

The Greatest Gift

BASED ON N'SIVAS SHALOM

Hevel became a shepherd and Kayin a farmer. After some time, Kayin brought some of the fruits of the ground as an offering to Hashem. Hevel, he too ("gam hu") brought [an offering—] some of his first sheep, the choicest ones. Hashem turned [in favor] toward Hevel and his offering. (4:2-4)

Kayin brought some of his worst produce... (Rashi's commentary)

THIS IS COUNTERINTUITIVE! IF KAYIN brought an offering out of his own free will, what would compel him to give inferior fruit? No one had forced him to bring anything! If he couldn't bear to part with his choicest fruits, let him hang back and not bring anything at all!

Another question: Why does it say that "Hevel, *he too* brought [an offering]?" What is gained with this superfluous phrase? Let the Torah say, "Hevel brought..."

If we delve into the language of these verses, the following contrast stands out:

Kayin brought some of the fruits of the ground...

Hevel, he too brought [an offering—] some of **his** first sheep...

Didn't Kayin also give of *his* fruits?

Here is the difference: When Hevel offered a sacrifice to Hashem, it was as if he was giving *a piece of himself*. He put blood, sweat, and tears into his cattle; when he brought them as an offering, he was giving Hashem, in a sense, that

which was most dear to him—namely, his labor. Contrast this with Kayin, who possibly did give very nice fruits; they were not, however, from the *first* of his fruits, those into which he had poured his heart and soul while bringing them to fruition. Kayin did not give of himself. Rather, he gave from that which the ground produced, of its own!

And here the Torah imparts a crucial lesson about the proper way to serve Hashem: It is not enough for a Jew to just serve Hashem; rather, he must give of himself—go against his very nature and give from that which is most dear to him. Even if someone, on the surface, seems to be giving Hashem his best efforts, if it

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Forbidden Fruit

How do we know the Torah [anticipated] Haman?

[We see a hint in B'reishis 3:11:]

Hamin ha'eitz asher tzivisicha l'vilti achol mimenu achalta—[Hashem said to Adam,] have you eaten from the tree which I commanded you not to eat from?" (Talmud, Chulin 139b)

WHY, OF ALL VERSES, DID THE GEMARA choose this one? Is it because the Hebrew word *hamin* ("from") can also be pronounced "Haman?"

It's actually deeper than that.


On that day Haman went forth joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordechai in the king's gate, and that he neither stood up nor moved before him, he was full of indignation against Mordechai...

Haman told [his friends and family] of the glory of his riches; of the multitude of his children; of

all the ways in which the King had promoted him; and how [Achashveirosh] had advanced him above the King's princes and servants... "Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the banquet that she had prepared—and I'm also invited along with the king tomorrow! Yet all of this is worth nothing to me, as long as I see Mordechai the Jew sitting at the King's gate!" (Esther 5:9-13)

Here is an example of someone who literally had everything, but threw it all away because of the one thing that he could not have—Mordechai's respect.

And the Talmud wonders: How could this be? Where have we seen this before? Where have we seen someone sacrifice everything, in order to get the one thing he couldn't have?

The gemara answers, sadly, "*Hamin ha'eitz*—Adam, have you eaten from the one tree that I told you that you couldn't eat from?" 

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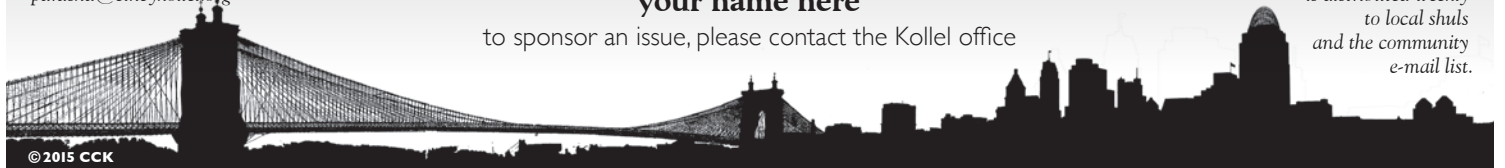
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The Greatest Gift CONTINUED

is in his nature to do that, it isn't worth as much as it would be if he were giving to Hashem against his nature.

It's appropriate at this point to mention something the Kotzker Rebbe once said.

[The gift of a bird as an *olah*—a burnt offering] is a fire-offering, a pleasant aroma to Hashem. (Vayikra 1:17)

[The Torah] says “a pleasant aroma” in reference to an *olah* offering of fowl, and it says “a pleasant aroma” about an *olah* offering of livestock (1:9), to tell us that [there's no difference between] someone who gives much and someone who gives less, as long as [the giver's] heart is directed toward Heaven. (Rashi's commentary)

We can infer from Rashi that even someone who gives generously must direct his heart toward Heaven.

Knowing this novel idea, we can now interpret the Torah's description of Hevel's offering with a slightly different twist:

Hevel brought *himself, too*, as well as some of his first sheep... Hashem turned [in favor] *toward Hevel and his offering.*

(For another eye-opening interpretation of these verses, see the writings of the *Netziv*.) 🚺