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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Covering of Blood from Sinai to the Crematoria on a Silent Thread and the Twentieth-Century Inversion of the Covered Ground

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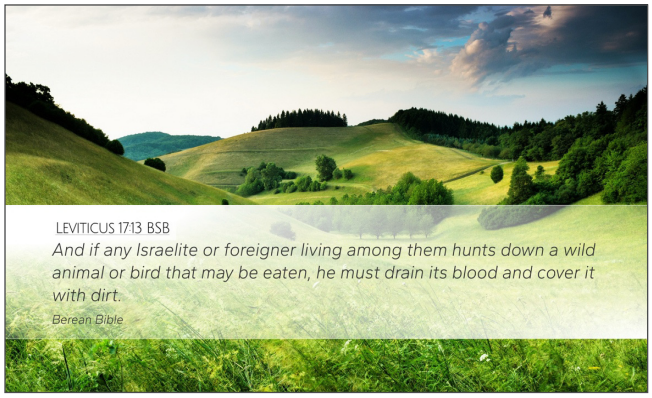

Abstract

The mitzvah of kisui ha-dam (Leviticus 17:13)—the ritual covering, with earth or dust, of the blood of a slaughtered wild animal or bird—occupies the sixth chapter of Tractate Chullin and is, despite its halakhic modesty, one of the most theologically charged ritual acts the Torah legislates. It does not affect the kashrut of the meat; it is a discrete gesture of honor, performed by a knowing human hand, returning the nefesh that has been taken to the adamah that receives it. This essay reads the mitzvah across four interpretive horizons: its halakhic parameters in Shas and the codes; the reasons offered by the rishonim and acharonim (Rambam's polemic against ancient blood-cults, Ramban's ontology of blood-as-nefesh, the Sefer ha-Chinuch's pedagogy of humility, and Hasidic-kabbalistic readings that see in the covering a small enactment of tzimtzum); the ancient Near Eastern ritual context, in which the biblical legislation defines itself against Hittite, Ugaritic, and Mesopotamian blood practices; and the cardiac theology of Leviticus 17:11, ki nefesh ha-basar ba-dam hi. The essay then turns to the theological obverse—the uncovered blood of Abel that cries from the adamah (Genesis 4:10)—and argues that the twentieth-century crematoria constitute a precisely inverted theology of kisui ha-dam: an industrial anti-covering designed to vaporize blood into ash too dispersed to be received by the ground, buried, or heard as cry. Engaging Fackenheim, Berkovits, Greenberg, Raphael, and the author's prior work on the dialectic of midat ha-din and midat ha-rachamim, the paper contends that post-Holocaust theology has not yet adequately registered the structural assault that the crematoria mounted on the biblical covenant with the adamah. A closing clinical coda, framed within the author's project of hermeneutic medicine, asks what gesture of covering might still be recovered at the bedside, in a therapeutic culture that has lost the vocabulary of the sacred at the moment when the blood stops.

Keywords: Kisui Ha-Dam, Blood (Dam) and Nefesh, Leviticus 17, Tractate Chullin, Ritual Slaughter (Shechitah), Post-Holocaust Theology, Crematoria and Anti-Kisui, Cain and Abel (Demei Achikha), Tzimtzum and Lurianic Kabbalah, Ancient Near Eastern Blood Ritual, Fackenheim, Adamah, Hermeneutic Medicine, Sacred Listening, Bedside Ethics.

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1. Introduction

This essay reads a single ritual gesture across the longest theological arc the Jewish tradition has had to traverse: from the priestly legislation of Leviticus 17 to the ash that fell on the fields around Birkenau in the summer of 1944. The gesture is kisui ha-dam, the covering of the blood of a slaughtered bird or wild animal with a deliberate handful of earth. The thesis I will defend is that this small mitzvah—easily passed over in surveys of halakhic literature, structurally unnecessary to the kashrut of the meat—encodes a theology of blood, life, earth, and accountability that, when followed across rabbinic, kabbalistic, and post-Holocaust horizons, illuminates one of the most theologically specific dimensions of the Shoah: not only that European Jews were murdered, but that the architecture of their murder was designed to deny their blood the ground that might have cried out.

Methodologically, the paper proceeds in four registers and a personal coda. Section I sets the ritual scene phenomenologically, from the shochet's hand to the blessing recited over the covered blood. Sections II and III analyze the halakhic parameters and the reasons (ta'amei ha-mitzvot) offered by the rishonim and acharonim, with attention to the disputes between Rosh, Taz, and Rema as reconstructed by R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, and to the four interpretive threads—Maimonidean, Nachmanidean, Chinuchian, and Hasidic—that together illuminate the mitzvah. Section IV situates the biblical legislation against the ancient Near Eastern background recovered by Yitzhaq Feder, David P. Wright, and Jacob Milgrom, arguing that the Priestly tradition inverts rather than borrows the blood-rites of its neighbors. Section V articulates the cardiac theology of nefesh ha-basar ba-dam and its convergence with modern neurological understanding of cerebral perfusion as the material substrate of personhood.Sections VI through VIII pivot from the legislated to the violated. The narrative of Cain and Abel furnishes the biblical archetype of the uncovered blood that cries from the earth; the crematoria of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, Bełżec, and Chełmno furnish its industrial twentieth-century enactment. I argue that the design of the Nazi extermination apparatus—the destruction of bodies by fire, the dispersal of ash, the Sonderaktion 1005 exhumations under Paul Blobel—constitutes a structural anti-kisui: a deliberate theological inversion of the gesture by which the Torah teaches a slaughterer to honor even the blood of a single bird. This claim, I suggest, has not yet been adequately developed within post-Holocaust theology, even by the major voices (Fackenheim, Berkovits, Greenberg, Rubenstein, Wiesel, Raphael) whose work I take as indispensable interlocutors. Section IX is a personal coda from neurological practice, asking what gesture of covering remains possible at the modern hospital bedside after a century in which the adamah has been saturated with the ash of those whose blood was never received. The concluding section gathers these threads into a single moral imperative: that the human hand, knowing what it does, must still cover what it has taken, even now.

