THE MEANING OF MELIKA

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible provides bird offerings for someone whose means do not suffice for a sheep (Lev. 5:7). Leviticus 1:15 describes the manner of slaughtering a burnt offering of a bird as involving an action called melika, The priest shall bring it to the altar, pinch off [u’malak] its head.... The same term is used when describing a sin offering of a bird, pinching [u’malak] its head at the nape without severing it (Lev. 5:8). With a burnt offering, the head was completely severed, with a sin offering it was not, but in both cases the bird was killed by melika.

The exact etymological meaning of the word melika is difficult to ascertain, as there are no cognates in the Bible, as Ibn Ezra points out (Lev. 1:15). It does not have cognates in other Semitic languages either.¹ The Targum does not use a different Aramaic word to translate it. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Saadia Gaon translate it as “separate”. Menahem ben Saruk, in his dictionary Mahberet Menahem, states simply that melika is the term used in the Bible for the slaughter of a bird.² Donash ben Labrat understood that Menahem meant that it was actually an act of shehita, contrary to rabbinic tradition that no knife was used for melika, and vehemently opposed that approach. Rabbenu Tam defended Menahem, explaining that he only meant that melika is the way birds are killed, not an actual act of shehita.³ The JPS Torah Commentary explains that the word means “to break the nape of the neck.”⁴

DESCRIPTION OF MELIKA

Although the Bible does not describe what exactly melika entails, a fact noted explicitly by pshat oriented commentators like Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, a full description is found in TB Zevachim 64b, “R. Zutra b. Toviah said in Rav’s name: How is the bird sin offering pinched off? He grasps its two

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wings in two fingers, and its two legs in two fingers, stretches its neck over the width of his thumb and pinches it off. In a baraita it was taught: The bird is without: he holds its wings in two fingers and its two legs with two fingers, stretches its neck over the width of two fingers, and pinches it off; and this was a difficult rite in the Temple”. The procedure is also described in a baraita quoted in TB Chullin 21a, “How must he [the priest] nip off [the head] of the sin-offering of a bird? He cuts the spinal cord and the neck bone without cutting through the major portion of the surrounding flesh, until he reaches the gullet or the windpipe. On reaching the gullet or the windpipe he cuts through one of them or the major portion of one of them, and then cuts through the major portion of the surrounding flesh. In the case of a burnt offering he cuts through both, or the major portion of both, of these organs. The bird was slaughtered without any knife or utensil, the priest used the fingernail of his thumb to kill the bird.”

This method of slaughter is very unusual. TB Zevachim 44b notes that the priests get to eat parts of every sin offering, including the bird sin offering, even though “I might think that it is neveila [an improperly slaughtered animal which is prohibited to be eaten], therefore [the text] informs us [that it is not so].” The idea is repeated in TB Menachot 73a among other places. TB Yevamot 32b notes that “a common man who ate melika” is punished for eating a neveila, and “when it was permitted in the Sanctuary it was permitted in the case of the priests,” but not to anyone else.

In the early years of Karaism, Anan ben David and others required birds to be slaughtered by melika rather than by shehita, since the Bible never refers to shehita of birds, only animals. By the ninth and tenth centuries many Karaite scholars, including Benjamin Nahawandi and Levi ben Yefet, rejected Anan’s view and accepted rabbinic shehita for birds. Melika had become universally relegated to Temple use only.

It seems strange that the difficult method of melika was chosen for slaughtering birds, since outside the Temple this method makes the bird prohibited for consumption. In this article we will explore the various traditional approaches to explaining the meaning and symbolism of melika, thus justifying its use in the Temple.

TRADITIONAL SYMBOLIC EXPLANATIONS
The Talmud and midrashic literature do not explain the reasoning or symbolism behind *melika*. Symbolic and homiletic explanations are found in later rabbinic literature, and even these are few. These break down into two basic categories, those that find in *melika* a symbol for sin and atonement, and those that link *melika* to a lesson regarding the poor person who brings a bird sacrifice.

*Moshav Zekeinim* is a collection of Tosafot era commentaries on the Bible. There, in the name of R. Eleazar of Worms (c. 1176 – 1238) it is explained that performing *melika* with a fingernail is a reference to Jeremiah 17:1, *The guilt of Judah is inscribed with a stylus of iron, engraved with an adamant point* [tziporen]. The Hebrew term used in the verse for point, *tziporen*, also means “fingernail,” so the priest performs melika with his fingernail to “expiate for a sin written with a *tziporen*.” This seems to be the earliest homiletic explanation of *melika*.

