



Parshat Vayikra 5768  
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Amidst its discussion in Parashat Vayikra of the various sacrifices offered in the *Mishkan*, the Torah establishes that the *chelev* – certain fats of the animal – must be placed upon the altar, rather than be eaten. Even though the meat of *shelamim* sacrifices is shared between the altar, the *kohanim* and the individual bringing the offering, the *chelev* is always offered upon the altar. The Torah emphasizes, "*Kol chelev le-Hashem*" – "All the fat is for the Lord" (3:16).

Maimonides concludes the *Hilkhot Issurei Mizbei'ach* section of *Mishneh Torah* with a famous passage in which he cites this verse as an allusion to a more general religious concept. He writes:

...for one who wishes to bring merit to himself should subdue his evil inclination, spend generously and bring his offering from the nicest and choicest of the species from which he brings... This applies as well to everything done for the Name of the good God – it should be the most beautiful and the best. If one builds a house of prayer – it should be more beautiful than his house of residence. If one feeds the hungry – he should feed from the best and tastiest on his table. If he clothes the naked – he should clothe from the nicest of his garments. If he consecrated something – he should consecrate the nicest of his property. Thus it is written, "*Kol chelev le-Hashem*."

(*Hilkhot Issurei Mizbei'ach* 7:11)

Whereas in its narrowest meaning the word *chelev* refers to animal fat, in its broader sense it denotes the choicest and most preferred part of the item under discussion. Thus, the phrase *kol chelev le-Hashem* is taken as an allusion to the fact that when one undertakes a certain project "for the Lord," he should use for this purpose the *chelev*, the very best of what he has. Instinctively, people wish to keep their choicest possessions for themselves, and are prepared to part with only their less desirable assets. Maimonides here urges one to "subdue his evil inclination," to resist this instinct and to donate the best of what he has for charity and for religious institutions, thereby demonstrating the priority he affords to these worthy endeavors over his personal comfort and luxury.

Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (the Brisker Rav, 1889-1960) noted the subtle but important distinction between this halakhic concept and the similar notion of *hiddur mitzva* – showing honor to *mitzvot* through high aesthetic standards. In a number of contexts, the Sages establish the requirement to use a beautiful *sukka*, a beautiful Torah scroll, a beautiful *tallit*, and so on. This rule is inferred from the verse in the Book of Shemot (15:3) when *Benei Yisrael* declare, "This is my God and I shall glorify Him!" This "glorification" is achieved through the beauty of objects used in the performance of

*mitzvot*. The Brisker Rav noted that *hiddur mitzva* requires an objective standard; for the purpose of this *halakha*, one must use *mitzva* articles that meet respectable aesthetic standards as defined in objective terms. The concept of *kol chelev le-Hashem*, by contrast, means that when a person chooses to perform a certain *mitzva*, he must select for this purpose the best of what he has. Even if his lowest-quality possessions meet the standards of *hiddur mitzva*, he is nevertheless enjoined to select items of the highest quality. This *halakha* refers not to the objective "glorification" of the *mitzva*, but rather to demonstrating the priority one affords to religious observance. Its focus is thus not on objectively determined aesthetic standards, but rather on the relative quality of the object in comparison with one's other belongings.

It is perhaps worthwhile to conclude this discussion with an anecdote demonstrating the practical implementation of this *halakha*. The story is told of a man who came before Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter of Ger (1864-1948), the *Imrei Emet*, and informed the rabbi that he had lost his *tefillin*. The man very much wished to fulfill this important *mitzva*, but simply could not afford a new pair. The rabbi immediately presented his visitor with a pair of *tefillin* and asked that he treat them with particular care, as they had belonged to the rabbi's illustrious father, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Ger (1847-1905), the *Sefat Emet*.

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai was later asked why he was prepared to part with such a valuable artifact, the *tefillin* worn by one of the most legendary rabbinic figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The rabbi replied by citing this passage from Maimonides, which urges us to use the very highest quality possessions in the performance of *mitzvot* such as charity. If a poor man is in need of *tefillin*, the rabbi explained, then he felt obliged to help by giving him the choicest pair of *tefillin* in his possession – the *tefillin* that had belonged to his illustrious father.