

# Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



VAYIKRA

## A Walk on the North Side

This week we begin reading the book of Vayikra. The first half of this book is very sacrifice intensive, which makes it a little less accessible to those of us who are two thousand years removed from actually offering them. So, we improvise. We find all sorts of hints at ideas in the text which can be applied to our Temple-less lives. This week we will delve into the hidden ideas apparently embedded, encased and enfolded in the Hebrew word for 'hidden'.

Here's the verse: It (the KORBAN, 'offering') shall be slaughtered before God on the north (TZAFON) side of the Altar, and Aharon's sons, the kohanim, shall dash its blood against all sides of the altar (Vayikra 1:11).

For our purposes, the critical word in those instructions is 'north', TZAFON. This term for the compass direction North also implies 'hidden' or 'covered', more about that anon.

This verse is very significant!

Why? You may ask. Because those of us who recite KORBANOT (the verses

describing the daily offerings) every day, read this verse, and it's the only such verse in this week's reading.

The holy Ari Z"l explains: When we say this verse everyday with devotion it will be a SEGULA ('precious promise') to atone for all our sins, as if we have offered all the KORBANOT. All of our sins can be placed in three categories: Idolatry, promiscuity and violence ('shedding blood'). All of these categories are hinted at in our verse: 'offer it on the side (YERECH, also means 'thigh')' hints at promiscuity, 'the Altar' hints at idolatry, and 'the north' hints at violence (connected to love of money from the verse, 'gold and silver is in the TZAFON', Iyov 37:22)

But I want to delve into this idea of TZAFON. Rav Zvi David Hoffman suggests that we borrowed this idea from idolaters who believed that their grand deity dwelled in the north. Even though we occasionally borrow from other ancient civilizations' commonly accepted ideas, this one doesn't resonate with me.

Prof Yoel Elitzur discusses the significance of the directional terms used in Biblical Hebrew. He notices that we sometimes name directions based on our relationship with the Sun. Other times we describe the directions based upon facing East, because ancient humans obsessed over sunrise. They were afraid of the

night and darkness.

He finds the third category most interesting. Biblical Jews called the directions based upon the landmarks of Eretz Yisrael: This category includes YAM, referring to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, and NEGEV, referring to the arid region in the south.

But what about TZAFON? He explains that YARK'TEI TZAFON (Yeshayahu 14:14) was a reference to a high mountain in Lebanon.

Okay, so we have TZAFON as north in the geography of Eretz Yisrael, but it's used in other contexts as well to mean north, and there Prof Elitzur relies on the Radak, who explains: The path of the Sun is never on [the northern] side but rather on the southern side, and it is as if that direction is hidden (TZAFUN) from the Sun.

That is another reminder that, clearly, the Torah was written with people living in the northern hemisphere of planet Earth in mind.

This brings us to our essential idea: The TZAFON or North is mysterious and, perhaps, dangerous. Remember Yirmiyahu warns us: The word of the Eternal came to me again: What do you see? 'I see a pot that is boiling', I answered. 'It is tilting toward us from the north.' The Eternal said to me, 'From the north, disaster will be

poured out on all who live in the land.' (Yirmiyahu 1:13-14)

There is profound symbolism in the details of the sacrificial ceremonies, and this extends to the directions used for the process. Rabbeinu Bechaye describes how the ascent of the kohen up the ramp (KEVES) of the altar (MIZBEI'ACH) symbolized the kohen ascending to a higher realm where new realities, different from our prosaic existence, are encountered. The place of the holiest offerings is therefore TZAFON, mysterious, secret, hidden.

Remember the name given by Par'o to Yosef HaTzadik? Tzafnat Pane'ach! Which means, according to Onkelos: The one to whom hidden things are revealed. In other words, the decipherer of riddles. Yosef unravels the TZAFON, the hidden.

So, significant things are often TZAFON, mysterious. Truly important ideas must be worked out, investigated, solved!

As we enter the month of Spring, when the natural world comes back to life, we should stay attuned to hints in the air and secret things around us. As one who suffers from hay fever, boy, am I aware of changes in the air. But our antennae should be also affixed to the great celebration looming, and hiddenness is in the offing. First, many hide the CHAMETZ

as a prelude to its total disappearance and destruction. But, much more significant, we have hiddenness at the Seder.

The eating of the AFIKOMEN (Greek for 'dessert') is called TZAFUN as one of the stages of the Seder process. Why? Well, because the little kids hide it. But also because it contains deep secrets. The deepest, darkest secret is: This might be the essential eating of Matza at the Seder.

There are a plethora of ideas about the significance of eating the Afikomen:

1. Does it replace the Paschal Lamb?,
2. Is it the fulfillment of the Mitzva to eat Matza,
3. Is it a separate decree to end the night with Matza on the palate?

The Shnei Luchot Habrit (Rav Yitzchak Halevi Horowitz, 1565-1630) suggests that it might be the obligatory consumption of the Matza, and therefore there should be no talking between the initial blessing over Matza and the eating of the Afikomen. Was his Seder very short or very quiet?

In any case, the Afikomen is a mystery. It is TZAFON! In Judaism, we live with and love mysteries! 🙏