



Ashes to Ashes

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The burnt ashes of the *korbanot* (sacrifices), piled on the altar, represent the intermingled prayers and dreams, experiences and regrets, of the Jewish people.

They are the concentrated experience of the *mishkan* (tabernacle) itself, filled with human beings approaching the Divine in response to wildly different circumstances. While Vayikra separates the different *korbanot* and the reasons they are brought into organized lists, the actual *mishkan* would have offered no clear separation. Within its curtained walls, people of different tribes, ages, and degrees of wealth would have mingled. Most markedly different, however, would have been the reasons they came to offer their sacrifices. On any given day in the *mishkan*, a *nazir* coming to complete his period of abstinence might stand side by side with a man filled with regret, there to offer his *asham* (guilt offering). Next to a new mother, there to offer her *chatat* (sin offering) as part of her purification ritual, might stand a woman recovered from illness, there to bring her *todah* (thanksgiving offering) as an expression of gratitude to God. At a distance, we might imagine a *metzora* (someone struck with skin disease), out of isolation and ready to offer his sacrifice and return home.



The *mishkan* is the improbable place that gathers together this expanse of human emotion and experience into a single space. There is something about this gathering that itself feels miraculous.

Vayikra Rabbah expresses the miraculous nature of the *mishkan*'s ability to gather the Jewish people together:

ויקרא רבה י"ט

אמר רבי לעזר: כל ישראל ששים ריבוא ואתה אומר: "הקהל אל פתח אהל מועד"? אלא זה אחד מן המקומות שהחזיק מועט את המרובה.

Vayikra Rabbah 10:9

Said R. Elazar: All of Israel are 600,000 and you say, "Gather [all of the assembly] to the entrance of the Ohel Mo'ed (tent of meeting)" (Vayikra 8:3)!? Rather, this is one of the places where a little can hold a lot.

Commenting on the command to gather the entire Jewish people together at the entrance to the *mishkan* during the *yemei miluim* (the inauguration of the *mishkan*), Vayikra Rabbah expresses surprise: how is possible that 600,000 people, the number of men in the Jewish people according to the Torah, gather at the *mishkan*'s entrance at one time? The *midrash* answers that this is one of a number of miracles in which a space was expanded to hold more than what it should have had capacity to contain.

While Vayikra Rabbah frames the *mishkan*'s astonishing ability in terms of numbers, its astonishment at the ability of a space so small to contain so much might extend to intangibles. The *mishkan* is miraculous not in its ability to hold so many humans, but in its ability to contain so much humanity.



Although they are gathered into a single space, however, the experience of each person who enters the *mishkan* and its successor, the *beit hamikdash* (the Temple), remains discrete:

אף בבית המקדש כן רבי שמואל בר אבאי בשם רבי אחא: רוח ארבע אמות בין כל אחד ואחד, אמה לכל
 צד, שלא יהא אחד מהן שומע קול תפילתו של חבירו

This was also true in the *beit hamikdash*. R. Shmuel bar Onya in the name of R. Aḥa: Each person had a width of four *amot* (cubits), an *amah* each side, so that not one of them would hear the voice of their fellow's prayer.

Vayikra Rabbah's statement that although they are crowded together each person in the *beit hamikdash* had enough space so that their prayers could not be overheard balances this ingathering of humanity with respect for the individuality of human experience. While a pilgrim might rub shoulders with dozens of others, his particular circumstances are unique and contained within a realm of privacy of his own.¹ This is as it should be: each person who comes to offer a *korban* is there because of some emotionally and religiously charged circumstance. The four *amot* surrounding each worshipper and consequent privacy ensures that each pilgrim's experience is given the weight it deserves.

But there is a cost to the four *amot* of space around each worshipper: it has the potential to deemphasize the things everyone there shares. While each pilgrim's circumstances are unique, they share the deep commonality of the need to approach God. While their experiences and resulting *korbanot* are different, the prayers that underlie them are based on a finite number of words: "Please, God. Thank you. See me. Hold me." The four *amot* of distance belie this commonality and treats their shared needs as discrete.

¹ For another expression of this aspect in the *beit hamikdash*, see Mishnah Middot 2:2.



Even though the pilgrims offering their *korbanot* are distanced from each other, a later stage of the process brings all the people together. Once the *korbanot* have been burnt and turned to ash, this ash is itself sacred and offered on the *mizbei'ah* (altar):

רש"י ויקרא ו:א

”הדשן אשר תאכל האש את העלה“. ועשאתה דשן, מאותו דשן ירים תרומה ”ושמו אצל המזבח“:

Rashi on Vayikra 6:1

He shall take out the ashes which the fire of the burnt offering consumed—and made it into ashes, from those ashes he shall take out a portion and put it beside the altar.

Rashi clarifies that the removal of the ashes from the *mizbei'ah* is not a simple cleaning protocol. The portion of ashes which are placed besides the altar are themselves a *terumah*, an offering to God, and as such, sacred (called *terumat hadeshen*).

What is sacred about a pile of ash? What makes it important enough that it is considered an offering of its own, rather than simply the remains of *korbanot* already offered? Perhaps the sanctity of the offering of the ashes stems from its relationship to the gathering function of the *mishkan*.

On the *mizbei'ah*, the ashes of the *korbanot* mingle, no longer discrete: prayers piled upon prayers, the experiences of gratitude and guilt, birth and recovery jumbled together and made sacred anew through their contact. In the ash, our sacrifices and their prayers take a different form. They touch each other at every point, from every angle. They become, instead of particular sacrifices attached to individual lives and circumstances, a representation of the Jewish people as a whole, with all its collective longing for God.

Our prayers, lives, and longing are precious in their uniqueness. They require—and deserve—their four *amot* of space.

But in the aftermath, in the ashes, we discover the other side of that truth: like pilgrims in the *mishkan*, our prayers rub shoulders. My longings, my prayers, my dreams, are not so different from yours. Perhaps, in some ways, they are even tied together.

Maybe in order to reach God, we need to begin to see the places where our prayers touch.