2. The Ritual Moment

There is a moment in the slaughter of a bird or wild animal, in Jewish ritual practice, that arrests the hand of the shochet just after his blade has done its work. The jugular vein has been severed in the precise way halakhah demands, the blood has begun to flow, and the creature that was a moment ago breathing and beating has begun to release its life.

> וְאִישׁ אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִן־הַגֵּר הַגָּר בְּתוֹכָם אֲשֶׁר יָצוּד צֵיד חַיָּה אוֹ־עוֹף אֲשֶׁר יֵאָכֵל וְשָׁפַךְ אֶת־דָּמוֹ וְכִסָּהוּ בֶּעָפָר׃
>
> And regarding anyone,[d] whether an Israelite or a stranger who resides among them, who hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten: they shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

The Torah commands, at that precise moment, an act of ritual coveringve-shafakh et damo ve-khisahu be-afar — "and he shall pour out its blood and cover it with dust" (Leviticus 17:13). Earth, sand, fine ash, or pulverized material must be placed by the slaughterer's hand over the pooling blood, and a blessing must be recited: asher kideshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu al kisui ha-dam — "who has sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us concerning the covering of the blood."This is the mitzvah of kisui ha-dam. It occupies the sixth chapter of Tractate Chullin [1]. It is a small law in the scheme of the halakhic corpus and might easily be overlooked by one entering the Mishnaic literature in search of grand

theological systematizations. But it is, I will argue in what follows, one of the most profound ritual acts the Torah legislates. It does not grant edible status to the animal — the meat is kosher whether or not the blood is covered, as Karo records in Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah 28 [2]. It is a discrete act of honor, of reverence, of ritual accounting that remembers what has been taken. In the hands of the rishonim and acharonim, the mitzvah becomes a meditation on the relationship between human beings, the creatures they consume, the earth that receives what has been shed, and the God in whose name even small killings must be bounded by a gesture of remembrance.

This essay takes up the mitzvah at several levels: its halakhic parameters, the reasons offered by the commentators for its existence, its possible ancient Near Eastern precursors and counterparts, and the theology of blood as nefesh — as the very seat of life— that stands behind the entire edifice. It will then turn toward the more disturbing horizon that this ritual law opens: the biblical narrative of uncovered blood, of demei achikha tzo'akim — the voice of Abel's bloods crying out from the earth (Genesis 4:10) — and from there to the twentieth-century atrocity of the crematoria, in which the machinery of genocide was designed precisely to deny the victims the ground that might have cried out. The burning of the bodies was not merely a method of disposal; it was, I will suggest, an anti-kisui, a deliberate inversion of the sacred covering. Where the biblical law takes the blood of a slaughtered bird and covers it with earth so that it rests honorably, the crematoria took the bodies of human beings and dispersed them into white ash that settled on the fields around the camps, where no ground could pool the blood, no dust could cover it, no cry could rise. The white smoke above the chimneys and the thin film of white ash that survivors describe settling on the grass around Birkenau, Majdanek, Treblinka, and Chełmno constituted a theological violation of staggering specificity.

I write this as a neurologist who has spent a career at bedsides where the line between life and death is often marked by just such fluids — where blood, pulse, and breath are the measurable signs of the nefesh whose weight the Torah establishes [3]. The mitzvah of kisui ha-dam has seemed to me, over years of reflection, not merely a rabbinic technicality concerning the ritual disposition of poultry but a deep commentary on the ethics of taking life and the duty that remains after. It has seemed, further, to speak across the terrible distance between the sacrificial imagination of the Temple and the industrial destruction of the twentieth century in ways Jewish theology has not yet fully reckoned with. What follows is an attempt at that reckoning.

3. Halakhic Parameters in Shas and the Codes

The locus classicus of the mitzvah is Leviticus 17:13–14. The Priestly writer — or, in the critical vocabulary of Knohl and Milgrom, the Holiness School editor whose hand is discernible across chapters 17–26 [4, 5] — situates the law within a larger theology of blood that culminates in the famous verse: ki nefesh ha-basar ba-dam hi — "for the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:11).

שָׁחַט מֵאָה חַיּוֹת בְּמָקוֹם אֶחָד, כִּסּוּי אֶחָד לְכֻלָּן. מֵאָה עוֹפוֹת בְּמָקוֹם אֶחָד, כִּסּוּי אֶחָד לְכֻלָּן. חַיָּה וְעוֹף בְּמָקוֹם אֶחָד, כִּסּוּי אֶחָד לְכֻלָּן. רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר, שָׁחַט חַיָּה, יְכַסֶּנָּה, וְאַחַר כָּךְ יִשְׁחֹט אֶת הָעוֹף. שָׁחַט וְלֹא כִסָּה וְרָאָהוּ אַחֵר, חַיָּב לְכַסּוֹת. כִּסָּהוּ וְנִתְגַּלָּה, פָּטוּר מִלְּכַסּוֹת. כִּסָּהוּ הָרוּחַ, חַיָּב לְכַסּוֹת:

If one **slaughtered one hundred undomesticated animals in one place, one covering** of the blood suffices **for all** the animals and there is no obligation to cover the blood of each animal separately. Likewise, if one slaughtered **one hundred birds in one place, one covering** of the blood suffices **for all** the birds. If one slaughtered **an undomesticated animal and a bird in one place, one covering for all of** the blood is sufficient. **Rabbi Yehuda says:** If one **slaughtered an undomesticated animal, he should cover its** blood immediately **and** only **thereafter he should slaughter the bird.** If one **slaughtered** an undomesticated animal or bird **and did not cover** the blood, **and another** person **saw** the uncovered blood, the second person is **obligated to cover** the blood. If one **covered** the blood **and it was** then **uncovered,** he is **exempt from covering it** again. If **the wind** blew earth on the blood and **covered it,** and it was consequently uncovered, he is **obligated to cover** the blood.

