

SOURCES & RESOURCES

TAKING UP AND TAKING OUT THE ASHES: CONSTANCY AND CHANGE ON THE ALTAR

The book of Leviticus opens with two sets of instructions regarding the laws of sacrifices. The Torah portion of *Vayikra* includes the laws of the burnt offering, the meal offering, the peace offering, the purification offering (*chatat*), and the guilt offering (chapters 1–5). Another list immediately follows that reviews and clarifies the laws of the burnt offering, the meal offering, the purification offering, the guilt offering, and the peace offering (chapters 6–7). The relationship between these two lists requires a separate discussion. In this article, we will discuss the instructions for the burnt offering with which the second list begins:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the law of the burnt offering: It is the burnt offering, which shall be burning on the hearth on the altar all night until morning, and the fire of the altar shall be kept burning in it.¹ The priest shall dress in his linen garment, with linen pants next to his body; and he shall take up the ashes from the fire consuming the burnt offering on the altar and place them beside the altar. He shall then take off his garments and put on other garments and take out the ashes outside the camp to a clean place. The fire on the altar shall be kept burning in it, not to go out: every morning the priest shall burn on it the wood, lay out on it the burnt offering, and turn

¹ The fire is generally situated “on” the altar, not “in” it, as we see in these verses: “The fire *on the altar* shall be kept burning in it. . . . A perpetual fire shall be kept burning *on the altar*.” Therefore, it seems that Ehrlich is correct that “kept burning *in it*” does not refer to the altar, but rather: “‘It’ [*bo*] goes back and refers to the hearth, which is a masculine noun, not to the altar” (A.B. Ehrlich, *Mikra ki-Peshuto* I [*Divrei Torah*], Berlin 5659, 216). In other words, the fire is kept burning *in* its hearth *on* the altar. See also: J. Milgrom, *Leviticus* 1–16, AB (Doubleday, 1991), 384.

into smoke on it the fat parts of the peace offering. A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out. (Leviticus 6:1–6)

On the face of it, this burnt offering is identical to the one introduced in the first list of offerings; both describe the burnt offering brought by an individual of his own volition. However, the formulation: “It is the burnt offering, which shall be burning on the hearth on the altar all night until morning” is more fitting for the burnt offering that is brought regularly and burnt throughout the night—the daily *Tamid* evening offering. In the words of R. Yosef Bekhor Shor: “‘It is the burnt offering, which shall be burning on the hearth’ — This is to say: I am explaining this law as it applies to the same burnt offering that needs to remain on its hearth throughout the night, which is the *Tamid* evening offering” (Bekhor Shor, Leviticus 6:2).

We should keep in mind that the Torah portion of *Tzav* follows God’s commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, where God commanded Moses regarding the *Tamid* burnt offering (Exodus 29:38–42).² As Abarbanel writes:

Given that the book of Leviticus does not mention the *Tamid* sacrifices, neither the morning nor the evening sacrifice, it says here “it is the burnt offering” because the *Tamid* sacrifices are already described in the Torah portion of *Tetzaveh*, as it is written: “Now this is what you shall offer upon the altar,” referring to what is written there: “You shall offer the one lamb in the morning, and you shall offer the other lamb at evening” (Exodus 29:39).

One should not conclude from Abarbanel’s argument that the law described in our verses is only relevant to the *Tamid* offering and not to other burnt offerings (or in this case, in fact, to all other sacrifices).³ Rather, the *Tamid* offering fits best with the law of the perpetual (*tamid*) fire that follows: The second list of the sacrifices focuses on the altar as consuming, and the sacrifices that are brought continue the process of consuming,⁴ and this is particularly true regarding the *Tamid* burnt offering.

² See especially R. David Zvi Hoffman’s introduction to his commentary on Leviticus.

³ Tosafot bring an interesting position (*Me’ila* 10b, s.v. *Ha-Kolmodim*), that the law regarding the ashes described in this section applies to sacrifices that are *kodshe kodashim* (a higher level of holiness), such as the burnt offering described in these verses, and not to the peace offering, which is *kodashim kalim* (a lower level of holiness). The simpler reading is that the law of cleaning off the altar applies to all sacrifices that are found there (as Sefat Emet and Keren Orah argue when discussing that passage in *Me’ila*).

⁴ See further: Jonathan Grossman, *The Sacrificial Service: Gestures of Flesh and Spirit* (Maggid Books, 2021), 61–79.

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This section includes two topics that, at first glance, do not seem connected to one another. The first is the time limit for burning the burnt offering—one night, “until morning,”—and the subsequent removal of the remaining ashes from the altar. The second is the requirement for a perpetual fire to burn on the woodpile on the altar. The challenge for the interpreter is to understand the connection between these two topics. The juxtaposition of these two sections or commandments is not mere happenstance, but, rather, there is an intentional, intrinsic connection between the two. The title—“This is the law of the burnt offering”—introduces both topics, and then the verses provide details regarding each topic, adjacent to one another. The structure of the section connects the two commandments:

This is the law of the burnt offering:	
2a. It is the burnt offering, which shall be burning on the hearth on the altar all night until morning,	2b. and the fire on the altar shall be kept burning in it.
3–4. The priest shall dress in his linen garment, with linen pants next to his body; and he shall take up the ashes from the fire consuming the burnt offering on the altar and place them beside the altar. He shall then take off his garments and put on other garments and take out the ashes outside the camp to a clean place.	5–6. The fire on the altar shall be kept burning in it, not to go out: every morning the priest shall burn on it the wood, lay out on it the burnt offering, and turn into smoke on it the fat parts of the peace offering. A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out.

