

The Pending Guilt-offering and the Global Climate

by Rabbi Shlomo Levin and Jonathan Neril¹

The parsha of Vayikra is dedicated by Mira Chaya Mellman, in the memory of the grandmothers for whom I am named: Rebecca Warach, Mollye Shapiro, and Clara Mellman, z”l.

This week’s Torah portion of *Vayikra* describes the various voluntary and obligatory sacrifices that G-d commands the Jewish people to bring. Two types of offerings, the *chatat* (sin offering) and the *asham* (guilt offering), provide atonement for unintentional transgressions against the Torah. After both of these offerings are described, in Leviticus 4-5:16, the Torah presents another, puzzling form of the guilt offering:

If a person sins and commits one of the commandments of the Lord which may not be committed, but he does not know, he is guilty, and he shall bear his transgression. He shall bring an unblemished ram from the flock, with the value for a guilt offering, to the kohen (priest). The kohen shall then make atonement for his unintentional sin which he committed and did not know, and he shall be forgiven. It is a guilt offering he has incurred guilt before the Lord. (Leviticus 5:17-19, Judaica Press Translation)

These verses elicit many questions. We have already read that the sin and guilt offerings atone for unintentional misdeeds; how does this offering differ? What does it mean, that the person “does not know?” Why is this action uniquely described as incurring guilt “before G-d?”

The Talmud reads these verses as describing a very specific type of sacrifice, called *asham talui*- an “undetermined guilt” offering. As opposed to the other sin and guilt offerings, which are brought when a person's action has transgressed a commandment (even if that was only realized after the fact), the *asham talui* is brought when it cannot be conclusively determined whether the act was, in fact, a transgression at all.

Rashi gives the following example of such a case³: [a piece of] prohibited animal fat (הלב) and [a piece of] permissible animal fat (שומן) are placed before someone, and, thinking that both were permissible [fats], the person ate one. Then, people told that person, “One of those pieces was הלב, prohibited fat!” Now, if the person knew that the piece consumed was the forbidden piece they would bring a regular sin offering. But since it is unknown which piece was eaten, the permitted or the forbidden, the *asham talui* offering is proscribed.

But why does one need to bring any offering at all? The 16th century Italian commentator Sforno⁴ even suggests that maybe a person in this situation would worry that bringing a sacrifice would be wrong. Since maybe the permitted piece of meat was actually eaten and there is no sin, this sacrificial offering would be unnecessary and therefore invalid. It would be bringing unconsecrated meat into the Temple.

Sforno writes that regardless of which piece of meat was actually consumed, even if it luckily was the right one, this person is still guilty of not paying closer attention to their actions and making sure that their food was kosher before eating. The *asham talui* teaches us that we may not engage in careless or risky behavior. We must take responsibility for questionable actions even in the absence of conclusive proof that we have done something wrong.

The logic of the *asham talui* offering is relevant to environmental consciousness. There are many instances where the negative environmental impact of our actions is not immediately evident or scientifically verified. Does shutting the water while I brush my teeth matter? Will carpooling to work *really* affect air quality? These kinds of doubts often prevent well-meaning people from making changes that could positively affect the environment.

Perhaps the most significant example is humanity's impact on the global climate. The basic premise of this impact is that modern industrial society has increased greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, with 85% of emissions caused by burning fossil fuels for energy.⁶ This increase is purported to affect the makeup of the earth's atmosphere, impacting climate.

For years, debate raged whether there was any real connection between human activity, greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. Today, most reliable scientific sources agree that the earth is getting warmer, and human activity contributes to that warming.⁸ The uncertainty that remains generally concerns the degree of impact and the effectiveness of our potential response to drastic change-- that is, whether human adaptation (sea walls and dikes, population transfers from low-lying regions, hurricane and other disaster response and rebuilding) will be possible, or whether climate change will threaten the very fabric of human civilization.⁹ According to the most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, (the most authoritative body on climate change science in the world, comprised of hundreds of scientists from tens of countries), "It is *very likely* that hot extremes, heat waves, and heavy precipitation events will continue to become more frequent."¹⁰ The US Environmental Protection Agency states that, by the end of this century, the average surface temperature of the earth is likely to increase within the range of 2.5 to 10.4°F. This means an increase in warming up to ten times that recorded in the 20th century, potentially the highest warming in the last 10,000 years.¹¹

If the warming stays in the low end of this range, the consequences may not be severe. The middle range forecast will likely be quite negative for humanity. According to the upper range scenario, the consequences would be dire: warming would melt polar ice caps, causing massive flooding, wreaking havoc on agriculture, and fueling powerful, destructive storms.¹²

In spite of the wealth of evidence from various US and international government agencies, skepticism still exists. Some say that it would be rash to take costly measures to stop the release of greenhouse gases while there is still scientific uncertainty as to the extent of their affect. Even if the naysayers are right, and global warming is not a pressing problem, reducing our need for fossil fuels would still result in positive benefits-- air will be cleaner, the chance of oil spills and other disasters will be reduced, pristine lands will not be threatened by drilling plans, and energy politics will no longer be at the center of global affairs.