The hunter, or in the rabbinic expansion any slaughterer, of a permitted wild animal or bird must pour out the blood and cover it with dust. Tractate Chullin devotes its sixth perek to the unfolding of this law [1]. The Mishnah opens with the principle that kisui ha-dam applies to chayah ve-ohf— wild animal and bird — but explicitly excludes beheimah, the domesticated cattle such as oxen, sheep, and goats. This exclusion is at first puzzling and has been the subject of considerable commentarial ingenuity. The rationale most widely accepted and articulated with clarity in the Sefer ha-Chinuch, is that the blood of the domestic animal is proper to the altar; that is the place where its nefesh is returned [6]. Only blood that will not reach the altar requires the ritual of covering. Chaza"l further debate whether the requirement applies to birds hunted in the wild or also to domesticated fowl (the conclusion favors the broader application), and whether a bird designated for Temple sacrifice is included (the conclusion excludes it, since the altar is the proper destination of its blood).The Mishnah at Chullin 6:4 records a dispute between R. Yehudah and the Sages concerning the slaughter of both a chayah and an ohf in succession [7]. R. Yehudah requires the shochet to cover the blood of the first before slaughtering the second and to recite a new blessing over each, whereas the Sages permit a single act of covering for both. The Rosh, R. Asher b. Yechiel (c. 1250–1327), following the Behag (Halakhot Gedolot, eighth century), reads this mishnah as evidence that kisui ha-dam constitutes the gemar shechitah — the conclusion of the act of slaughter itself — such that to interpose another shechitah between the first slaughter and its covering would be to leave the mitzvah unfinished [8]. The Taz and Rema, in their glosses on the Shulchan Aruch, dispute this, holding that kisui ha-dam is an independent mitzvah, albeit one performed in such close ritual proximity to shechitah that it resembles the tefillin shel rosh and shel yad as paired observances [2]. R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in his analytical reconstruction of this dispute, distinguishes two functions of shechitah — the permission of the meat for consumption, for which shechitah alone suffices, and the kiyum ha-mitzvah, the fulfillment of the commanded act, for which the covering is required [9]. On this reading, kisui ha-dam is not structurally necessary to the kashrut of the bird but is structurally necessary to the ritual integrity of the slaughterer's deed.

The Rambam, in Hilkhot Shechitah 14:1, specifies that the shochet himself ideally performs the covering, reciting the blessing al kisui ha-dam; if he fails or refuses, the obligation falls upon any observer [10].

מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה לְכַסּוֹת דָּם שְׁחִיטַת חַיָּה טְהוֹרָה אוֹ עוֹף טָהוֹר שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ויקרא יז יג) "אֲשֶׁר יָצוּד צַיִד חַיָּה אוֹ עוֹף אֲשֶׁר יֵאָכֵל וְשָׁפַךְ אֶת דָּמוֹ וְכִסָּהוּ בֶּעָפָר". לְפִיכָךְ חַיָּב לְבָרֵךְ קֹדֶם שֶׁיְּכַסֶּה בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל כִּסּוּי הַדָּם:

It is a positive commandment[1] to cover the blood of a kosher wild beast or fowl[2] that was slaughtered, as [**Leviticus 17:13**] states: "If you will snare a wild beast or a fowl that may be eaten, you shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth." Therefore, before covering it, he is obligated to recite the blessing: Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the earth who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to cover the blood.

The material with which the covering is performed must be something capable of sustaining vegetation— dust, fine sand, powdered lime, crushed stone, or ash — such that the blood is genuinely received into the earth rather than merely concealed beneath an object [10]. One may not cover with the foot, for this would treat the mitzvah contemptuously; the hand or an implement must be used [10]. The Talmud at Chullin 87a preserves a striking halakhic subtlety: if the wind blows earth onto the blood so that it is covered naturally, no mitzvah has been performed; and if that natural covering should then blow away, the slaughterer must still cover it deliberately. The act is not reducible to its outcome; it must be performed as an intentional gesture by a human hand [1].

This insistence on the intentionality of the covering is, I believe, the hermeneutical key to the mitzvah. A pile of dirt that happens to fall on blood is not kisui. Only the deliberate gesture — the hand that knows what it is doing and why — constitutes the mitzvah. The Torah is not asking for the concealment of a stain; it is asking for a ritual act of honoring. The dust and the blood meet because a human being has recognized

the gravity of what has just occurred, and has placed the one over the other with knowing purpose.

4. Rishonim and Acharonim: Reasons for the Covering

The ta'amei ha-mitzvot literature, which seeks to articulate the rational or spiritual purposes of the commandments, has attended carefully to kisui ha-dam. Four major threads may usefully be distinguished, and together they form a tapestry of meaning rather than a set of competing explanations.

