

Kodashim: An Overview

The Mishnah's 5th order, *Kodashim* (holy things), feels quite distant from our lives in the 21st century. Its eleven tractates primarily discuss offerings given in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, and many of these offerings were performed through the killing of animals. The reason for this is that throughout the Torah we repeatedly find descriptions of various kinds of offerings. There were rituals included that directly call for the slaughter of various different kinds of animals (bulls, sheep, doves, etc.), and the Rabbis felt that the regulation provided in the text of the Torah did not outline the nature of these offerings in sufficient detail. So, as in other segments of the Mishnah, they took on the task of providing further detail themselves.

There are five general kinds of offerings that are referred to throughout this *Seder*. They are the *olah* (burnt-offering), *sh'lamim* (peace-offering), *asham* (guilt-offering), *mincha* (meal-offering), and *chatat* (sin-offering). The word *korban*, which is used as an overarching term for all five of these kinds of offerings. While *korban* is often translated as "sacrifice," the word actually comes from the root *kuf-reish-bet*, which connotes "closeness." In other words, the idea is that, through giving of an animal or grain to God, we grow closer to God. That model of worship may not resonate with us today, but it served as the foundation for Israelite worship from which all later forms would grow.

Importantly, we must note that these *korbanot* are no longer practiced. Most interestingly, they were not even utilized when the Rabbis were writing the Mishnah. As a result, we must ask the question "Why did the Rabbis spend so much time talking about a form of worship that had already become obsolete?"

There are a few possible answers. One is that the Rabbis hoped that one day the Temple would be rebuilt. Many Jews today continue to hope for just that. Thus, it was and is important to preserve the rules and regulations of Temple sacrifice, because there may come a day where such rituals are possible once again. Whether we should hope for such a day is a complicated issue that each one of us must wrestle with for ourselves.

The eleven tractates of *Seder Kodashim* are as follows: *Zevachim* (on Animal Offerings), *Menachot* (on Meal-Offerings), *Chullin* (on non-sanctified animals), *B'chorot* (on Offerings of First-Born Animals), *Arachin* (on "Valuations"), *Temurah* (on "Substitutions"), *K'ritot* (on "Excisions"), *M'ilah* (on Improper Use of Sanctified Objects), *Tamid* (meaning "always," on the Daily Offering), *Midot* (on the Dimensions of the Temple), and *Kinnim* (meaning "nests," on bird-offerings).

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Many of these English translations, such as “dedications” or “substitutions” are difficult to understand on their own. You will find text clarifying what those terms refer to, along with a summary of each tractate, below.

Zevachim (Animal Offerings): Tractate *Zevachim*, which opens the order, provides some baseline information that is important to understanding the rest of *Kodashim*'s analysis. First, it discusses the principle of intention – meaning that offerings given under false pretenses (a Priest offered a sin-offering but thought he was offering a guilt offering) are invalid. Next, the tractate delves into some of the specific mechanics of how offerings are given, walking through the sprinkling of the blood, where and how animals are slaughtered, and the removal from the altar of the animal after the offering. Towards the tractate's conclusion, the order of the different categories of offerings is discussed, along with some rules about purifying utensils that are used during a *korban*. The tractate closes by mentioning a few offenses that individuals might commit during the process of given an offering, and providing some insight about offerings occurring outside the Temple (the general principle was that offerings should, and in certain occasions must, take place exclusively at the Temple).

Menachot (Meal-Offerings): Tractate *M'nachot* primarily concerns meal-offerings (a meal-offering is a *min'chah* in Hebrew, and the term is today used to describe the afternoon service in Rabbinic Judaism). This tractate is interesting largely because it discusses a category of offering that, unlike many of the others, does not involve animal slaughter. Like *Z'vachim*, this tractate begins with a discussion of intention, along with principles regarding what procedural errors during the offering cause it to be invalid. Next, the *masechet* discusses the actions associated with bringing this offering (mixing the ingredients, taking a handful, waving them altogether, and eventually burning it up). As the tractate continues, it discusses the “showbread,” special loaves of bread that were always present on a table in the Temple. Its very last Mishnah takes an interesting turn, by discussing an alternative temple that was known as Onias's temple (Onias was a leader in Egypt and there was a temple there resembling the Temple in Jerusalem), mentioning in what ways offerings given there have the same status as those given in Jerusalem and in what ways they differ.

Chullin (Non-Sanctified Animals): The tractate's title *Kodashim* means “holy” or “sanctified” things. The opposite of the word *Kodashim* is *Chullin*, meaning “un-sanctified things.” In this tractate we learn about the slaughtering of animals not for sacrificial purposes, but instead for food. It begins by discussing who is permitted to slaughter (minors, for example, may not) and when they are allowed to do so. Next it discusses some blemishes on animals that might make them invalid for consumption. In the middle portion of the tractate, we find a number of prohibitions regarding consumption of certain parts of an animal, or regarding the juxtaposition of certain foods close together (such as milk and meat). The tractate closes with a chapter discussing the Torah commandment to set free a mother-bird from its nest before taking its children for food.