This intertwined structure leads us to ask two key questions: 1) How do the two topics discussed in this section each provide details regarding “the law of the burnt offering,” the title of the section? In the continuation of this portion, the Torah describes “the law of the meal offering,” “the law of the purification offering,” and the laws of the other offerings. In all these cases, the Torah describes the laws of each sacrifice—what is done for each sacrifice. However, in our case, we find two sets of laws (taking up the ashes and the perpetual fire) combined under the title, “the law of the burnt offering.” These two sets of laws are tangentially connected to the burnt offering, but it is difficult to see them as expounding “the law of the burnt offering” in particular. 2) We need to understand the relationship between these two commandments, taking up the ashes (*terumat ha-deshen*) and the perpetual fire (*esh tamid*). If the two

commandments were merely written side by side, we could claim that the connection between them is technical or associative. However, the fact that one title introduces both commandments indicates that the two are one unit presented together.⁵

Removing the Ashes

We begin our study by analyzing the law of removing ashes from the altar, the first topic under the title, “the law of the burnt offering.” We will also divide this section into two parallel “stanzas”:

(3) Taking up the ashes	(4) Taking out the ashes
The priest shall dress in his linen garment, with linen pants next to his body	He shall then take off his garments and put on other garments
and he shall take up the ashes from the fire consuming the burnt offering on the altar	and take out the ashes
and place them beside the altar.	outside the camp to a clean place.

The parallel between the two parts of the commandment is clear. Both begin with a discussion of the priest’s garments, and, in both, the second stage is the journey of the ashes; in the first part, the verb is “take up” the ashes, whereas in the second, the verb is “take out” the ashes. Lastly, in both parts, the third stage is the new place to which the ashes are taken; in the first section, that place is beside the altar, and in the second, that place is outside the camp. What is the relationship between these two parallel parts of the commandment?

The Sages saw these parts as two distinct commandments. Although they are both related to the ashes on the altar, they are not inherently connected. Rashi took this approach:

“And take out the ashes” that were heaped upon the ash-heap. When it accumulated and there was no more room on the woodpile, he car-

⁵ Although these two commandments are generally discussed separately when counting the commandments, *Sefer Mitzvot Gedolot* discusses them together and is thus faithful to the spirit of the verses: Positive commandments #191–192: “To light a fire on the altar each day, as it says: ‘Every morning the priest shall burn on it the wood.’ To take up the ashes each day, as it says: ‘And he shall take up the ashes from the fire consuming the burnt offering on the altar.’”

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ried it out; this was not compulsory every day, while taking up the ashes (*terumat ha-deshen*) was compulsory every day (Rashi, Leviticus 6:4).

According to this reading, our verses include two different commandments. The first is “taking up the ashes,” which is required every morning. According to this requirement, each morning the priest must take the firepan (according to the Sages, this is the silver firepan) from the embers of the altar and place its contents on the side of the altar. At the same time, the priest heaps the rest of the ashes that are remaining on the altar in the center of the altar. The pile of ashes that gets bigger in the center of the altar is called “*tapu’ah*” (ash-heap, from the same root as swell up [ת.פ.ת]), and it does not need to be removed every day. The second part of this section is the commandment to remove this ash-heap when necessary. This is not a daily duty but rather necessary only “when it accumulated and there was no more room on the woodpile,” and this is what is called “taking out the ashes.”⁶ Because this part of the Temple service is also done on the altar, clearly it requires priestly garments. Thus, when the verse states: “He shall then take off his garments and put on other garments,” it does not teach us that he wears non-sacred garments, but that he wears simple priestly garments, so that his good priestly garments will not get dirty.⁷ As Rashi states there:

“He shall then take off his garments” — This is not compulsory, but it is a matter of decency so that he should not, through taking out the ashes, soil the garments in which he regularly ministers at the altar; in the garments he wore when he boiled a pot for his master (a menial task) he should not pour a glass of wine for him (an honorable service). On this account it states: And put on other garments—inferior to the garments in which he ministers at the altar.

⁶ Maimonides’ language implies that taking out the ashes was also done every day (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Daily and Additional Offerings, 2:13). However, Maimonides also thinks that taking out the ashes is not intrinsically considered part of the Temple service, unlike taking up the ashes, which according to Maimonides is part of the Temple service in every sense.

⁷ Note the language of *Sifra*, which is aware of the simpler reading of the verses and rejects it: “He shall then take off... and put on: I might think that just as in the Yom Kippur commandment, he should change from his sacred garments and put on non-sacred garments. It is, therefore, written ‘He shall then take off his garments... and put on other garments.’ The garments that he puts on are likened to the garments that he takes off. Just as the garments that he takes off are fitting for his work, so too the garments that he puts on are fitting for his work. If so, why is ‘other garments’ written? They must be inferior to the first set” (*Sifra*, *Tzav* 2:6).

Bekhor Shor provides a different, simpler reading of the verses. According to his reading, this section does not describe two separate commandments, but one continuous commandment that is done in two stages:

The simple reading of the text is the following: When they wanted to clear off the ashes from the altar, he would wear his priestly garments and go up to the altar, because he cannot go up to the altar in non-sacred garments, and he would remove the ashes and place them next to the altar. After he put the ashes down there, he would put on non-sacred garments and take the ashes outside the camp. This is the explanation of “and put on other garments and take out the ashes”; he cannot take out the ashes in priestly garments, as our Rabbis said in *Yoma* (69a): “It is forbidden to go out to the country (i.e., outside the Temple) in priestly garments” (Bekhor Shor, Leviticus 6:3).

