



# Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYIKRA • ויקרא

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** ז"צ

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah.

An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays and videos were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks ז"ל in 5771 (2010–2011). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) (2023–2024), created to inspire intergenerational learning on the parsha.

## The Dimensions of Sin

Our parsha, which deals with a variety of sacrifices, devotes an extended section to the *chattat*, the sin offering, as brought by different individuals: first the High Priest (Lev. 4:3–12), then the community as a whole (Lev. 4:13–21), then a leader (Lev. 4:22–26) and finally an ordinary individual (Lev. 4:27–35).

The whole passage sounds strange to modern ears, not only because sacrifices have not been offered for almost two millennia since the destruction of the Second Temple, but also because it is hard for us to understand the very concepts of sin and atonement as they are dealt with in the Torah.

The puzzle is that the sins for which an offering had to be brought were those committed inadvertently, *be-shogeg*. Either the sinner had forgotten the law, or some relevant fact. To give a contemporary example: suppose the phone rings on Shabbat and you answer it. You would only be liable for a sin offering if either you forgot the law that you may not answer a phone on Shabbat, or you forgot the fact that the day was Shabbat. If, for a moment, you thought it was Friday or Sunday. So your sin was inadvertent.

This is the kind of act that we don't tend to see as a sin at all. It was a mistake. You forgot. You did not mean to do anything wrong. And when you realise that inadvertently you have broken Shabbat, you are more likely to feel regret than remorse. You feel sorry but not guilty.

We think of a sin as something we did intentionally, yielding to temptation perhaps, or in a moment of rebellion. That is what Jewish law calls *be-zadon* in biblical Hebrew or *be-mezid* in rabbinic Hebrew. That is the kind of act we would have thought calls for a sin offering. But actually, such an act cannot be atoned for by an offering at all. So how are we to make sense of the sin offering?

The answer is that there are three dimensions of wrongdoing between us and God. The first is guilt and shame. When we sin deliberately and intentionally, we know inwardly that we have done wrong. Our conscience – the voice of God within the human heart – tells us that we have done wrong. That is what happened to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after they had sinned. They felt shame. They tried to hide. For that kind of deliberate, conscious, intentional sin, the only

adequate moral response is *teshuvah*, repentance. This involves (a) remorse, *charatah*, (b) confession, *vidui*, and (c) *kabbalat le-atid*, a resolution never to commit the sin again. The result is *selichah umechilah*, God forgives us. A mere sacrifice is not enough.

However, there is a second dimension. Regardless of guilt and responsibility, if we commit a sin we have objectively transgressed a boundary. The word *chet* means to miss the mark, to stray, to deviate from the proper path. We have committed an act that somehow disturbs the moral balance of the world. To take another secular example, imagine that your car has a faulty speedometer. You are caught driving at 50 miles per hour in a 30 mile an hour zone. You tell the policeman who stops you that you didn't know. Your speedometer was only showing 30 miles per hour. He may sympathise, but you have still broken the law. You have transgressed the speed limit, albeit unknowingly, and you will have to pay the penalty.

That is what a sin offering is. According to Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch it is a penalty for carelessness. According to the *Sefer Ha-Chinuch* it is an educational and preventive measure. Deeds, in Judaism, are the way we train the mind. The fact that you have had to pay the price by bringing a sacrifice will make you take greater care in future.

Rabbi Isaac Arama (who lived in Spain in the 15<sup>th</sup> century) says that the difference between an intentional and an unintentional sin is that in the former case, both the body and the soul were at fault. In the case of an unintentional sin only the body was at fault, not the soul. Therefore a physical sacrifice helps, since it was only the physical act of the body that was in the wrong. A physical sacrifice cannot atone for a deliberate sin, because it cannot rectify a wrong in the soul.

What the sacrifice achieves is *kapparah*, not forgiveness as such but a “covering over” or

obliteration of the sin. Noah was told to “cover” (*ve-chapharta*) the surface of the Ark with pitch (Gen. 6:14). The cover of the Ark in the Tabernacle was called *kapporet* (Lev. 25:17). Once a sin has been symbolically covered over, it is forgiven, but as the Malbim points out, in such cases the verb for forgiveness, *s-l-ch*, is always in the passive (*venislach*: Lev. 4:20, Lev. 4:26, Lev. 4:31). The forgiveness is not direct, as it is in the case of repentance, but indirect, a consequence of the sacrifice.

The third dimension of sin is that it defiles. It leaves a stain on your character. Isaiah, in the presence of God, feels that he has “unclean lips” (Is. 6:5). King David says to God, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” – “*me-chatati tahareni*” (Ps. 51:4).

About Yom Kippur the Torah says:

“On that day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you [*letaher etchem*]. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins.”

*Lev. 16:30*

Ramban says that this is the logic of the sin offering. All sins, even those committed inadvertently, have consequences. They each “leave a stain on the soul and constitute a blemish on it, and the soul is only fit to meet its Maker when it has been cleansed from all sin” (*Ramban to Lev. 4:2*).

The result of the sin offering is *tehora*, cleansing, purification. So the sin offering is not about guilt but about other dimensions of transgression. It is one of the stranger features of Western civilisation, due in part to Pauline Christianity, and partly to the influence of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, that we tend to think about morality and spirituality as matters almost exclusively to do with the mind and its motives.

But our acts leave traces in the world. And even unintentional sins can leave us feeling defiled.

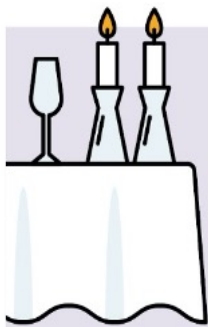
The law of the sin offering reminds us that we can do harm unintentionally, and this can have psychological consequences. The best way of putting things right is to make a sacrifice: to do something that costs us something.

In ancient times, that took the form of a sacrifice offered on the altar at the Temple. Nowadays the best way of doing so is to give money to charity (*tzedakah*) or perform an act of kindness to others (*chessed*). The Prophet said so long ago, in God's name:

“For I desire loving-kindness, not sacrifice.”

*Hosea 6:6*

Charity and kindness are our substitutes for sacrifice and, like the sin offering of old, they help mend what is broken in the world and in our soul.



## Around the Shabbat Table

1. In the absence of the Mishkan and korbanot (offerings), what are the modern equivalents of making a 'sacrifice' for our unintentional wrongdoings?
2. In what ways do consequences educate or prevent future mistakes in our lives, and in our community?
3. Think of other times that people brought korbanot in the Tanach. What kinds of emotions were they trying to communicate to Hashem?

● These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at [RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/vayikra/the-dimensions-of-sin/](https://RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/vayikra/the-dimensions-of-sin/)