

Parashah #78
Torah: Leviticus 5:1–26
Haftarah: Zechariah 5:3-6:15
Apostolic: James 5:16–20 and Matthew 18:15-17
Beit Brachot, Washington, NJ

Introduction

Parasha #78 concerns itself with yet another kind of offering that was available for the Israelites to bring. This all began, of course, back in chapter 1. From there was read about:

- The Whole Burnt (Olah) Offering (Chapter 1)
- The Grain (Minchah) or Tribute Offering (Chapter 2)
- The Shalmim (Peace) Offering (Chapter 3)
- The Sin (Chatat) Offering (Chapter 4)

A. Comparison of Chapters 4–5 of Leviticus¹

Chapters 4 and 5 are very similar to each other, rightly so, because they both discuss offerings one could bring when one sinned. Yet, upon closer examination, we find that these chapters are really quite different in several ways.

1. The *ritual* of both chapters is different, though they contain certain key similarities, which we will discuss later.
2. The *sacrificial animals* were different.
The animals permitted to be offered also differed in both the Sin Offering of chapter 4 and the offerings here in chapter 5.
3. The *circumstances* in which they were offered differed.
In chapter 4, the offerings seem to focus on any kind of sin, both intentional both unintentional. Here in chapter 5, the offerings are for unintentional sin.
4. The *functions* of the offerings were different.
5. The names denote different sacrifices.
Finally, as we see in the text of Leviticus, these differences contributed to the different names for the offerings.

Now, here in chapter 5 we are presented with what is called an “*Asham* (אָשָׁם) Offering.” Our commentary this week, therefore, delves into what this Asham Offering is. Commentator Gordon Wenham provides a great outline of chapter 5 which will also partially serve as teaching outline. Here it is:²

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| I. Purification Offerings for Sins of Omission | 5:1–13 |
| 5:1–7 Offering: A Lamb or A Goat | |
| 5:8–13 Offering: Flour | |
| II. Reparation Offerings for Inadvertent Sins | 5:14–19 |
| 5:14–16. For Inadvertent Sin | |
| 5:17–19 For Known Offenses | |
| III. Sin Offering for Purposeful Sins | 5:20–26 |
| IV. Lessons from Leviticus 5 | |

1. Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*, 105.

2. *Ibid.*, 97.

I. Purification Offerings for Sins of Omission 5:1–13

The text in Leviticus is not complicated. It first speaks of sins where we forgot to do something we were committed to do. These are sins which “slips his memory.”

A. Failure to Fulfill the Role of a Witness 5:1

It was the duty of a witness to come forward and give his testimony in the interest of truth and justice. In Israel all the people were to be involved in seeing that justice was done. For society to function with God’s kind of justice, therefore, witnesses to crimes and even legal transactions must fulfill their role in society. The Torah takes this so seriously that failure to do so was considered a crime in itself. Therefore, the one who violated the role of a witness was liable to make it right with both God and man. “In Israel all the people were to be involved in seeing that justice was done. Not to witness was a sin.”³

B. Touching Something That is Tam’ei 5:2–3

The offense described in **5:2–3** is probably one of the most difficult for our modern, western minds to comprehend. That difficulty is reflected by how the Hebrew words are translated. The Hebrew word in question is *tam’ei* (טמא). It is most frequently translated as “unclean” or “impure.” Yet those terms really do not convey the essence of the term. In fact, I am not sure we in today’s western world can find any adequate term that will rightfully convey the essence of *tam’ei*.

We are told that one who touches anything that is *tam’ei* is considered to be guilty. Then the text gives some examples, such as the carcass of an unclean animal, or the carcass of unclean cattle, or a carcass of unclean swarming things (**5:2**), or if he touches human uncleanness (**5:3**). *Tam’ei* is an important word for Leviticus. We will see it many times later.

From these renderings we get the impression that something makes us physically dirty. For example, as much as we respect commentator R. Laird Harris, he expresses what so many often mistakenly think about *tam’ei* when he writes, “The laws of cleanness (vv.2-3) were partly for public health (cf. chs. 11-15), but they were given sanction in the tabernacle. The priests were the public health officers. Uncleanness demanded ritual cleansing.”⁴ This sounds good, but unfortunately, the condition of being *tam’ei* does not primarily have to do with public health. It is not as simple as that.

We should note that in **5:3** when we read about “human uncleanness” it “refers to such forms of impurity as affect a woman after childbirth (12:2), a person who experiences a bodily discharge (15:2, 19), or a man who has sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman (18:19). It also applies to a person who has eaten the meat of a dead animal or an animal torn by beasts (17:15–16).”⁵

3. R. Laird Harris, *Leviticus (Expositor’s Bible Commentary)*, comments on Leviticus 5:1.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus (Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary)*, 27.