According to Bekhor Shor, the verses describe the ashes’ journey from the altar to outside the camp in two stages. In the first stage, the ashes leave the altar and are placed on the side of the altar. In the second stage, they are taken from there to outside the camp. This whole journey should be done every morning.⁸

The Torah needs to split up the journey of the ashes to outside the camp into two stages, because of the problem of the priest’s garments. When the priest goes up to the altar to take out the ashes, he must be wearing priestly garments, but when he goes outside the camp, it is not appropriate for him to wear priestly garments. Therefore, in the first stage, the ashes are taken from on top of the altar to next to the altar, while the priest is still wearing his priestly garments (“The priest shall dress in his linen garment, with linen pants next to his body”). Then, after that, the priest must take off his priestly garments and wear “other garments,” in which he takes the ashes outside of the camp:

The Torah notes here: “He shall then take off his garments and put on other garments and take out the ashes outside the camp to a clean place” in order to teach, that if the priest wants to take up the ashes that are on the altar and take them out, at the same time that he is taking them up, to outside the camp, he is not allowed to do so. Because the Torah

⁸ Maimonides combines these two readings. On the one hand, he adopts the reading of the *Sifra*, that we are talking about two different matters. On the other hand, when he describes taking out the ashes, he writes that one of the priests “fills it from the ashes that he took down” (*Mishneh Torah*, *ibid.*, 2:14). He thus also follows the simple reading of the verses, according to which taking out the ashes is the second stage after the ashes are taken down from the altar.

established that “taking up the ashes” must be done in a particular place, by specifying, “place them beside the altar,” and this taking out must be in honorable garments. The Torah also established that taking the ashes from next to the altar must be “outside the camp to a clean place,” and in inferior garments. If the priest wanted to take up the ashes and take them immediately outside of the camp, he would make one of two mistakes: Either he would take out the ashes in honorable garments, or he would take up the ashes in inferior garments, and either of these would be far from the Divine intention (Abarbanel, Leviticus 6).

According to this reading, the priest must carry out the process of removing the ashes from the altar each morning, and every morning the entire process must be completed, including both stages—from the altar to outside the camp, with a stop in the middle for the priest to change clothes.⁹

In discussing this very debate, Nahmanides (Leviticus 6:4; which is also reflected in *Yoma* 23b), too, prefers (in his words) “the simple reading of the verse”: The garments that the priest puts on after the ashes are taken down from the altar are non-sacred garments.

Our discussion shows that the main commandment in this section (in the first part) is clearing off the altar from the previous day. All the leftovers from the previous day’s sacrifices were consumed on the altar throughout the night, yet when the morning comes, it is time to clear them off. According to this understanding, we should see taking up and taking out the ashes as both part of the same process of merely clearing off the altar, which, though necessary, is unlikely to qualify as a formal Temple service.

This approach is clearly expressed in the position of Rabbi Eliezer, that even priests who have physical blemishes that disqualify them from performing the Temple service are allowed to take out the ashes: “R. Eliezer said: ‘Other garments and take out’ teaches us that priests with physical blemishes are eligible to take out the ashes” (*Yoma* 23a, and *Sifra*). Another position is even more explicit: Because the process is considered just clearing off the leftovers, this position claims that even

⁹ The custom of reciting the verses regarding the commandments of taking up and taking out the ashes before the morning prayers reflects this reading. We do not only recite the verses regarding “taking up the ashes,” which according to the Sages is done every day, but rather we recite the entire section, including both parts. The person who recites these verses sees both parts as being done every morning (this custom reflects the position of Maimonides, mentioned earlier, according to which taking out the ashes also occurs every day).

the first part—where the priest goes up to the altar—requires only two priestly garments (rather than the full set of four garments usually worn by the priests). This is the implication of Reish Lakish's words (*Yoma* 23b), explaining that priests with physical blemishes can take out the ashes because this is not considered part of the Temple service: "If you presume that taking out the ashes is considered a Temple service: Do you have any Temple service that may be performed with only two garments?" Meaning, we should not consider taking out the ashes a Temple service. Therefore, it is sufficient for the priest who takes up the ashes to wear two garments, just as it is sufficient for priests with physical blemishes to take out the ashes, even though they are forbidden from performing the Temple service.

In this context, it is interesting to note Maimonides' words in his commentary on the Mishna (*Tamid* 5:3). As discussed earlier, the Sages said that the priests wore "inferior garments" after changing their clothes for the second stage of the process, taking out the ashes. Maimonides, however, uses the language of "inferior garments" when discussing the first stage, taking up the ashes:

You should know that taking up the ashes should only take place when wearing four garments, even though the verses only mention two garments: "The priest shall dress in his linen garment, with linen pants next to his body." Nevertheless, the Sages say: "Shall dress – to include the miter and the belt, for purposes of taking up the ashes." And when the Torah says: "He shall then take off his garments and put on other garments," it does not mean that the priest should put on non-sacred garments, but rather that he should put on inferior garments, meaning that they are less honorable than what he was wearing before, but are still sacred garments. As it is said, the garments he puts on are juxtaposed to the garments he takes off. This indicates that just as there, the garments he removes are sacred garments, so too here, the garments he puts on are sacred. If so, what is the meaning when the verse states: "Other garments"? It means that they are inferior to the first set of garments. And why were the garments that he wore while taking up the ashes inferior to the garments that he wore while dealing with the sacrifice? It is not because he was protecting the garments so that they would not get worn out, because I already told you the central principle in the Temple that there is no poverty in a place of wealth. Rather, we already mentioned the reason: "In the garments he wore when he boiled a pot for his master, he should not pour a glass of wine for him."¹⁰

¹⁰ See also *Mishneh Torah*, *ibid.*, 2:10.