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B'chorot (Offerings of First-Born Animals): In the Torah, the first-born is critically important. We learn that, as a general rule, first-born sons were expected to receive their fathers' blessings (though this rule is discarded on a number of occasions in the Torah), and we even find a plague specifically targeting first-born sons that directly proceeded the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. What many do not know, however, is that first-born animals have a special status in Judaism as well. This tractate discusses regulations related to certain firstborn animals, since the Torah mandates that they are to be offered to God. The tractate discusses firstborn donkeys and cows to start out, then discusses first born beasts more generally. Next, we learn about certain blemishes that disqualify these first-born offerings. Because of the discussion on animal blemishes, the text then takes a tangent to discuss blemishes that disqualify a priest from offering a *korban*. Famously, we learn in this section that bald priests are ineligible to participate in the service. The final chapter discusses the procedure for tithing animals (offering one out of every ten newborn animals). In what I find to be a humorous kind of procedure, all the animals are led into an enclosed space, literally counted off (1, 2, 3...up to 10) and the tenth one is marked off with red paint, so that it is clear that it is the one meant to be offered.

Arachin (Evaluations): In Leviticus Chapter 27, we find a fascinating text. There it states that Israelites can pledge their own value as a gift to the Temple. In the first six chapters of this text, the procedure for how a person determines his/her value (in addition to "he's" and "she's," androgynous individuals are discussed as well) are outlined. On a related note, the closing three chapters discuss the appraisal of real estate, along with rules and regulations regarding when it is permissible or invalid to redeem property, as outlined in Leviticus Chapter 25.

Temurah (Substitutions): Elsewhere in Chapter 27 of Leviticus, we find an interesting prohibition. Basically, what it says is that once an animal is designated to be *kodesh* (a holy animal that will be offered to God) it cannot be substituted for any other animal. In this *masechet*, a wide variety of scenarios are discussed where individuals attempt to substitute either animals or objects that have been designated for use in the Temple. Despite the fact that performing this substitution was a serious offense (penalized with 39 lashes), it appears from the text that many people did so anyway. *Temurah* does discuss certain situations where individuals are exempt from punishment for breaking this Torah commandment, but those are exceptions to the rule.

K'ritot (Excisions): The term *Karet* is a difficult one to translate, but it is often treated in English with the word "excision" or "extirpation." The Torah doesn't really provide a great explanation of what it means, which is part of why the Mishnah has to help clarify. In the Torah, it is mentioned as a punishment for a wide variety of sins (36, according to this tractate of Mishnah), and various commentators have interpreted it to mean a wide variety of things. Some believe it refers to exclusion from *olam habah* (the world to come, occasionally translate as "eternal life"). Others say that it means that God will bring an early death. Please note: this text may not be shared or reproduced without the written permission of the Darshan Yeshiva.

death – the sin is not large enough for a death penalty inflicted by humans (which would have been discussed in tractate *Makkot* of *Seder Nezikin*), but God will bring forth some sort of divine punishment that will result in an early death. A general principle laid out in this tractate is that these sins, designated by the Torah as punishable by *Karet*, are only punished in that way if the sin was committed intentionally. If the sin was committed unintentionally, then bringing a sin-offering is sufficient in order to obtain atonement.

M'ilah (Improper Use of Sanctified Objects): When an object or animal is designated as an offering and thereby sanctified to God, using it in ways that hinder its holiness is incredibly problematic. This tractate lays out regulations regarding which forms of activity are prohibited with respect to sanctified objects and which, alternatively, are permitted. One important principle derived here is that obtaining monetary gain from a sanctified object is strictly prohibited (even a *p'rutah's* worth of monetary gain, an amount that constitutes the modern equivalent of pocket change). The use of objects designated to God for other purposes is, interestingly, compared to theft, because once designated for God's use, any human use is equivalent in the Rabbis' minds to taking God's object and appropriating it for one's own gain.

Tamid (Daily Offering): The following description of Tractate *Tamid*, by Eugene Lipman in his book *The Mishnah* captures this tractate perfectly, and I have chosen to include it in lieu of a summary authored by me: “The Book of Numbers 28:3-4 prescribes the offering of two he-lambs each day in the Temple, one in the morning and one in the evening. These were wholly burnt offerings. The Mishnah consists of a careful, detailed description of the procedures by which this injunction was carried out during the Second Temple era. It contains no discussions, disagreements, arguments, or decisions. It is factual, concise, and crisp, and includes the following materials: the priestly watch; the daily inspection of Temple vessels and ash-removal in preparation of sacrifice; the kindling of the new fire; the slaughtering of the sacrificial lamb; the flaying and cutting up of the lamb; additional ceremonies then performed, including the incense ritual; the closing prayers and benedictions; and the psalms sung by the Levites.”

Midot (Dimensions of the Temple): This book, similar to tractate *Tamid*, is primarily descriptive and does not, therefore, include many disputes among Rabbis. The word *Midot* refers to “measurements” and in this case it is the title applied to a tractate discussing the layout and dimensions of the Second Temple that stood for just under 100 years (between 19 B.C.E and 70 C.E). Also emphasized are Temple Mount upon which the Temple stood, the responsibilities of the priests who guarded the Temple, and regulations regarding which priests were allowed to serve in that important role and others.

Kinim (Bird-Offerings): In the Torah we hear offerings of birds (pigeons or turtle-doves) frequently. They are segmented into two categories – those given voluntarily and those that are obligatory (in order to purify oneself, for example). This short tractate (only three chapters) Please note: this text may not be shared or reproduced without the written permission of the Darshan Yeshiva.

chapters) delves into many of these offerings. Because birds are generally offered in pairs, the tractate outlines what you do if a pair has been designated and one flies away, along with discussing whether it is permissible to pair one pigeon with one turtle-dove (instead of having two of the same species). The Mishnah rules that the answer to that query is no. The tractate (and Seder Kodashim) closes with further hypothetical situations where birds designated as *kodesh* could get confused with one another, and how to deal with those scenarios when they arise.