The Rambam, in the Moreh Nevuchim III:46, offers a rationalist account that situates the law within his broader program of reading Torah legislation as a response to the idolatrous practices of the surrounding peoples [11]. In the religions of the ancient Near East, Rambam argues, blood was conceived as food for the chthonic spirits and the demons, and the consumption of blood was thought to facilitate communion with those powers. By commanding that blood be poured out and covered with dust — rather than consumed, displayed, or offered to underworld deities — the Torah effects a decisive break with that imagination. The blood is returned to the earth not as an offering to spirits but as a neutralization of the magical potency attributed to it elsewhere. The mitzvah, on Rambam's reading, is a polemical act of cultic hygiene against the blood-economies of the gentile nations.

The Ramban (Nachmanides), in his commentary on Leviticus 17, takes a rather different path [12]. For him, the prohibition against consuming blood is rooted in the ontological identification of blood with the nefesh of the animal — the very verse of Leviticus 17:11 that Milgrom, in his Anchor Bible commentary, would later call the "cardiac theology" of the Priestly source [5].

לְבַעֲלֵיהֶן וְהֻכַּר מְפֻלָּא בְּאַנְשֵׁי בֵּית בַּעֲלֵיהֶם, וְכֵן לַיּוֹנִים דַּעַת וְהַכָּרָה. מִן הַיְדוּעַ עוֹד כִּי הַנֶּאֱכָל יָשׁוּב בְּגוּף הָאוֹכֵל וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד, וְאִם יֹאכַל אָדָם נֶפֶשׁ כָּל בָּשָׂר וְהוּא יִתְחַבֵּר בְּדָמוֹ וְהָיוּ לַאֲחָדִים בַּלֵּב, תִּהְיֶה עִבְרִי וְגַסוּת בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם וְתָשׁוּב קָרוֹב לְטֶבַע הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַבַּהֲמִית אֲשֶׁר בַּנֶּאֱכָל, כִּי הַדָּם לֹא יִצְטָרֵךְ עִכּוּל כְּשְׁאָר הַנֶּאֱכָלִים שֶׁיִּשְׁתַּנּוּ בְּעִכּוּלָם, וְיִתָּלֶה בּוֹ נֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם בְּדַם בְּהֵמָה, וְהַכָּתוּב אוֹמֵר (שם שם כא) "מִי יוֹדֵעַ רוּחַ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם הָעֹלָה הִיא לְמָעְלָה וְרוּחַ הַבְּהֵמָה הַיֹּרֶדֶת הִיא לְמַטָּה לָאָרֶץ". וּלְכָךְ אָמַר (ויקרא י״ז:י״ד) "כִּי נֶפֶשׁ כָּל בָּשָׂר דָּמוֹ בְנַפְשׁוֹ הוּא", כִּי לְכָל בָּשָׂר בָּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה נֶפֶשׁ בַּדָּם, וְאֵין רָאוּי לְעָרֵב הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַנִּכְרֶתֶת בְּנֶפֶשׁ הַקַּיֶּמֶת, אֲבָל תִּהְיֶה לָהּ כַּפָּרָה עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְרָצוֹן לִפְנֵי ה'. וְזֶה טַעַם "עַל כֵּן אָמַרְתִּי לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל", בְּעֲבוּר שֶׁהַדָּם הוּא הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְאֵין רָאוּי שֶׁתֹּאכַל הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֶת הַנֶּפֶשׁ, וַאֲנִי חְמַלְתִּי עַל נֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם וּנְתַתִּיו לָהֶם עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ שֶׁתִּהְיֶה נֶפֶשׁ הַבְּהֵמָה מְכַפֶּרֶת עַל נַפְשׁוֹ. וְשָׁנוּ בְּסִפְרֵי (ראה עו), "רַק חֲזַק לְבִלְתִּי אֲכֹל הַדָּם" (דברים יב כג), רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר, מַגִּיד שֶׁהָיוּ שְׁטוּפִים בְּדָם וכו', "כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַנָּפֶשׁ" (שם), לְהַגִּיד מָה גָּרַם, "וְלֹא תֹאכַל הַנֶּפֶשׁ עִם הַבָּשָׂר" (שם) זֶה אֵבֶר מִן הַחַי. זֶה רֶמֶז וּרְאָיָה לְמָה שֶׁפֵּרַשְׁנוּ. וּלְכָךְ צִוָּה עוֹד (ויקרא י״ז:י״ג) לְכַסּוֹת כָּל דָּם בַּחַיָּה וּבָעוֹף, כִּי לֹא יִתְקָרֵב דָּמָם עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, כִּי גַּם בָּעוֹפוֹת לֹא יִקָּרֵב מֵהֶם רַק שְׁנֵי מִינִין בִּלְבַד, וְגַם הֵם אֵינָם נִשְׁחָטִים, אֲבָל בַּבְּהֵמוֹת רֹב הַמְּצוּיִים נִשְׁחָטִים לַשֵּׁם הַנִּכְבָּד וְדָמָם לְכַפֵּר, וְאֵין רָאוּי לְכַסּוֹתוֹ. וְלֹא חָשַׁשׁ לְכַסּוֹת דַּם הַחֻלִּין בִּבְהֵמָה כִּי אֵין חֻלִּין בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְגַם אַחֲרֵי כֵן עַל הָרֹב יָצָוָה:

Now in the opinion of the Greek philosopher [i.e., Aristotle] as interpreted by those who scrutinize his words, it was out of the Active Intellect that there emitted a very fine and bright flash and glitter of light, from which came forth the spark which is the soul of the animal. It is thus in a certain sense a real soul.