In combining many commentators' simple reading of the text, as well as Reish Lakish's and Maimonides' applications of fewer—or “inferior”—garments, we can assert the following: Taking up the ashes is the beginning of the process of clearing the altar from the previous day's leftovers. Therefore, the Torah determines that trousers and a tunic, two garments that do not have “honor and splendor” (*kavod ve-tiferet*, which is normally necessary for the priest to approach the altar), are sufficient for taking up the ashes.

Is it Really Just Clearing Off the Altar?

According to this reading, we are inclined to interpret these verses as describing a process of clearing out the altar. As a result, this service does not require priests who are eligible to perform a Temple service, and it does not require priestly garments in order to perform it.

However, this approach is one-sided, and the facts before us are more complicated. My friend, Dr. Hillel Mali, pointed out to me that the use of the verb, “take up” (*herim*), in describing taking the ashes down from the altar, has biblical connotations with broad meaning, and it does not make sense for this verb to be used in our case if we are talking about merely clearing out waste.¹¹ The verb “*herim*,” for example, is used regarding the commandment of *teruma* (the priestly tithe on produce) and giving the breast and leg of the peace offering. So too, the verb is used regarding taking the token portion from the meal offering in order to turn it into smoke: “The priest shall take up (*herim*) the token portion from the meal offering and turn it into smoke on the altar” (Leviticus 2:9). The verb “*hotzi*” (take out) does have associations of clearing off unnecessary leftovers, but the verb that is used in the first part, “*ve-herim* (take up) the ashes” hints to an act with the meaning of raising up and sanctifying to the One above.

Furthermore, the associations of the noun *deshen* (used here in the context of removing the ashes) are very positive; *deshen* is used regarding things that bring pleasure, that are fatty, satiating, and filling. Several verses regarding removing the ashes (*dishun*) from the altar do imply that the Torah is referring merely to removing the leftovers and nothing else, such as: “Make the pails for removing its ashes (*le-dasheno*), as well as its scrapers, basins, flesh hooks, and fire pans—make all its utensils of copper” (Exodus 27:3) and “They shall remove the ashes (*dishenu*) from the altar and spread a purple cloth over it” (Numbers 4:13).

¹¹ Compare with: Milgrom, *Leviticus* 1–16, 385.

However, generally the word *deshen* is used in positive contexts, such as in the following examples:¹²

- “But the olive tree said to them: Should I leave my fatness (*dishmi*), with which by me they honor God and man?” (Judges 9:9).
- “So rain shall be provided for the seed with which you sow the ground, and the bread that the ground brings forth shall be rich (*dashen*) and fat. Your livestock, in that day, shall graze in broad pastures” (Isaiah 30:23).
- “Give heed to Me, and you shall eat choice food and enjoy the richest (*deshen*) viands” (Isaiah 55:2).
- “They shall come and shout on the heights of Zion, radiant over the bounty of the Lord— over new grain and wine and oil, and over sheep and cattle. They shall fare like a watered garden; they shall never languish again. Then shall maidens dance gaily, young men and old alike. I will turn their mourning to joy; I will comfort them and cheer them in their grief. I will give the priests their fill of fatness (*dashen*), and My people shall enjoy My full bounty—declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 31:12–14).
- “May He receive the tokens of all your meal offerings and approve (*yedashene*) your burnt offerings. *Selah*” (Psalms 20:4).
- “You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies; You anoint (*dishanta*) my head with oil; my drink is abundant” (Psalms 23:5).
- “They feast on the rich fare (*deshen*) of Your house; You let them drink at Your refreshing stream” (Psalms 36:9).
- “I am sated as with a rich (*deshen*) feast; I sing praises with joyful lips” (Psalms 63:6).

Although these verses do not provide unequivocal proof, nevertheless, I am inclined to see the word *deshen* in our verses regarding the burnt offering as having similar connotations to the word *deshen* generally in the Bible, and, therefore, imply a more formal Temple ritual that carries a deeper significance.

It seems from this analysis that we must embrace both approaches. “Taking up the ashes” is a symbol representing the encounter between God and people that takes place on the altar. The ashes result from the encounter between the offering, brought by people, and God, who is revealed on the altar as the fire that consumes. This encounter between flesh and fire produces ashes, which the priest “takes up” each morning,

¹² Compare: A. Negoita and H. Ringgren, “דשן,” Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, vol. 3, 310–312.

and in so doing points to the covenant and grace that are present in this place. According to this understanding, taking up the ashes is connected to clearing off the altar, but the moment before removing the leftovers, there is a declaration regarding the unique encounter that takes place in this sacred spot by pointing to its results: an encounter between flesh and fire that produces ashes. We will return to this idea when we analyze the relationship between removing the ashes from the altar and the commandment of the perpetual fire (*esh tamid*).¹³

The tension between understanding taking out the ashes as clearing off waste, on the one hand, and as a true Temple service, on the other, is expressed in several halakhic debates in rabbinic literature. One such debate, concerning the punishment for a non-priest who takes up or takes out the ashes, will suffice as an example. R. Yohanan believes that he is punished by death, in the same way as any other Temple service performed by a non-priest. Reish Lakish, however, holds that such a non-priest is not subject to the death penalty, because this is “the service of removing and not the service of offering” (*Yerushalmi Yoma* 2:1). This disagreement reflects the debate regarding whether clearing off the altar should be seen as a Temple service in every sense, or whether it is an inferior service, which is merely intended to clear off the altar.