A Sanctuary Problem

Gordon Wenham, in our opinion, captures the essence of being *tam'ei* (or its opposite, *tahor*) best in the following remarks that he makes. He says that human sin causes what he calls a subsidiary problem: “pollution and defilement” to God’s Sanctuary.⁶ He continues to explain that “Sin not only angers God and deprives Him of his due, but it also makes His sanctuary unclean. A holy God cannot dwell amid uncleanness.”⁷ Perhaps he should have used the word “unacceptable” instead of “unclean.”

It seems that when someone comes into physical contact with the realm of sin and death, that renders the person unable to participate in God’s sanctuary. That is more to the essence of what the word signifies Participation can only happen when the person offers the prescribed offering, as indicated by Leviticus. This is so, even when it might be done by accident or when the person did not mean it. That is the thrust of **5:3**. Hence, “The purification offering purifies the place of worship, so that God may be present among His people. This interpretation of the term seems to be compatible with its root meaning, and to explain the rituals of blood sprinkling peculiar to it.”⁸

C. Unfulfilled Oaths 5:4–5

The text continues to list another occasion where a possible sin was committed by omission. That is when a person does not fulfill his/her promise or oath (**5:4–5**). In this case, the person may simply have forgotten that a promise was made. However, forgetting it does not leave the person guiltless. As one writer says, “One must fulfill an oath, and if one neglects to do so or allows the matter to escape his notice, he offends God, in whose name the oath was taken, as well as those affected by it. As Deuteronomy 23:24 states, “. . . you must fulfill what has crossed your lips,” a thought echoed in Ecclesiastes **5:3–5**.”⁹ This would also apply to anyone who swears an oath thoughtlessly and perhaps makes what might be an “unlawful” oath.

D. A Guilty Conscience

Commentator John E Hartly provides an important insight into the nature of the sins committed in these verses. He notes,

The primary way that one learns about his unintentional sin [then] is through the dynamic of guilt. Even though a person sins unintentionally, he incurs guilt (*אשם*, *asham*). The guilt eventually works its way into his conscience so that he feels “guilty.” The belief here is that psychological guilt awakens one to an inadvertent sin. Such guilt is not the mere figment of a person’s imagination, however, as soon as one becomes conscience of his error, he must rid himself of his guilt by presenting a purification offering.”¹⁰ Hartley, 67.

D. The Procedure 5:5

As with many things in Leviticus, there is a formal procedure regarding what happened when someone wanted to make it right when they committed a sin of omission. This procedure is mostly in **5:6–13**. It involves the following:

6. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 95.

7. *Ibid*, 89.

8. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 89.

9. Levine, *JPS: Leviticus*, 28.

10. John E. Hartley, *Leviticus (Word Biblical Commentary)*, 67.

1. Confess the Offense 5:5

The entire process from sin to forgiveness does not hinge on bringing the offering. Rather the first thing mentioned is the act of confession in **5:5**. This was essential. Moreover, “it is to be a public confession, and it may accompany his sacrificial offering.”¹¹ This was probably the most difficult part of the restoration process. We are reminded of 1 John 1:8–9 when we read about the necessity of confession. “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

2. Bring Offerings 5:6 (A Priest Makes Atonement)

Next comes the required offerings. Leviticus lists three offerings that must be part of the restoration process: the asham offering (**5:6**), the sin offering (**5:7–9**) and the burnt offering (**5:7–9**) are all part of the process. The very nature of these offerings gives us the fuller picture of how God views sins of omission. While it is true that these certainly might have been accidental sins, nevertheless the Lord indicates that they are missing the mark anyway and must come to light.

Hence, first the asham offering is offered (**5:6**). “As a noun, asham (אָשָׁם) means both ‘reparation’ and ‘reparation offering’. As a verb it means both ‘be guilty’ and ‘feel guilty’.”¹² “Its basic meaning is the ‘guilt, responsibility, or culpability’ that a person must bear for having done something wrong.”¹³ Thus, we can see that even if someone simply forgets and inadvertently misses the mark, the Holy One still considers that behaviour, or that statement, as if something was done wrong and the guilty one owes a debt to the person offended and to the Lord.

Then **5:7–9** says that along with an asham offering the guilty one must also bring a sin offering. This is denoted by the term *haChatt'at* (חַטָּאת). This was discussed earlier in Leviticus. The term is related to the word *chatta* (חָטָא), which means “missing the mark.” It is the most common Hebrew word that is translated as “sin.” This is yet another indication that a sin of omission was still a sin, a missing the mark.