It therefore has sufficient understanding to avoid harm, and to seek its welfare, and a sense of recognition towards those with whom it is familiar, and love towards them, just as dogs love their masters, and they have a wonderful sense of recognition of the people of their households, and similarly pigeons have a sense of knowledge and recognition. Now it is also known that the food one eats is taken into the body of the eater and they become one flesh. *Genesis 2:24. If one were to eat the life of all flesh, *Further, Verse 14. it would then attach itself to one's own blood and they would become united in one's heart, and the result would be a thickening and coarsensss of the human soul so that it would closely approach the nature of the animal soul which resided in that which he ate, since blood does not require digestion as other foods do, which thereby become changed, and thus man's soul will become combined with the blood of

the animal! And Scripture states, Who knoweth the spirit of man whether it goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast whether it goeth downward to the earth? It is for this reason that He said, For as to the life of all flesh, the blood thereof is all one with the life thereof, for all flesh, whether man or beast, has its soul in the blood, and it is not fitting to mix the soul that is destined to destruction with that which is to live [in the hereafter].

Rather, it is to be as an atonement upon the altar to be acceptable before G-d. This is the sense of the expression, Therefore I said to the children of Israel: No soul of you shall eat blood, *Verse 12. meaning: "Because the blood is identical with the soul, and it is not proper that one soul devour another, therefore I had compassion upon man's life and gave it [the animal's soul] to him upon the altar, so that the soul of the animal should effect atonement for his soul." Thus we have been taught in the Sifre: "Only be steadfast in not eating the blood. Rabbi Yehudah says, [From the fact that it states, only be steadfast, which indicates that a special effort was required], you learn that they were addicted to eating blood etc. For the blood is the life *Deuteronomy 12:23. — this teaches you why it was prohibited. And thou shalt not eat the life with the flesh — this prohibits the eating of a limb cut from a living animal." This is a hint and proof for what we have explained. It is for this reason that He further commanded that we are to cover up all blood of an [edible] wild beast or fowl [which have been ritually slaughtered] *Verse 13. because their blood is not brought upon the altar, for even of fowls only two species [i.e., young pigeons and turtle doves] may be brought as offerings, and they too are not slaughtered [in the usual way]; *See above, 1:15. but in the case of cattle, most of them that are found among men may be slaughtered to the Glorious Name and their blood is used for atonement, and it is therefore not to be covered.

There was no necessity to require the covering of the blood of an ordinary [unconsecrated] animal, since the slaughtering of cattle for ordinary meat was not permitted in the desert, and even afterwards [when Israel came into the Land of Israel and a meal of ordinary meat was permitted], the commandment of the Torah is directed to the majority [and since in most cases cattle were brought as offerings, and their blood would be needed for the altar, therefore He did not require covering of the blood even if the cattle were not slaughtered as offerings].

Blood is not just a nutrient or a substance; it is life itself, or the material locus of life. To consume blood is to attempt to incorporate another creature's life into one's own, which, in the Ramban's reading, produces a cruelty and a coarseness of spirit in the eater. The covering of the blood is thus an act of ethical formation: the slaughterer who has just taken a life must, in covering the blood, acknowledge that he has not merely acquired meat but has ended a nefesh, a soul.

The Sefer ha-Chinuch, that medieval anonymous compendium that articulates the educational dimension of each mitzvah, places kisui ha-dam at mitzvah 187 and offers perhaps the most psychologically rich reading [6]. The covering, writes the author, is meant le-hakhni'a et ha-adam — to humble the human being— and to remind him that the animal whose blood he has just spilled has a measure of dignity that demands at least this minimal ritual accounting. The dust with which he covers is the very substance of his own mortality: afar va-efer, dust and ashes, as Abraham says to God in Genesis 18:27. In the act of covering, the killer recognizes that he and the killed are kin in their createdness, that they will both return to the earth, and that the taking of life — even for legitimate consumption — is not a morally weightless act. The mitzvah, on this reading, is a moral propaedeutic: a pedagogy of the hand that teaches the heart.

There is a midrashic tradition, preserved in Bereshit Rabbah and elaborated in later kabbalistic literature, that links kisui ha-dam to the moment after the killing of Abel, when Cain did not know what to do with his brother's body [13]. According to this midrash, the Holy One showed Cain two birds, one of which killed the other and then dug a hole in the earth and buried its victim. From this, Cain learned the practice of burial. The birds were thereafter rewarded with the honor of kisui ha-dam — their blood, at least, would be received into the earth with ritual dignity, as their avian ancestor had shown Cain how to dignify the dead. This midrashic linkage between the primordial fratricide and the ritual covering of bird's blood is not a decorative flourish; it encodes a deep theological intuition that the covering of blood is always, at some level, a repetition of the attempt to honor and rectify the shedding of life.

A fourth line of interpretation, particularly prominent in the Hasidic sources and in the phenomenological readings of Elliot Wolfson, sees in kisui ha-dam a symbolic rehearsal of tzimtzum — the Lurianic doctrine of divine self-contraction [14, 15]. Just as the infinite God must withdraw, must cover the blazing light of Eyn Sof in order to make room for creation,

so the human being must cover the violent reality of blood-letting in order to make the world habitable. The earth that receives the blood is a figure of the kelim that receive divine light; and the whole structure of the mitzvah becomes a small enactment of the cosmic drama of concealment that enables presence. On this reading, kisui ha-dam is a ma'aseh be-ze'ir anpin — an act-in-miniature that rehearses the cosmic dynamic of tzimtzum and hitpashtut at the scale of a single bird's blood. It is a very small theater in which a very large drama is performed.

These four threads — Maimonidean polemic against idolatry, Nachmanidean ontology of blood as nefesh, Chinuchian ethics of humility, and Hasidic kabbalah of tzimtzum — together illuminate what the Torah has in mind when it asks the slaughterer to stop for a moment, bend down, and cover with dust what he has just poured out. None of these readings exhausts the mitzvah. The mitzvah is richer than any single explanation and seems, rather, to open onto all of them simultaneously. It is a small act that carries extraordinary theological weight.