Fire on the Altar

The second part of the commandment focuses on the requirement for the fire on the altar to be burning at all times, as it says in the title of this whole section: “And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning in it” (Leviticus 6:2). In order to make it easier for the reader, the Torah repeats this sentence in the beginning of the second part, so that it is clear that what follows are details regarding the requirement mentioned in the title. Note the repeating phrases that provide a clear literary frame for this part of the section:

The fire on the altar shall be kept burning in it, not to go out:
Every morning the priest shall burn on it the wood,
lay out on it the burnt offering,
and turn into smoke on it the fat parts of the peace offering.
A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out.

Paying attention to this refrain reveals the inner development that is taking place. In the section heading, it states: “And the fire on the altar

¹³ See also the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Leviticus 6:3, where he suggests a similar (yet also different) interpretation of taking up the ashes.

shall be kept burning in it”; in the beginning of the second part, there is an additional phrase: “The fire on the altar shall be kept burning in it, *not to go out*” (verse 5); and in the closing of the commandment, there is another addition: “A *perpetual* fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out” (verse 6). In this way, the verses themselves give us a feeling that the fire is perpetual and grows stronger over time. Unlike a regular fire, that grows smaller as the wood feeding it is consumed, the fire on the altar remains lit in perpetuity. *Tamid* (translated here as “perpetual”) in this context means always burning, not burning regularly (as *tamid* means in the *Tamid* daily offering).

This part of the section is formatted poetically, not only in that it has a literary frame, but also in that the phrases within the commandment have a parallel structure. The parallel structure is: verb – “on it” – direct object:

Every morning the priest shall burn – on it – the wood,
lay out – on it – the burnt offering,
and turn into smoke – on it – the fat parts of the peace offerings.

The range of verbs, on the one hand, and the repetition of “on it,” on the other hand, gives us a feeling of poetry. However, this poem is not designed merely to be aesthetic; it is meant to emphasize the focus of the commandment. The focus of the commandment becomes the repeating word— “on it”—which refers to the fire that is mentioned earlier—“the fire on the altar.” Identifying the fire as the focus and seeing how it is wrapped in a literary frame, shapes our understanding of the entire law: Be careful that the fire does not go out, and in order to do so, burn more wood on the fire each morning,¹⁴ and on that perpetual and constant fire, offer all the sacrifices.¹⁵ Because the focus is the fire, it makes sense to men-

¹⁴ Rendtorff is correct that the phrase “*ba-boker ba-boker*” (translated here as every morning, although the Hebrew reads literally “in the morning, in the morning”) creates a sense of hurry, that the wood must be added before the fire burns out, already at the beginning of the morning; R. Rendtorff, *Leviticus, BKAT* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1985), 234.

¹⁵ There is a widespread position in rabbinic literature that sees the arrangement of wood on the altar as an actual sacrifice, to such an extent that there is an obligation to salt the wood and bring it to the altar before “offering” it, as if it were a sacrifice (*Menahot* 106b, *Zevahim* 99b). It seems to me that the main source for this approach in the Torah is our verses, where alongside “laying out the burnt offering” and “turning into smoke the fat parts of the peace offerings,” we also see: “Every morning the priest shall burn on it the wood.” Although the simple reading is that this phrase is still describing the requirement for burning a fire, and not what is

tion both the wood and the peace offering as part of this law, even though the title prepared the reader only for discussion of the burnt offering.

This emphasis may already reveal one aspect of the connection between the two parts of the commandment regarding the burnt offering—between the removal of the ashes and the perpetual fire. Even when they are clearing out the altar, they must be careful that the fire does not go out. Just the opposite: At the same time as they are clearing out the ashes, they must also add wood. Therefore, the Torah emphasizes the time at which the wood must be burned: “Every morning the priest shall burn on it the wood.” This formulation connects the requirement of burning the fire in the morning with the requirement of allowing the burnt offering to turn into smoke all night: “all night until morning.” In the morning, as is discussed, the ashes that remain must be cleared out. According to this understanding, the connection between the two parts of the commandment is fundamentally technical: At the time when there is the greatest concern that the fire might be extinguished (as the ashes are being removed), the Torah emphasizes being careful that the fire is always burning.¹⁶

However, we can suggest a more fundamental connection between the two parts of this commandment. In a certain sense, we can see the two parts

offered on the fire, nevertheless, the parallel, repeating structure makes space for the Sages’ interpretation. In addition to our verses, we should note that Nehemiah also implies that there is a separate wood offering: “We have cast lots [among] the priests, the Levites, and the people, to bring the wood offering to the House of our God by clans annually at set times in order to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as is written in the Torah” (Nehemiah 10:35). This verse states that the wood offering is “written in the Torah,” but it is unclear to which verses it is referring. Many explain that it is referring to sustaining the fire, regarding which there is a commandment in the Torah. However, my friend R. Uri Holtzman suggested to me that the verses in Nehemiah are interpreting our verses in Leviticus 6, in which the law of the burnt offering specifically includes “burning the wood.” Therefore, the language in Nehemiah is “to burn (*le-va’er*) on the altar of the Lord our God,” which is similar to the language in Leviticus 6: “Every morning the priest shall burn (*u-vi’er*) on it the wood.” At the same time, it is important to note that some argue that even those who see the wood as its own offering think that the wood does not have intrinsic sanctity (*kedushat ha-guf*), but, rather, only monetary sanctity (*kedushat damim*) (see R. David HaKohen Rappaport’s discussion in *Mikdash David*, 171–174).