The Italian kabbalist Menahem Recanati (1223 – 1290) explained that *melika* symbolizes the sinner “who turned the back of his neck to God.” The Medieval work *Sefer haChinuch* discusses *melika* as part of an explanation of commandment 124, the bird sin offering. Before providing his explanation for *melika* he states that we do not have the requisite wisdom to understand the meaning behind the details of the sacrificial service. That having been noted, *Sefer haChinuch* writes that “there is a hint regarding *melika* that it occurs on the back of the neck with turtledoves and young doves, that Israel should not be stiff necked”.

*Sefer haChinuch* also suggests that *melika* is done by hand and not with a knife “Because it is an offering of a poor person. This hints that people should be quick regarding the needs of a poor person, therefore the offering does not need ritual slaughter, so that the priest will not be required to find a knife and examine it and cause the poor person to refrain from working during that time. Additionally, to make things quicker, it says that one should start from the back of its neck for it is readily available and one does not need to turn its neck to the sides of the *simanim* (the parts of the animal cut for ritual slaughter).” Thus, the special *melika* rules are there to make the process quicker for the benefit of the poor person who brought the offering.

R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch provides a long explanation of the bird sacrifices in his comments to Leviticus 1:17. He explains that birds
symbolize the unprotected, as in *Like fugitive birds, like nestlings driven away* (Isaiah 16:2) and *My foes have snared me like a bird* (Lam. 3:52). The bird offering, brought by the poor and others dealing with some kind of suffering, represents serving God even in a state of oppression, demonstrating that there is the possibility of nobility and closeness to God even in suffering. For this reason, the bird is slaughtered in a violent and destructive way, with its body torn apart and the vital blood squeezed out. *Melika* is part of the symbolism of the suffering person, serving as a contrast to the relatively neat and refined manner in which animals are slaughtered.

These last two explanations focus on the connection between the poor person and the bird sacrifice, deriving either a lesson regarding assisting the poor or finding meaning in difficult and oppressive circumstances.¹³

**TECHNICAL EXPLANATIONS**

*Moshav Zekeinim* brings a technical reason that a bird could not be slaughtered with a knife like the other animal sacrifices. If the priest was to use a knife the blood would spill to the floor and he would not be able to fulfill *its blood shall be drained out against the side of the altar* (Lev. 1:15). “And if you should say, he should collect [the blood] in a vessel and slaughter with a knife, we can say that since it has a little blood it would be absorbed [in the vessel] and he would not be able to fulfill *its blood shall be drained out*.¹⁴ In this understanding, *melika* was chosen to avoid losing whatever little amount of blood the bird has to absorption in the knife and collecting vessel. Thus, a utensil free method was used for bird offerings. The idea that changes were made regarding the bird offering due to the small amount of blood is also used by Abarbanel in explaining that TB *Zevachim* 65a mandates that the birds were killed at the top of the altar in order “to not lose any of the blood at all.”

A different technical reason is brought by the Tosafot era exegete, Hizkuni. In his comments to Leviticus 1:15, he writes that since the birds were killed at the top of the altar a knife could not be used, since *by wielding your sword upon them [the stones of the altar] you have profaned them* (Exodus 20:21).¹⁵ Recanati further explains that since sacrifices are holy, no knives should have been used on them at all, just like no sharp utensils are used on the holy altar.
However, since there is no other way to slaughter animals, knives had to be used. With birds, since a sharp fingernail can be used, knives are not.\textsuperscript{16}

CONCLUSION

It should be noted that many of these interpretations are built on information regarding the bird offerings that is not explicit in the Bible. Leviticus does not explicitly say that a priest uses his fingernail to kill the bird, or even that he should eat a part of it, or that it is offered on the top of the altar. Still, it was only through clues understood to be provided by these various details of the bird offerings that rabbinic commentators were able to tease out some lesson, symbolism or explanation for the unusual act of melika.

NOTES

5. TB \textit{Chullin} 4a proposes that the Samaritans did not accept the idea that birds required shehita, and even some Sages in believed that there is no Biblical mandate to slaughter birds, and that shehita for birds was only Rabbinic, see TB \textit{Chullin} 27b.
8. We will not delve into the mystical reasons offered for melika. See, for example, Shalom Moskowitz, \textit{Da’at Shalom} vol. 1 (Brooklyn: 1988), pp. 35-45 and his note in vol. 2 p. 227, where he states that he could not find earlier mystical explanations.

12. This idea is expanded upon in Zvi Hirsch Mayzlish, *Dvar Zvi* (Jerusalem: 2007), pp. 214-216.

13. In modern homiletic literature, it has been suggested that the act of *melika* purifies the bird itself, which may have eaten food that belonged to others, thus making it inappropriate to be used as expiation for a sin. After going through *melika*, the bird itself is now purified from its own transgressions. This is based on the idea is found in *Leviticus Rabbah* 3:4 that certain digestive organs of the bird offering are removed and not offered on the altar because they may have been involved in eating food belonging to others. Pinchas Hocherman, *Siach Mordechai* (Bnei Brak: 1996), p. 15.


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