The final kind of offering, mentioned in **5:7–9**, is the olah offering (עֹלָה). This was the first offering mentioned in Leviticus. Its basic thrust was that it represented the idea that a person who offered it was demonstrating an outward commitment to dedicate or re-dedicate his/her life to serving God through covenant faithfulness. In other words, offering this whole burnt offering was God’s way of helping the person renew their commitment to covenant faithfulness by helping them to be more careful in their life.

3. What is Affordable

In the next verses, **5:7–13**, we see a beautiful demonstration of the graciousness and mercy of God. The Holy One just finished instructing His people to bring offerings as part of the restoration process. These animal offerings, sheep, goats, or rams, were quite expensive. Yet, what if the person could not afford such an animal?

11. Hartley, *Leviticus*, 69.

12. Hartley, *Leviticus*, 76.

13. *Ibid.*

In these verses God specifies much more inexpensive offerings he/she was permitted to bring. These consisted of small birds, or even the smallest grain offerings (5:11). This was a “tenth of an ephah of fine flour” (5:11). An ephah was “A dry measure equal to one tenth of a homer, or about two thirds of a bushel.”¹⁴ In addition, the quantity of flour used in this offering is equivalent to what is prescribed for the grain offering in 6:12 and Numbers 28:5. Moreover, “Hebrew *solet* [סולת] more accurately means ‘semolina flour’.”¹⁵

Levine makes an insightful comment at this point. He remarks, “Although this omission may be explained in part as a reduction in the cost of the offering, there is probably another factor involved: It was thought that God took no delight in receiving such offerings and would have preferred, so to speak, that they had not been necessary in the first place!”¹⁶

4. Forgiveness 5:12

Finally, if the person has been sincere and his confession was truly from his heart, the Lord says that there is real forgiveness (5:12). We should note that this granting forgiveness is not because of bringing an offering. That was partially for outward testimony and partially to show sincerity. The Hebrew term translated “forgiveness” in 5:12 is associated with the word *selach* (סלח). It is just as the translators put it, “forgiveness” or “pardon.” It simply goes to show us that God did not wait until Yeshua to forgive sins!

II. Reparation Offerings for Inadvertent Sins 5:14–19

The next section, 5:14–19 focuses on sins or mistakes that are made, not because something was overlooked, but because someone was not being careful and committed something they really did not mean to do but did anyway. Or, to state it another way, this material deals with things that were/are done as a “breach of faith against God.” In fact, two Hebrew words work together to describe the topic for the next section. The first is translated as “acting unfaithfully.” It is “Hebrew term *ma‘al* [מעל], meaning an act of infidelity towards God.”¹⁷ The second term is *shegagah*, שגגה and it means “a mistake, error, in particular a sin which has been committed by mistake or inadvertently.”¹⁸ And, the offense is said to be against “the Lord’s holy things” (5:15).

“In this instance the legislation related to the property of the sanctuary or of the priests being misappropriated, perhaps because the offerings had been inferior in character, or had even been withheld due to forgetfulness or inattention.”¹⁹ In addition, one could say that the kinds of sins that these verses are talking about are those committed when one be untrue, “violates one’s legal agreements.”²⁰

In case this happened, the offender is instructed in 5:16 to bring both an asham offering and to make restitution. In other words, “the guilty person must restore the sacred property.”²¹ The thrust of this legislation is stated clearly in 5:17, “Now if a person sins and does any of the things¹ which the Lord has commanded not to be done, though he was unaware, he is still guilty and

14. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 108.

15. Levine, *JPS: Leviticus*, 30

16. *Ibid.*

17. R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus (Tyndale Commentaries)*, 73.

18. HALOT, 1412.

19. Harrison, *Leviticus (TC)*, 73.

20. HALOT, 613.

21. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 107.

shall bear his punishment.” Finally, once again, even this kind of offense was forgivable, depending on the person’s heart (5:18).

Restitution

One of the items that makes 5:14–18 different from 5:1–13 is the idea of restitution (5:16). This is the idea that if something is damaged or lost, the offender must not only replace the object, but he must also add 20% of the value to it. This was to be done by also acknowledging his guilt before that Lord by bring an offering.

III. Sin Offering for Purposeful Sins

5:20–26

The Hebrew Bible considers chapter 6:1–7 to be 5:20–26. Hence, the subject matter is similar. 5:19 summarized 5:1–18 as concerning the *asham* offering. It seems clear that this offering was partially for sins which were caused by simply forgetting the Lord’s teaching, or my making mistakes in doing the instructions. There does not seem to be much maliciousness in the intents.

The contents for 5:20–26 seem to be different. They seem to focus on the reality that sometimes people do, in fact, purposely miss the mark and sin against others as well as the Lord, even people in the covenant community. What happens then? These verses tell us.