¹⁶ According to the simple reading of the verses, the wood should be added to burn on the fire only in the morning, but halakha concludes that the wood can also be added to the evening *Tamid* offering (*Mishneh Torah*, *ibid.*, 2:2). This position fully reflects the title of the section: “This is the law of the burnt offering.” According to the Sages, the laws in this section apply while offering the *Tamid* burnt offering, whether in the morning or in the evening.

of the commandment as representing two opposing approaches. The first part, which describes gathering the ashes that accumulated the previous day on the altar and clearing them off the altar, reflects the approach that each day begins a new journey on the altar. A sacrifice from yesterday cannot be offered today. If there is a little remaining flesh from yesterday's burnt offering, it must be cleared off the altar, in order to prepare the altar for today, so it is clean from all of yesterday's leftovers. In contrast, the second part, which describes the continuous fire, expresses an opposing approach: On the same perpetual fire, all sacrifices are continuously offered. Wood should be brought to feed the existing flame, but the fire should never be lit anew. The fire does not cease, and from the moment that it was brought down on the eighth day of the consecration of the Tabernacle, the fire has continued to consume the sacrifices. The priests make sure to continue to feed and fan the fire all the time.¹⁷ In the context of the fire, the passing days do not add or take away. The fire continues constantly; it is a perpetual fire.

Bringing these two commandments under the same title creates a delicate dialogue between stability and change, between regularity/continuity and flux; both are exhibited every morning, together, side by side. The Divine revelation that is represented by the fire is unchanging and eternal. God is present in this place all the time, day and night; it does not matter what day we are talking about. In contrast, the person, who brings the sacrifice and brings the flesh for the offering, is a new and different book each day. His standing before God one day is not the same as his religious consciousness another day. It is possible that on Monday, he will bring a burnt offering, and on Tuesday, he will want to bring a peace offering. As a result, the flesh is cleared off the altar each day, in order to enable the person to express something new on the altar, while the fire that receives the offering is perpetual and constant.¹⁸

¹⁷ For this reason, I think that Maimonides' formulation of this commandment—"It is a positive commandment for the fire to always be burning on the altar" (ibid., 2:1)—is more true to the spirit of the verses than *Sefer ha-Hinnukh's* formulation: "The commandment of lighting a fire each day on the altar: To burn a fire each and every day on the altar" (Commandment 132). The point is not lighting the fire but sustaining the fire.

¹⁸ Note that according to the Sages, there are several arrangements of wood on the altar (the rabbis of the Mishna disagreed regarding exactly how many there were—see *Yoma* 4:6). According to them, there is one arrangement of wood that represents the constant, perpetual fire, and another, separate arrangement that consumes the sacrifices. Earlier in this article, I interpreted the verses according to the simple reading, that the fire that consumes is the same as the constant, perpetual fire—the *esh tamid*.

The ashes on the altar represent the encounter between the person, who is transient, temporary, and always changing, and the presence of God, which is constant and immutable. The ashes are “taken up” in order to testify to this complex encounter, and they are taken out in order to clear space for the Temple service of the new day.

In this context, it is interesting to think about the song that the Levites sang (with instrumental accompaniment) each day alongside the morning and evening *Tamid* burnt offerings. A different psalm is chosen for each day of the week. This is puzzling: A single, fixed psalm could have been chosen that was appropriate for use throughout the week, all year long, and it could have been sung alongside the *Tamid* sacrifice each day. It seems that the obligation regarding the daily song also reflects the constant change that goes along with offering sacrifices in the Temple. Every day has a different song; they could not sing yesterday’s song to accompany today’s *Tamid* offering.

A Perpetual Fire That Is Never Extinguished?

Up until this point, we assumed that the fire that the priests are required to feed every morning is the same fire of God that descended to the altar on the eighth day of consecrating the Tabernacle, in order to henceforth consume the sacrifices—the fire that all the people who saw it, sang and fell on their faces (Leviticus 9:24). However, there is a fundamental problem with this assumption: While the Israelites traveled in the desert, the Tabernacle was folded up, along with the altar. It follows that it was also necessary to put out the fire at the time of travel, and to light it anew at each and every stop. This is the implication of the simple reading of the verse describing “packing up” the Tabernacle in preparation for traveling: “They shall remove the ashes from the altar and spread a purple cloth over it” (Numbers 4:13). The removal of ashes described in this verse seems to refer to the act of sweeping out the altar and taking out all the flesh that remained on it. This act enabled them to cover the altar in a purple cloth without the cloth burning. How can the perpetual fire on the altar be seen as the continuation of the fire that came down and consumed the sacrifices on the altar on the eighth day of consecrating the Tabernacle, if that fire is extinguished when traveling?

