

## Introduction to Tractate Keritot

Like *Sanhedrin* and *Makkot*, *Keritot* concerns atonement for sin or punishment for crime. But here, instead of fines, capital punishment, or flogging, what is required is either a sin-offering or a suspensive guilt-offering (extirpation). What is the difference between the sin-offering and extirpation? Man bears responsibility for what he does; the law provides the opportunity to atone for doing what God has commanded not to be done. The Torah explicitly imputes guilt even for actions committed inadvertently, those done without the intention of violating the Torah. It follows that the law has to provide for penalties to expiate sin or crime, whether deliberate or otherwise. Here making its statement concerning the taxonomic power of intentionality, the law distinguishes deliberate from inadvertent sin or crime. A sin-offering is required in the case of an action, the *deliberate* commission of which is penalized by extirpation (early death, before the age of 60), and a suspensive guilt-offering in the case of doubt. The principal interest then is in animal offerings that expiate sin. The Scripture contributes to the topic (Lev. 5:17–19).

- I. The sin-offering
  - A. Classes of transgressions that are subject to extirpation or the sin-offering
  - B. The sin-offering
- II. Multiple sin-offerings: the single sin-offering and multiple sins
- III. The suspensive guilt-offering
  - A. Cases of doubt in which the suspensive guilt-offering is required
  - B. When the animal designated for the suspensive guilt offering may not be required

Three sections make up the topical presentation. The first covers those occasions on which the sin-offering or extirpation, as the case may be, is required. The second section addresses a single sin-offering and multiple sins. The third deals with the suspensive guilt-offering, which is required where one inadvertently may or may not have committed a sin. The order is logically necessary, since the suspensive guilt-offering cannot come before the sin-or guilt-offering, which is offered for what one is certain he has done.

Offerings expiate those sins that are not committed as an act of rebellion against God. God graciously accepts these offerings, as an appropriate act of atonement for an act for which one bears responsibility but which was not meant as defiance of God. Those actions that embody an attitude of rebellion, by contrast, can be expiated not through the surrogate, the blood (life) of an animal, but through the life of sinner himself. The rebel is put to death by the court here on earth, cut off in the prime of life, or is flogged by the court's agents.

The religious principle that pervades *Keritot* is simple: God sees into man's heart. That is why the same act may result in diverse consequences. Those consequences are based upon the intentionality with which the act is done. Indeed, in its own way that same concept animates the discussions on how many sin-offerings are owed by the transgressor for a single action or how many actions may be subsumed under, and expiated by, a single sin-offering.

Beyond *Keritot*, the matter is expressed best in the law of *Shabbat* where it is made explicit: A sin is atoned for by a sin-offering only when the act is inadvertent. A deliberate action is not covered.

“This is the general principle: All those who may be liable to sin offerings in fact are not liable unless at the beginning and the end their [sin] is done inadvertently. [But] if the beginning of their [sin] is inadvertent and the end is deliberate, [or] the beginning deliberate and the end inadvertent, they are exempt—unless at the beginning and at the end their [sin] is inadvertent”

(Mishnah Tractate *Shabbat* 11:6J–L).