



Parshat Vayeishev
By Rabbi Josh Hoffman

Parshat Vayeishev relates the conflict between Yosef and his brothers, which led to his eventual sale and descent into Egypt. Yosef's brothers, in an effort to fool their father Ya'akov into thinking that Yosef was dead, slaughtered a young goat, dipped Yosef's tunic into its blood, and showed it to him. Because the blood of a goat is similar to that of a man, Ya'akov believed that Yosef had been ripped apart and killed by an animal, and went into mourning for him. Maimonides, in his Guide for the Perplexed (part 3, chapter 46) writes that, in his opinion, the reason all sin offerings brought in the Temple, on the three festivals of pilgrimage, on Yom HaKippurim, Rosh Chodesh as well as the offerings brought for idolatry, came from he-goats was because the nation's greatest act of disobedience at that time was their addiction to sacrificing to the se'irim, or spirits, as the Torah tells us, "And they shall no longer sacrifice to the se'irim after whom they have gone astray" (Vayikra, 17:8). However, continues Maimonides, our sages say that the reason for the constant atonement through he-goats is that the first act of disobedience done by the whole congregation was done with the help of a kid of goats, in connection with the sale of Yosef.

Maimonides goes on to say, "Do not consider this as a weak argument; for it is the object of all these ceremonies to impress on the mind of every sinner and transgressor the necessity of continually remembering and mentioning his sins. Thus the Psalmist says, "And my sin is constantly before me" (Tehillim, 51: 3). The above-mentioned sin-offerings further show us that when we commit a sin, we, our children, and the children of our children, require atonement for that sin by some kind of service analogous to the sin committed. If a person has sinned in respect to property he must liberally spend his property in the service of God; if he indulged in sinful bodily enjoyments he must weary his body and trouble it by a service of privation and fasting, and rising early before daybreak. If he went astray in respect to his moral conduct he must oppose his failings by keeping to the opposite extreme, as we have pointed out in Mishneh Torah, Hilcot Deot (chap. 2.). If his intellectual faculties have been concerned in the sin, if he has believed something false on account of the insufficiency of his intellect, and his neglect of research and proper study, he must remedy his fault by turning his thoughts entirely away from worldly affairs, and directing them exclusively to intellectual exercise, and by carefully reflecting on that which ought to form the subject of his belief. Comp." And my heart hath been secretly enticed, but my hand touched my mouth" (Iyov, 31:27). These words express figuratively the lesson that we should pause and stop at that which appears doubtful, as has been pointed out by us in the beginning of this treatise."

The importance of constantly keeping one's sin in his consciousness is also discussed by Maimonides in his Laws of Repentance, 2:8. He writes there that even over sins for which a person has recited the 'vidui,' or confession, on one Yom HaKippurim, he should recite the vidui again on another Yom HaKippurim, even if he is still in a state of repentance over these sins. Rabbi Yosef Karo, in his commentary Kesef Mishneh, points out that this is the subject of a dispute in the Talmud, Yoma 84, but Maimonides follows the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'kov there, following the general Talmudic principle that his opinion is authoritative. It is interesting to note that Maimonides, in this halacha, cites the same verse from Tehillim, 51:3 - "And my sin is constantly before me" - that he cites in his Guide to show that a person needs to remember the sins that he has done for the rest of his life. Rabbi Aharon Soloveichik has pointed out that this requirement, as presented by Maimonides in his Laws of Repentance, is part of 'darchei teshuvah,' meaning, ways of maintaining oneself on the path of repentance, rather than part of the essence of repentance. This is evident from the fact that Maimonides previously defined, in same chapter 2, halacha 3, what constitutes the essence of repentance. In halacha 4, he wrote



begins to speak of the paths of repentance, which are means that one uses, after repenting, to remain a penitent. His remarks in halacha 8, then, calling on one to constantly keep his past sins in his consciousness, are the conclusion of his prescription for darchei teshuvah. Perhaps, with his remarks in the Guide in mind, we can add that his remarks here, in halacha, 8, are a culmination of his prescription for the paths of repentance, and a description of 'repentant man' as one is always on guard to prevent a repetition of his past deeds.