There are two possible answers to this question. First, we should note that there is a position in rabbinic literature that the fire was not put out, even when traveling. The rabbis of the Mishnaic period debated this question, as we see in *Sifra*: “‘Not to go out’ – even while traveling. What did they do to the fire? They covered it with a psykter (a large

copper vessel used in the Temple service). These are the words of R. Yehuda. R. Shimon says: Even on Shabbat and when traveling, they removed the ashes, as it is written: ‘They shall remove the ashes from the altar and spread a purple cloth over it.’” (*Sifra*, *Tzav* 2:10). Rashi adopts the position of R. Yehuda and saw his position (following *Yoma* 21) as a direct response to the problem of the continuity of the fire that came down on the eighth day: “‘Spread a purple cloth over it’ – The fire that came down from the heavens lay underneath the cloth, like a lion, while they were traveling, but it did not burn the cloth, because they covered it with a copper psykter” (Rashi, Numbers 4:13). According to this understanding, the fire really did continue to burn all the time, and when traveling, the fire’s flames were merely lowered, but continued to burn, waiting until the next stop when the fire would break out anew.¹⁹

Second, the simpler reading is R. Shimon’s position that they did put out the fire and clear off the altar before covering the altar with the purple cloth. Nevertheless, we can see the burning fire as symbolically representing the heavenly fire that consumed the sacrifices the first time and signified the role of the fire in general and the symbolism that went with it. Perhaps it is for this reason that they covered the altar with crimson (*argaman*) colored cloth when they were traveling, rather than the blue cloth they generally used. The *argaman* of the traveling cover, according to many interpretations, is visibly closer to and reminiscent of the red of the perpetual fire.²⁰

Yet, seeing the fire as always burning is problematic not only when we read our section in light of the people of Israel’s travels described in Numbers. It is problematic even within the section describing the sacrifices itself. According to the simple reading of the laws of the burnt offering, as they are brought in the first list, it seems that one of the jobs of the priest is to burn a fire on the altar. This act is listed among the other acts that the priest must do as part of the process of bringing the burnt offering: “The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and lay out wood on the fire” (Leviticus 1:7). It does not seem from reading this verse that there was already a fire on the altar that was constantly burning.

¹⁹ It is difficult to know for sure, but it is possible that R. Yehuda’s position, that the fire never went out, is connected to his position that there were only two arrangements of wood on the altar (one that consumed the sacrifices, and one for incense), and not three arrangements, as R. Yossi argues. According to R. Yossi, a third arrangement is necessary in order to sustain the perpetual fire. The Talmud already connects the position of R. Yossi with that of R. Shimon (*Yoma* 45b).

²⁰ See Athalya Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament* (JSOT Press, 1982), 145–148, and Menahem Z. Kaddari, *Milon ha-Ivrit ha-Mikra’it* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), 67.

Just the opposite: It seems that there was no fire on the altar, and therefore the priest was required to burn a fire and to set up the wood, in order to turn into smoke the burnt offering that was just brought to the Tabernacle. How can we read these two commandments together?

The Sages—and Rashi following them—saw the priests' lighting of the fire as an addition to the existing perpetual fire: "Even though the fire came down from the heavens, there is a commandment to bring some fire by human effort" (Rashi, Leviticus 1:7). This seems to be a halakhic determination intended to reconcile the two sections, but from an exegetical perspective the question remains: Why does the Torah in the portion of *Vayikra* create a false impression that the priests need to light the fire in the altar, and without their intervention there would be no fire?

It seems that the two descriptions of the fire are adapted to fit in with the lists of sacrifices in which they are found. In the portion of *Vayikra*, the focus is the Israelite who brings the sacrifice. He needs to feel that they lit the fire on the altar especially for him. The Tabernacle was built only for him, so that he can bring his sacrifice and meet his God. In contrast, the portion of *Tzav* describes the role of sacrifices in strengthening the revelation of God. Because the revelation of God in the fire on the altar is a continuation of the Divine revelation on Mount Sinai, "a consuming fire on the top of the mountain" (Exodus 24:17), we must preserve it, using wood and sacrifices. We can formulate this understanding in almost the opposite way from the impression created in the portion of *Vayikra*: In the first list, the fire is burned in order to consume the sacrifice; in the second list, the sacrifices come to sustain the fire. From here it is clear why the portion of *Vayikra* ignores the perpetual fire, and the portion of *Tzav* ignores the fire that was added with each and every offering.²¹ In practice, the Sages determined that both roles of the fire must be fulfilled, and even though fire comes down from the heavens, there is a commandment to bring some fire by human efforts.

According to this understanding, we can also explain why the instructions regarding sacrifices in the portion of *Tzav* begin with the commandment of the perpetual fire. The perpetual fire is essential to the point of the sacrifices in this entire portion. The consuming fire that represents revelation requires sacrifices in order to sustain itself in the Tabernacle and in the camp of Israel.

²¹ Compare with: Avraham Shama, "Two Thematic Tendencies in the Dedication of the Tabernacle and their Reflection in the Laws of Sacrifice" [Hebrew], *Megadim* 2 (1997), 32–44.

This Is the Law of the Burnt Offering?

In order to conclude our discussion of “the law of the burnt offering,” we still need to answer the question of why the laws of the altar—clearing out the ashes, on the one hand, and the perpetual fire, on the other hand—follow the title, “This is the law of the burnt offering.” At first glance, these laws apply to the basic use of the altar, and therefore are important for all sacrifices.

In this regard, we touch upon the two essential aspects of this short section—the nature of the burnt offering, on one hand, and the nature of the second list of sacrifices, on the other hand. As I explained, this section does not focus on the burnt offering of the individual who offers it of his own volition, but rather on the public *Tamid* offering. The central sacrifice, to which this section relates, is the evening *Tamid* that continues to be offered the entire night, and must be cleared off in the morning (the Sages permit turning it into smoke only until midnight, but they are not making a fundamental change, rather they are just seeking to protect people from sinning; cf. Mishna *Berakhot* 1:1).