5. Ancient Near Eastern Backgrounds and the Priestly Inversion

The question of whether kisui ha-dam has ancient Near Eastern parallels must be approached with care, because the ritual life of the Torah emerges from a cultural matrix in which blood played a vast and varied role — and yet the specific gesture of covering hunted blood with dust, so far as the surviving evidence goes, has no exact analogue in the texts of Israel's neighbors. What the comparative evidence does yield is a rich context within which the distinctiveness of the biblical legislation comes into relief.

The work of Yitzhaq Feder on Hittite and biblical blood ritual has established beyond reasonable doubt that the Israelite sacrificial system shares a deep structural kinship with the blood rites of Late Bronze Age Anatolia, particularly those associated with the Hurrian-influenced region of Kizzuwatna (roughly classical Cilicia, in southeastern Anatolia bordering northern Syria) [16,17]. Hittite texts from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE attest to rituals in which blood — usually of a bird or a small animal — was smeared on cult objects, walls, and ritual patients for purposes of purification, expiation, and consecration. The zurki rite, in which the priest smeared blood on birth stools and other cultic equipment, bears striking procedural similarities to the biblical chatta't offering and its blood manipulations. Feder argues persuasively that the Israelite tradition inherited these practices from the broader Syro-Anatolian cultural region, adapting them to its own theological vision [16]. The Levantine world, stretching from Asia Minor through Syria and down into the Sinai, shared a common ritual vocabulary in which blood functioned apotropaically, as a substance capable of averting evil and restoring purity.

Ugaritic texts warn explicitly against the consumption of blood, associating the practice with necromancy and with the cults of chthonic deities [18]. In the Mesopotamian world, by contrast, blood appears to have had comparatively little ritual significance; Mesopotamian sacrifices were conceived primarily as meals for the gods, with the focus lying on the presentation of the meat and the fat rather than on the blood [19]. The Eblaite goat ritual and the Hittite scapegoat texts show that the motif of transferring impurity to an animal that was then sent away into the wilderness or killed had deep roots in the ancient Near East and stands behind the biblical rites of the se'ir ha-mishtaleach, the scapegoat of Yom Kippur, and the purification of the metzora [20]. David P. Wright's comparative study of elimination rites documents the wider grammar within which the biblical ma'arekhet of blood and purification takes its place [21].

Against this background, the specific legislation of kisui ha-dam emerges as a pointed theological intervention. The Torah commands neither that the blood be smeared on cult objects (as in the Hittite zurki rite), nor that it be poured out on the altar and offered

to the underworld (as was common in Ugaritic and Greek chthonic practice), nor that it be consumed for magical efficacy. It commands, rather, that the blood be poured out and covered with dust. The blood is neither ritually exploited nor demonized; it is quietly, honorably, returned to the earth.

This returning is not neutral. The earth, in the Torah's imagination, is the adamah from which humankind was taken and to which it will return (Genesis 3:19). The earth is also, crucially, the receiver of Abel's blood in the Cain narrative, and the speaker of its cry (Genesis 4:10). By commanding the slaughterer to pour out and cover the blood of the bird with adamah, the Torah places every small act of legitimate killing within the same theological topography as the primordial fratricide — with the crucial difference that in kisui ha-dam the ground receives the blood quietly, without accusation, because the human hand has acknowledged what it has done. The uncovered blood cries. The covered blood rests. That, I take it, is the theological logic that binds the small mitzvah to the grand narrative.

The priestly tradition does not borrow or invent kisui ha-dam from its neighbors. It constructs the mitzvah as a statement within — and in some measure against — the broader ritual world. It takes the universal ancient intuition that blood is powerful and potentially polluting, and it transforms that intuition into a gesture of ethical accountability. The Hittite smears blood on the cult to cleanse the cult. The Israelite covers the blood with dust to honor the life that has been taken. The difference is not incidental; it is constitutive of the moral imagination of Leviticus.

6. Dam Ki Hu Ha-Nefesh: Blood as Life

At the heart of the prohibition against consuming blood, and thus at the heart of kisui ha-dam, stands the dogmatic assertion of Leviticus 17:11: ki nefesh ha-basar ba-dam hi — "for the life of the flesh is in the blood." This verse is one of the most remarkable theological statements in the Priestly corpus. It identifies the nefesh — a term whose semantic range runs from "throat" to "life-force" to "soul" — with the blood, the material fluid that circulates through the body and maintains its vitality. It is not a metaphor. The nefesh is, in some fundamental way, the blood [5].

This identification has consequences that ramify throughout the biblical and rabbinic imagination. Blood is never, in Jewish thought, merely a fluid. It is the material bearer of life. When the Torah prohibits the consumption of blood, it is prohibiting the appropriation of another creature's life-force into one's own body — a theologically and psychologically charged act. When it commands that the blood of slaughtered birds and wild animals be covered with earth, it is commanding that this life-force be returned, quietly and honorably, to the source from which all life comes. Blood belongs to God, not to the one who has taken it (Leviticus 17:14).

The neurological and physiological coordinates of this theology are not to be dismissed. Modern medicine has confirmed, in its own idiom, that the circulation of blood is the material condition of consciousness — that cerebral perfusion is the necessary substrate of the mind [22]. When I have sat at the bedside of stroke patients or of those with anoxic brain injury, I have understood the Priestly verse in a new way. The nefesh really is in the blood, in the sense that the moment-by-moment supply of oxygenated blood to the brain is the material condition of personhood as we clinically encounter it [23]. To lose the blood is to lose the nefesh — not in some mystical sense, but in the most literal and clinical one. This convergence of ancient theological intuition and modern neuroscientific fact has seemed to me, over the years, one of the most striking corroborations of the Torah's phenomenological accuracy about what life is and what its material conditions are [3].