The very message of the *asham talui* offering is that atonement must be sought *even in the absence of certainty*. Since what is at stake could be the continuation of life as we know it, our use of fossil fuels has tremendous bearing on how we serve G-d and act as stewards of Creation¹³. Thus, as Sforno says, we should avoid behaviors that might bring us into guilt. Burning fossil fuels to support the global industrial economy has led us into just such a situation, and will continue to do so if we do not respond accordingly. The Torah thus underlies a contemporary moral and political guiding value, the precautionary principle. It implies "...a willingness to take action in advance of scientific proof [or] evidence of the need for the proposed action on the grounds that further delay will prove ultimately most costly to society and nature, and, in the longer term, selfish and unfair to future generations."¹⁴

The Midrash to our verse teaches, “Rabbi Yose the Galilean says: Scripture punishes someone who did not know [whether he had sinned or not]; how much more so will Scripture punish someone who does indeed know!”¹⁵ Thus our tradition emphasizes how a person's sin becomes more severe as awareness increases. Today, a global consensus of scientists has become more and more adamant about the urgent need for human action to curb global climate change. Even if we are not certain of the long-term impacts of global warming today, we must prepare for the future, or know that our guilt is before G-d.

Suggested Practical Lifestyle Tips:

1. Calculate your carbon footprint. This can be done online at websites like <http://www.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.html>
2. Consider the frequency of your air travel. Flying contributes even more to climate change than driving because much more of the carbon emitted by the plane goes directly to the atmosphere.
3. Try carpooling to work or riding public transportation once a week. Reducing our reliance on the personal automobile for all of our transportation needs will be important to slowing the rate of global climate change and will also reduce our reliance on foreign oil.

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge Sareet Benayahu and Shimshon Stuart Siegel for their involvement in editing this piece

³ Rashi (France, 2nd century) Vayikra 5:17

⁴ Sforno, Vayikra 5:17

⁶ EPA, Executive Summary of the Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990-2005. <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads06/07ES.pdf>

⁷ Dissent still exists, though. Notable is the recent film *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, a response to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*

⁸ See the 2007 Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), specifically the Working Group I Report "The Physical Science Basis" available online at the <http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-wg1.htm>

⁹ See also the IPCC's *Working Group II Report "Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability,"* available online at <http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-wg2.htm>

¹⁰ IPCC. *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. page 16. Also see chart on page 9.* Online at <http://www.ipcc.ch/SPM2feb07.pdf>,

¹¹ Environmental Protection Agency website. <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/science/futuretc.html>

¹² Although we can not necessarily blame global warming for Hurricane Katrina, she is a perfect example of how devastating storms can be. For a list of other predicted effects of projected climate change, see http://www.grida.no/climate/ipcc_tar/wg2/009.htm

¹³ Because of the burning of fossil fuels contributes to global climate change in an indirect way (for example, due to a time-lapse between emissions from cars and factories and the greenhouse-gases' entry into the atmosphere), a Jewish law would not see fit to punish a person in a formal legal sense for damages that climate change brings on. Yet actions that contribute to damages even indirectly are frowned upon by the Sages for those who seek to live in resonance with G-d's will.

¹⁴ Precaution, uncertainty and causation in environmental decisions. *Environ Int.* 2003 Apr;29(1):1-19. Ricci PF, Rice D, Ziagos J, Cox LA Jr, available online at http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez?db=pubmed&cmd=Retrieve&dopt=AbstractPlus&list_uids=12605931&itool=iconabstr&itool=pubmed_DocSum&query_hl=5, cited on Wikipedia.com

¹⁵ Torat Kohanim, Chovah, 12:7, quoted in Rashi to Vayikra 5:17, translation by The Judaica Press. (Torat Kohanim is generally acknowledged to have been compiled by the tannaitic sage R. Hiyva around 200 CE)