rabbah 12:12, Chagiga 12b, and *Amudei Chaim* of R. Chaim Palagi, *Amudei Avodah* 16, p. 328 (Shuvi Nafshi ed.).

4 Shemos 29:43

5 S.v. *bichvodi*, quoting Zvachim 115b.

6 Vayikra 10:1

7 Children's deaths can only be a punishment for their fathers' sins when they, too, share that same sin, according to Sanhedrin 27b.

correct the sin of the Golden Calf, and what is its connection to the Mishkan?

When Yitzchak was offered up, his soul entered into the ram that was being offered, and it was as though he was offered, himself, as a sacrifice. Hashem told Avraham, “*kach na*” – please take.⁸ Rema Mifano⁹ teaches us that the word *na*, which means “please,” is made up of the two letters *nun* and *alef*, the *nun* hinting to Nadav and the *alef* to Avihu, for, their souls were there at the time of the *Akeidah*. What were they doing there? He tells us that, in fact, the Satan told the angel Michael that Yitzchak should die since “his children will eventually sin at the *Egel* [Golden Calf].” The Arizal¹⁰ also taught us that it was the incredible accomplishment of the *Akeidah* that ingrained in the Jewish people the depth in their souls, which allowed them to survive the sin of the Golden Calf and not be wiped out. The word *svach*, which means “thicket,” used in the verse to describe where the ram was caught at the *Akeidah*,¹¹ is made up of the letters *samech*, *bes* and *chof*, which are the three letters that, respectively, precede the *ayin*, *gimmel* and *lamed* of the word *egel*, which means “calf.” It is only the merit of Avraham and Yitzchak and that little ram in the thicket that gave the Jewish people the incredible ability to not be ruined by the Golden Calf incident.

Here is why: Serving Hashem is what Torah is about. We do not create a “god” based upon what we need. The very opposite is true. We are meant to relate to Hashem, and Truth because it is true. We do not gauge our needs, and then act. Avraham could have thought about how much he needed his son, both for his own dreams and for those of his future offspring. But since we give ourselves up entirely as a sacrifice to Hashem, we do not get to choose. Paradoxically, our Sages teach us, “The only way that one can truly exist is by practically killing himself!”¹² You begin to exist when you stop being self-centered and let yourself join the Infinite Creator. Only then is your existence real. When Yitzchak made himself into a real sacrifice, he did something that was the very opposite of the creation of the Golden Calf. The Jewish people felt lost without Moshe, and they needed someone to lead them. So they created a god for that. Other religions have created gods to fit their needs. Whenever the Jews worshiped idols, all they were really doing was creating gods who would then meet their immediate needs, says the Gemara.¹³ The *Akeidah* was the very opposite of Golden Calf. The giving up of oneself for the Truth, is what the Jewish people had ingrained in them by Yitzchak. That lesson gave them the strength to not be ruined entirely by the Golden Calf. They followed a false system to gratify their momentary needs, but it didn’t really penetrate their souls, for the *svach* came long before the *Egel*.

Nadav and Avihu did something similar. They gave themselves up so completely that they

8 Bereishis 22:2

9 *Maamar Henefesh* 4:15

10 Quoted by Chida in his *Dvash Lifi*, *alef*, 16.

11 Bereishis 22:13

12 Tamid 32:2; see Rashi there. See also R. Chaim Palagi’s *Hachaim Yoducha* to Tehillim 22, and the Introduction to *Chelkan BiChaim*, quoting the *Olillos Efraim*.

13 Sanhedrin 63b

became actual human sacrifices.¹⁴ This was a great act, and it is what colored the nature of the Mishkan. The Mishkan was the place where we would offer sacrifices to God. The most important thing about those sacrifices was that they be sacrifices of people. The sacrifice that is just a way to get the gods to do what you want is a hollow one, and just another Golden Calf. The truest sacrifice is when one admits to God that He is in charge, and that we, as humans, have no say in defining right and wrong. When a person looks to the Truth first, and only after that, makes his next decisions, then he has followed in the path of Yitzchak, and the path of Nadav and Avihu. The potential for their act – that act that would define the very essence of the Mishkan as a true place of worship and correct the mistake of the Golden Calf – was rooted in the true offering of a man, which was done by Yitzchak.

Only when we are prepared to completely sacrifice our own attitudes and look first to what is right and what is wrong can we truly have the humility that we need to avoid being wiped out in this world. Only then can we bring back our Temple, and truly offer the sacrifices that matter most. But first, we must be prepared to burn our egos, and let them incinerate on the altar of the Truth

14 The most fascinating thing about all of this may perhaps be the fact that the act of Nadav and Avihu was an act that they were not commanded to do. That is, in fact, what was lacking in their act. It was complete self-sacrifice to Hashem, and yet, Hashem had not asked for it. That paradox is what is behind their deaths, for the Torah emphasizes that it was a “strange fire that Hashem did not ask for.” It was the kink that needed to be worked out. It was corrected, teach the kabbalistic works (see *Zohar*, vol. 3, 217a), by Pinchas, when he rushed in to kill Zimri and Cozbi, which was also something that could not be commanded, as is clear from Sanhedrin 82a. See this and more in the comments of *Ramasayim Tzofim*, vol. 2, p. 35a. See also Rema Mifano in *Maamar Hanefesh*, 4:15, where he also teaches that the word *baayil* (the ram) is made up of the same letters as “Elijah,” for Pinchas and Elijah were the same person – and that “Pinchas” (when spelled with a *yod*) shares the same *gematria* as “Yitzchak.” See also his *Chikur Din* quoted earlier, where he adds that the belt of Eliyahu (Melachim II, 1:8) was from the leather of the ram from the *Akeidah*, as taught in Pirkei Dirabbi Eliezer.