Elliot Wolfson, in his work on Kabbalistic hermeneutics and the phenomenology of sacred temporality, has written eloquently of how blood in the Jewish mystical imagination functions as a material node where the finite and the infinite meet [15, 24]. Blood carries life, and life carries divinity; blood is thus the point at which the divine presence inhabits matter most densely. To spill blood is to spill, in some measure, divine immanence. To cover blood is to acknowledge that immanence and return it, ritually, to its source. The Hasidic masters go further: the covering is a small tikkun — a repair of the original shevirah, the cosmic shattering that scattered the divine sparks into matter [25]. Every handful of dust placed over a bird's pooling blood gathers, at the hidden level, one of those sparks.

From this theology flows the ethical weight of kisui ha-dam. The covering is not an act of disposal. It is an act of theological return. The earth, substrate of creation and destination of all flesh, receives the blood as an offering, and the covering with dust is the human acknowledgment that this return is sacred and must be performed with intentionality. One does

not simply let the blood pool on the ground and walk away. One does not scrub it up and dispose of it as waste. One covers it, deliberately, with a handful of earth, and blesses the God who commanded the covering.

7. Demei Achikha: The Primordial Crime and the Accusing Earth

If kisui ha-dam is the ritual of the covered blood, then Cain and Abel is the theological catastrophe of the uncovered blood. The narrative in Genesis 4 is compressed to the point of opacity, but its theological architecture is entirely clear. Cain kills Abel in a field. The text does not describe the body or the wound. It moves directly to the divine confrontation: ei Hevel achikha — "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain's evasion — ha-shomer achi anokhi, "am I my brother's keeper?" — is met with the terrible retort: kol demei achikha tzo'akim elai min ha-adamah, "the voice of the bloods of your brother are crying out to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10) [26].

The rabbinic tradition seized upon the plural demei — "bloods" rather than "blood" — and read it as a reference not only to Abel himself but to all his potential descendants whose existence was foreclosed by his murder [27]. The Talmud at Sanhedrin 37a develops this into the famous teaching that one who destroys a single life destroys an entire world, for every human being is a singular universe of possibility [28]. The bloods cry out because they carry within them not only the lost life of Abel but all the unborn generations whose potentiality has been snuffed out. The plural is not a grammatical curiosity; it is a theological accusation.

The text's further detail is crucial: the blood cries from the earth. The adamah itself has "opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood" (Genesis 4:11). The earth is not neutral. It is a listening, speaking agent — it has received the blood and now bears witness. God says to Cain: arur atah min ha-adamah, "cursed are you from the ground." The earth, which had received Abel's blood, now refuses to yield its fruit to Cain. The adamah, having become the vessel of the accusing blood, becomes the instrument of divine judgment.

This passage must be read in dialogue with kisui ha-dam. In the ritual covering of the bird's blood, the earth receives the blood quietly, and no cry rises. In the murder of Abel, the earth receives the blood but does not absorb it; the blood remains on the surface of the adamah, crying. The difference lies precisely in the covering. Kisui ha-dam is the ritual gesture that would, if it were possible, quiet the cry — that would transform the raw accusation of shed blood into an honoring return. But no ritual covering is possible for the blood of murder; the mitzvah applies only to the blood of permitted slaughter, not to the blood of homicide. The murder of a human being cannot be ritually rectified. The blood of Abel cannot be covered. It cries forever.

The Zohar, in its reading of the Cain narrative, elaborates the uncovered blood as a cosmic stain on creation — a cry that continues to ascend and to demand justice throughout all the generations [29].

Tikkunei Zohar 118b:3

וַיֹּאמֶר קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צוֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן הָאֲדָמָה (בראשית ד י),
אַנְתְּ הוּא בְּרֵיהּ דְּחִוְיָא דְּגָרַם מִיתָה לְאָדָם, דְּאִתְמַר בֵּיהּ (שם ג יד)
אָרוּר אַתָּה מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה, כַּד אִית לָךְ לְיַרְתָּא מִנֵּיהּ, דְּעוֹבָדָא
דִּילֵיהּ בִּידָךְ, בְּגִין דָּא אָרוּר אַתָּה מִן הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת
פִּיהָ, דָּא הַוָּה אַרְעָא דְּלַיְיט לָהּ קוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא תֵּשַׁע לְוָוטִין,
לַיְיט לְקַיִן חַד לְאַשְׁלָמָא לַעֲשָׂרָה, וּבְגִין דָּא אָמַר (שם יא) אָרוּר
אַתָּה מִן הָאֲדָמָה וכו', כִּי תַעֲבוֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה וכו' דְּתִהֵא תְּשַׁשׁ
חֵילָהּ לְגַבָּךְ, וְלָא יִפְקוּן מִינָהּ מַלְכִין וְשַׁלִּיטִין.

Every subsequent murder renews this primordial cry. Every act of unjustified killing, in the kabbalistic imagination, deepens the accusing voice that rises from the adamah and clamors before the divine throne. The theology of the uncovered blood is thus not only a past event but an ongoing present. History, in this reading, is the long unfolding of the cry that began with Abel.