The burnt offering has a unique role in the Tabernacle. Alongside sacrifices that are gifts of a person to his God—given as a donation, atonement, or compensation—there are sacrifices that are intended to be used for and help with the operation of the Temple. The *Tamid* offering defines the altar as that which consumes sacrifices: the morning *Tamid* opens the altar for business at the start of the day, and the evening *Tamid* closes the altar in the evening. In between, sacrifices are brought throughout the day, but the *Tamid* offering itself defines the altar as a place of revelation.

The book of Exodus’ presentation of the *Tamid* commandment supports this understanding. There, the *Tamid* commandment is given immediately following the commandment regarding the days of consecration, describing how the Tabernacle and the priests should be sanctified. The conclusion of this process focuses on the sanctification of the altar: “Seven days you shall perform purification for the altar to consecrate it, and the altar shall become most holy; whatever touches the altar shall become consecrated” (Exodus 29:37). Then, immediately thereafter, we find the commandment regarding the burnt offering: “Now this is what you shall offer upon the altar: two yearling lambs each day, regularly...” (Exodus 29:38). It seems that these two lambs are part of defining the altar, and their role is to make revelation possible.

Thus concludes the commandment of the burnt offering in Exodus: “A regular burnt offering throughout the generations, at the entrance of

the Tent of Meeting before the Lord. For there I will meet with you, and there I will speak with you, and there I will meet with the Israelites, and it shall be sanctified by My Presence” (Exodus 29:42–43). Following its discussion of the burnt offering, the Torah concludes that in this place, God meets with Israel and speaks with Moses, and that the House of God will be sanctified with the Presence of God that will dwell there. In this sense, the burnt offering is connected at its core to the revelation of God’s Presence and the sanctification of the altar as a place where sacrifices can be offered.²² Therefore, it is fitting that the law regarding renewing the altar each morning, alongside the law of the continuous fire that burns on it, should be included under the title, “the law of the burnt offering,” indicating that the burnt offering is the subject of this section.

Not only does this section clarify the nature of the burnt offering; it also clarifies the nature of the entire Torah portion of *Tzav*. The main topic in the second list of sacrifices is consuming the sacrifices. For the rest of the sacrifices, where someone actually eats them, laws are delineated regarding the people who eat the sacrifices—whether the priests (in the cases of the meal offering, the purification offering, and the guilt offering) or the person who brings the sacrifice himself (in the case of the peace offering). However, in the case of the burnt offering, the sacrifice is entirely consumed on the altar. Therefore, the instructions for the burnt offering focus on the “mouth” that consumes them—the fire of God that consumes them on the altar. Just as regarding the peace offering, in the continuation of the portion, it specifies the time limit for eating it (Leviticus 7:15–18), so too regarding the burnt offering, the Torah specifies the time limit for the altar to “eat” the sacrifice—“until morning” and no longer. As the Sages say in several places: “The Torah talks about two kinds of eating: the person eating, and the altar ‘eating’ (consuming)” (*Zevahim* 13b).

This reading is supported by several interesting connections between the description of the altar consuming the burnt offering and the laws of the priests consuming the other sacrifices. The place where the ashes are taken to as part of the law of the burnt offering—he shall “take the ashes outside the camp to a *clean place*” (Leviticus 6:4)—is defined similarly to the places where the rest of the sacrifices are allowed be eaten:

²² See more in *Shiurei ha-Rav Lichtenstein – Zevahim* (Alon Shvut, 5759), 9–12 and A. Eldar, “Incense, Nadav and Avihu, and Yom Kippur” [Hebrew], *Alon Shvut* 158 (5761), 81–95. Also, in a slightly different formulation: “The focus of our portion (*Tetzaveh* – Exodus 29) is not the commandment of the *Tamid*, but rather the explanation of how to use the altar that was just completed” in E. Bick, “The Burnt Offering” [Hebrew] in *Torat Etzion – Shemot*, editors E. Bick and Y. Feintuch (Jerusalem, 5775), 348.

- Meal offering: “What is left of it shall be eaten by Aaron and his sons; it shall be eaten as unleavened cakes, in the *sacred place*; they shall eat it in the enclosure of the Tent of Meeting” (Leviticus 6:9).
- Purification offering: “The priest who offers it as a sin offering shall eat of it; it shall be eaten in the *sacred place*, in the enclosure of the Tent of Meeting” (Leviticus 6:19).
- Guilt offering: “Only the males in the priestly line may eat of it; it shall be eaten in the *sacred place*: it is most holy” (Leviticus 7:6).
- Peace offering (in the commandment regarding the eighth day): “But the breast of the elevation offering and the thigh of the gift offering you, and your sons and daughters with you, may eat in any *clean place*” (Leviticus 10:14).

In addition, the connection between the different kinds of eating is emphasized by the use of the word “eating” (*akhila*) in the law of the burnt offering as well: “he shall take up the ashes from the fire consuming (literally: eating, *tokhal*)” (Leviticus 6:3). Thus, the instructions regarding the burnt offering hint that turning the burnt offering into smoke should be seen as an act of eating, just like all the descriptions in this section regarding the priests eating.

In conclusion, we learn that the law of the burnt offering is the law of the consuming altar and the revelation expressed by the consuming fire. Every morning, the Tabernacle begins a new journey, and the sacrifices of the day before are cleared out in order to make space for the new sacrifices that will be brought with a “new song.” The glory of God is revealed as a fire that receives the new sacrifices that are brought to it. The fire itself, however, is not subject to changing times and changing moods; the perpetual fire does not go out, but, rather, continues to represent God’s Presence constantly inspiring us and sustaining the entire world.

Translated from Hebrew by Rachael Gelfman Schultz