



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Vayikra 5775

By Margalit C. Rosenthal

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In Parashat Vayikra, God calls to Moses to instruct the people of Israel regarding how to atone for certain sins through appropriate sacrifices in the Tabernacle. As Vayikra unfolds, the category of inadvertent sins, those a person commits that she does not even *realize* she was committing, is discussed:

*“When a person unwittingly incurs guilt in regard to any of the Lord’s commandments about things not to be done, and does one of them—”<sup>1</sup>*

This verse introduces two sections that the Etz Hayim refers to as “expiatory sacrifices,” those forms of sacrifice that are intended as atonement for and only effective for “unintended offenses.” These can be offenses committed by an individual, a High Priest, or the entire community. These sins lack malice or negative intention and may even have good or benign intentions behind them. Scholars ask: Then why must one atone? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that these inadvertent sins are caused by ignorance or negligence.<sup>2</sup> That is, the sinner should have been, and is obligated to be, more aware and more knowledgeable.

The atonement instructions for these inadvertent sins not only require an initial recognition and admission of guilt, but this category of sin also pushes us to consider and take responsibility for the unintended consequences of our actions.

Consider the action of buying a particular material product. The motivation may be as simple as “I enjoy this product.” This is fairly benign, but what if that product was made by underpaid laborers in a country that does not uphold basic human rights? Ignorance of how these goods were produced has led to the inadvertent support of these unjust practices. Vayikra suggests that we are liable both for these unintended consequences as well as for our own lack of knowledge. Vayikra also provides atonement instructions that push us to recognize our ignorance and work towards becoming better informed.

It would be impossible for us to recognize and redress every specific injustice or unintended consequence of our actions. However, we can work towards systemic changes that address these injustices. American Jewish World Service (AJWS) calls on its supporters to spend time and energy learning, writing letters, organizing, and advocating for human rights around the world to address global injustice. Many who are active in this work do it out of passion for justice. But some are also driven to act because of the guilt they feel for the unintended injustices their lifestyle may cause. Many activists are compelled by both.

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<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 4.2 Etz Hayim Chumash

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks <http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5769-vayikra-the-sin-offering/>

Moreover, as AJWS continues to fight for Congress to pass the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA) to ensure the rights of women and girls, does it ultimately matter what compels our elected officials to support the bill? Victories of justice may sometimes be achieved through sheer passion, but some victories may result from a society struggling to atone for injustices—injustices born of past ignorance. Often such victories result from a messy combination of passion, atonement, *and* politics.

Vayikra seems to suggest that regardless of our motivation, it is our actions that ultimately matter most. Jewish tradition recognizes that human beings make mistakes; we commit these inadvertent sins. Judaism also compels us to be more responsible in the future, by offering (and requiring) atonement—but this can only happen after we've recognized our complicity in these sins and learned something from them. Together, we are recognizing and learning from our inadvertent role in injustice, taking steps to resolve our ignorance regarding human strife. The first step to atonement is awareness and understanding; the next step is action: advocacy for policies that protect and uphold human rights.



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