TSAV: No To Religious Hypocrisy

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And HaShem spoke to Moses, saying: “When someone sins and commits a mistake by deceiving his neighbor in matters of theft or extortion, he must return what he took by stealing or what he obtained by extortion, and [only] then will he bring to the priest his atonement offering for HaShem.”

Leviticus 5:22-25

SACRIFICE AND REPENTANCE
This week’s Parashah describes the qorbanot, the sacrifices, and offerings presented in the Mishkan or Tabernacle, serving various functions. Some were part of the daily service in the Temple of Jerusalem, others were offered during festivals, and some qorbanot were individual offerings to thank God or as atonement for a committed transgression. Let’s examine an example from this last category. The Torah describes the asham gezelot, a sacrifice brought when someone had stolen, repented, and confessed their fault. In this case, the sacrifice was the “last” step in their atonement, the manner in which their fault was ultimately rectified. There are two essential points about this qorban that teach us about the moral stature of the Jewish people and our Tora.

ALL VARIETIES OF THEFT
First, the Tora describes various forms of theft. Beyond direct theft, the biblical text discusses, for instance, the case of someone who finds something that doesn’t belong to them, an object that can’t be identified as to whom it belongs, such as a coin or bill found on the street. There’s no way to know to whom it belongs because bills don’t have

names, addresses, or identifying marks that can be used to find their owner. However, there are objects that one can determine to whom they belong, like a wallet. Suppose I see a wallet, a cell phone, or any identifiable object, and instead of trying to find and return it to its owner. In that case, I keep it for myself; the Tora considers it “theft.” A second example is osheq, which is oppressing a person financially. The Gemara cites a particular case as the most common example of this type of oppression. The Sages describe it with the Hebrew words “LEKH VASHOB, LEKH VASHOB,” meaning “go (now) and come back (tomorrow).” This happens; for instance, when I owe money to someone, that person comes to collect their money, and even though I have the money to pay them, I tell them, “Go and come back another day.” This action also required an expiatory sacrifice because it is classified by the Torah as “theft,” since I retained money that doesn’t belong to me, even temporarily, and “stole” time from my creditor.

SACRIFICE: THE LAST ACT

The Torah also clarifies that the qorban or sacrifice should be offered only after what was stolen has been restored. Thus, the Tora asserts that the qorban, a religious act, cannot replace an act of justice, such as restitution. Just as on Yom Kippur, I cannot pretend that God forgives my faults towards my neighbor unless I first obtain their forgiveness. In this case, I must settle accounts with the victim of my crime, and only then am I entitled to seek my religious expiation. The Midrash Tanhuma explicitly formulates this idea in the words of David haMelekh, in Tehilim, Psalm 24. There, the King of Israel asks: □ □□□ □□□□ □□’ “Who deserves to ascend the mountain of HaShem and stand in His holy place?” Essentially, asking who deserves God’s attention and closeness. The immediate answer is □□□□□ □□□, “a person whose hands are clean” of theft or robbery, adds the Midrash (Tanchuma, Parashah 1). God does not accept sacrifices or appeals from the corrupt who have not yet made restitution for what they took from others or have not taken responsibility for their

mistakes or transgressions.

Our Parasha, Tehilim, and the Midrash deliver the same message: a resounding “NO” to religious hypocrisy, which was not uncommon among other peoples and religions.