“The offenses outlined here were quite definitely intentional!” They involve false oaths and involve deceitful acts of theft, robbery, fraud, and so on, which case there is actual loss of property to another. “A person misappropriated property or funds entrusted to his safekeeping, or defrauded another, or failed to restore lost property he had located.”²² As there were no witnesses to the crime, the usual laws of testimony were not applicable. When sued, the defendant lied under oath and claimed no responsibility. Without witnesses, the aggrieved party had no further recourse and sustained an irretrievable loss. he was given the opportunity to clear himself by making restitution and by paying a fine of 20 percent to the aggrieved party. Having lied under oath, he had also offended God and was obliged to offer an *’asham* sacrifice in expiation.

What is interesting about this section is that while there seems to be deliberate lying or stealing, yet the Merciful One also permits restoration by permitting the offender to confess and bring an offering. For cases of outright lawbreaking, such as those given in Exodus, the fines would vary according to the circumstance and as assessed by the judge. A repentant lawbreaker, however, would also presumably offer his guilt offering.

IV Lessons from Leviticus 5

Since, obviously, God’s House is not present among us today, what value can these verses have for us. We would suggest that we can see several things for us to apply to our lives. Here are but a few possible applications.

A. Sin Defiles

The sanctuary was the physical manifestation of God’s unique presence on earth. Sin, however, defiles the sanctuary. It does not defile it in a physical sense, but in an unseen sense. Its presence makes it difficult for God to dwell among His people. Holiness does not mix with unholiness. That is why eventually God’s special presence physically left His Sacred House, according to Ezekiel 10, one of the saddest chapters in the Bible.

The Scriptures indicate that we who trust in Yeshua are now God’s sanctuary on earth (Ephesians 2:22). Therefore, we are instructed to not grieve God’s Spirit (Ephesians 4:30).

²² Levine, *JPS Leviticus*, 32.

B. Confession

This passage also shows what should be done when one's conscience convicts us. Understanding the dynamics of confession is necessary for the restoration of human relationships and for our relationship with the Holy One. See 1 John 1:9.

C. An Obligation to Fulfill the Role of a Witness

This passage underscores the ethical obligation to fulfill the role of a witness, especially in courts and otherwise. We cannot passively sit back when we have the knowledge that will help in a legal situation (5:1).

D. Tahor and Tam'ei

A fourth item is something that is very difficult for us to appreciate or understand. We need to try to appreciate the essence of tahor and tam'ei. The is the thrust of 5:2–3. Although we cannot practice this concept today without the presence of God's House among us, we still need to know about it to understand more about God, His presence among us, and the sacredness of His Sanctuary. We need to somehow understand that sin desecrates God's sanctuary. In like manner, sin desecrates God's sanctuary — us!

This is a notion that is almost absent from the modern world. For the biblical writer and action has enduring aftereffects. Sins pollute the place where they are committed. "If a private citizen sinned, the action polluted the sanctuary only to a limited extent. Therefore, the blood of the purification offering was only smeared on the horns of the altar of burnt sacrifice. If, however, the whole nation sinned or the holiest member of the nation, the high priest, sinned, this was more serious. The blood had to be taken inside the tabernacle and sprinkled on the veil and the altar of incense. Finally, over the period of a year the sins of the nation could accumulate to such an extent that they polluted even the holy of holies, where God dwelt. If He was to continue to dwell among His people, this too had to be cleansed in the annual day of atonement ceremony (Leviticus 16)."²³

E. God's Unlimited Mercy

This passage can teach us something about God's unlimited mercy as well as the necessity to discipline us sometimes. Yet, no matter what the discipline, He will always accept us back.

F. The Necessity to Make Restitution

This passage teaches us the necessity to make restitution when we damage, loose, or destroy something belonging to someone else. This goes from accidentally breaking a dish when we are at someone's house to damaging someone's car and other property. "Sin has both a social and spiritual dimension. It not only affects our relation with our neighbour, but it also affects our Creator...Just as we must put ourselves right with men by paying them back for the wrongs we have done to them, so we must compensate our heavenly Father for the debts we run up against Him."²⁴

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23. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 96.

24. *Ibid.*, 111

25. *Ibid.*

G. Messiah, Our Asham Offering

The nature of the asham offering helps us to understand more of Yeshua's substitutionary death for the sinner. The asham offering is "The sacrifice which metaphorically compensates God for our sin."²⁶ Isaiah 53:10 says that the death of the Servant Messiah was an asham offering. "The choice of [*asham*] אָשָׁם to describe [Messiah's] sacrificial death in may be twofold. First, it communicates that the servant's death compensates God fully for the damages he as occurred by mankind's sinning. Second, the servant's sacrifice provides expiation for every kind of sin, inadvertent and intentional. That is the servant's sacrifice providers expiation for any person who appropriates it merits to himself, no matter how grave his sin."²⁷

26. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 110

27. Hartley, *Leviticus*, 80.