



# The Parasha with Rabbi Dweck

*Highlights for*

## Vayikra: Life's Inherent Violence

### SUMMARY

*Sefer Vayikra*—the Book of Leviticus—stands at the centre of the Torah, addressing the complexity of human life head-on. Its dominant theme is *Korbanot* (sacrificial offerings), rooted in *Karov*, meaning ‘closeness’—a means of drawing near to God. This week focuses on the *Korban Hatat*, the sin-offering, and asks: why does the Torah prescribe an act of violence—the killing of an animal—as the remedy for sin? The answer lies in a radical understanding of what sin actually is: a violation of being itself.

### Vayikra: The Guts of the Torah

*Sefer Vayikra* is what the *Hakhamim* call the centrepiece, flanked by two books on each side (Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:20). It is here that the full complexity of human nature—including its violent, predatory dimension—is addressed directly. Central to the book is the concept of *Korbanot*, introduced for the first time and defined as a vehicle for closeness to God. The specific offering this week, the *Korban Hatat*, addresses *Hatat*—the missing of the mark, transgression, sin.

### The Nature of Sin: A Violation of Being

On the surface, sin is a transgression of God's word. But at a deeper level it is ontological—it concerns the nature of being and non-being. The Rambam, in the second chapter of the *Moreh Nevukhim*, explains that before eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the human being perceived reality in purely ontological terms: something either existed or it did not; it was viable or it was not. This is the realm of *emet* and *sheker*—truth and falsehood as existential, not merely moral, categories. In that state, non-viable things did not enter conception, and

there was no real capacity for sin.

After eating from the tree, human beings became trapped within their own subjective perception—their biases, their gaze, their desire. It became a lifelong task to recalibrate one's vision with what was actually real.

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*‘You cannot remove the predatory, aggressive nature of your being from within you. All you can ever do is channel it towards productive modes of being.’*

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### Consciousness Itself Is Violent

This leads to a startling insight from Jean-Paul Sartre: consciousness itself is, in a basic sense, violating. The moment I become aware of another person, they are objectified within my frame of awareness—they have no choice in the matter. As Martin Buber describes in *I and Thou*, most of our interactions are ‘I-It’ relationships; we relate to the other not as a full, complex being, but as an object in our field of consciousness.

Sin is therefore essentially predatory: the use of one's being—will, intention, and action—to diminish the being of something or someone else. At its most extreme it is murder, but it exists on a spectrum from a consuming gaze to theft, gossip, and character assassination. Ultimately, it is the diminishing of our covenant with God.

## Why a *Korban* Atones for Sin

If sin is violent, why prescribe more violence as its remedy? Because thought alone cannot confront non-being. Anything we think about is already in the realm of being—we cannot truly conceive of nothingness. A purely intellectual act of repentance is therefore insufficient. The destruction of being must be *acted*. The *Korban* makes a person witness, smell, and experience the violence of a life being taken—and then aims that visceral encounter towards God within the covenantal frame.

Just as on *Shabbat* a destructive act becomes constructive when oriented towards a creative

purpose, the *Korban* takes the predatory element of human nature and channels it back into relationship with the Divine.

## *Vayikra* (ויקרא) and *Vayikar* (ויקר): Two Ways to Live

The first word of the book encodes this distinction. *Vayikra*—with its small *Alef*—means a calling, an intimate invitation. Rashi teaches that God always initiated speech to Moses with this endearment: a calling into closeness and covenant. Without the *Alef*, the word becomes *Vayikar*—the language of *mikreh*, chance and chaos; the world of eat-or-be-eaten. It may not look like murder in the fields. It may be gossip, manipulation, or ad hominem attack. But it is violence nonetheless.

The Torah does not ask us to cease being human—it asks us to recognise our aggressive nature, understand how it diminishes other aspects of the world, and channel it into its highest and most constructive expression.

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## Questions for the Table

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1. **The Violence of Consciousness:** Sartre and Buber suggest that even our gaze objectifies others. How might we cultivate more 'I-Thou' moments in daily life?
2. **Sin as Predation:** Rabbi Dweck defines sin as using one's being to diminish another's. How does this reframe seemingly minor transgressions—gossip, manipulation, dismissiveness?
3. **Channelling Rather Than Suppressing:** The *Korban* redirects rather than eliminates the violent impulse. What does it look like in practice to channel aggression into covenantal, relationship-oriented living?

**About Rabbi Joseph Dweck:** Rabbi Dweck has held rabbinic leadership roles in the US and the UK. He is the Rosh Bet Midrash of TheHabura.com and the Rabbi Levy Chair of Jewish Wisdom at the London School of Jewish Studies. For more, visit the Office of Rabbi Dweck (rabbijosephdweck.com).

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