Emil Fackenheim, in his meditations on post-Holocaust theology, returned repeatedly to this figure of the crying blood [30, 31]. For Fackenheim, the moral horizon of Jewish existence after Auschwitz

is defined by the imperative not to let the blood of the murdered Jews cry in vain — not to let the cry become historical background noise against which life resumes its ordinary patterns. The so-called 614th commandment, in his famous formulation, is not to grant Hitler posthumous victories. Which is to say: do not let the blood of the six million lie uncovered and uncried, or be absorbed silently into the earth as if nothing had happened. The cry must remain audible. The adamah must not be permitted to forget. In this, Fackenheim articulates a post-Holocaust halakhah of memory that operates at precisely the theological level on which kisui ha-dam operates — the level of the gesture that quiets or refuses to quiet the cry of shed blood. I have elsewhere developed this reading within the dialectic of midat ha-din and midat ha-rachamim, arguing that post-Holocaust theology must learn to inhabit the space of "NOT-God" where divine absence is felt without being nihilistically resolved [32].

7. The Anti-Kisui of the Twentieth Century

This brings us to the terrible specificity of the crematoria. The Nazi industrial destruction of European Jewry was, among its other dimensions, a precisely inverted theology of kisui ha-dam. I mean this not as a metaphor but as a structural fact about the perpetrators' practice. Consider the sequence.

First, the machinery of the camps was designed to collect the victims in vast numbers, to kill them efficiently, and then to dispose of their bodies in ways that would leave no trace for the ground to receive [33, 34]. At Treblinka, Sobibor, Bełżec, and Chełmno — the Operation Reinhard and associated extermination camps — the initial disposal method of mass burial was abandoned by late 1942 because the buried corpses were decomposing visibly, producing stench and contamination, and because the perpetrators, increasingly aware that Germany was losing the war, wished to destroy the forensic evidence of their crimes [35]. The Sonderaktion 1005, under SS-Standartenführer Paul Blobel, systematically exhumed and burned the already-buried corpses, ground the remaining bone fragments, and scattered them so that no body, no bone, no blood pool would remain to testify [36].

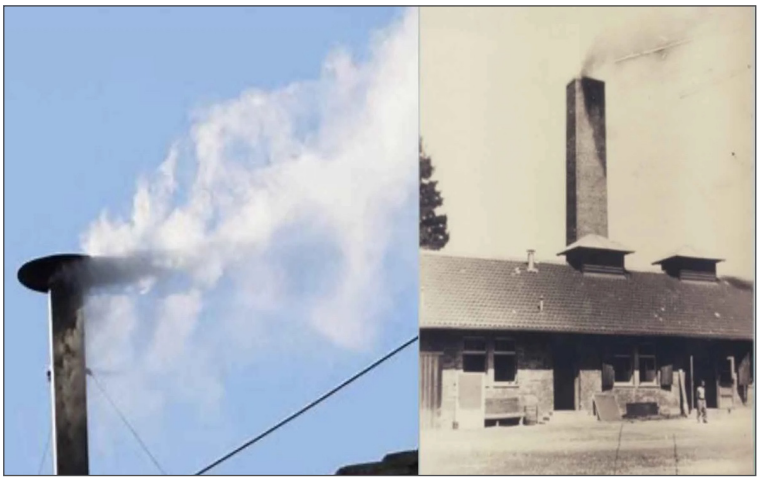
At Auschwitz-Birkenau, the scale of the killing demanded a different architecture from the outset. The crematoria — numbered II, III, IV, and V — were constructed explicitly to reduce the victims to ash at the rate of thousands per day [37]. The gas chambers killed; the crematoria consumed. When crematorium capacity was overwhelmed during the 1944 Hungarian deportations, open-air burning pits were constructed in the woods behind Crematorium V, and Jews were burned in trenches fueled by the melted fat of earlier victims [38]. The ash was collected and either dumped in the marshes around the camp, strewn as "fertilizer" on the surrounding fields, or simply allowed to settle onto the grass and road dust around Birkenau, where survivors report that in the summer of 1944 everything — leaves, branches, boots, bread — had a thin white coating of human ash [39].

This is the anti-kisui of which I have been speaking. Where the biblical ritual covers the blood with earth so that the ground receives the nefesh quietly and the cry is stilled, the Nazi apparatus burned the bodies until there was neither blood nor ground nor cry. The white ash dispersed on the wind is the exact inversion of the handful of dust placed by a shochet's hand over the blood of a single bird. The ritual imagination of the Torah insists that even a single slaughtered sparrow deserves the honor of having its blood covered by a deliberate human hand. The industrial imagination of

the perpetrators insisted that six million human beings deserved to be vaporized into an ash too fine to be gathered, too diffuse to be buried, too thin to cry.

The theological specificity of this inversion has not, I think, been adequately registered in post-Holocaust theology. We have Fackenheim's 614th commandment [30]; Berkovits's Faith After the Holocaust and its defense of divine self-hiding [40]; Greenberg's "cloud of smoke, pillar of fire" imagery of covenantal rupture, together with his demand that no theological statement be made in the presence of burning children that could not be made in their presence [41]; Wiesel's silence and Rubenstein's "death of God" [42]; Melissa Raphael's recovery of the Shekhinah as the maternal divine face accompanying women into the gas chambers [43]. These are all profound and enduring responses. But we have not, I believe, adequately thought the crematoria as a technology of theological anti-covering. The perpetrators did not merely kill; they attempted to annihilate the possibility of the cry. They tried to make the blood unable to speak from the ground because they removed the ground from under the blood. This is a theological crime of a different order from ordinary mass killing, because it is directed against the structure of biblical moral ontology itself— against the capacity of creation to bear witness.

I have written elsewhere, in my essay on the dialectic of midat ha-din and midat ha-rachamim in post-Holocaust theology, about the way the Shoah ruptures both traditional theodicies and Enlightenment progressivisms [32]. The concept of "NOT-God"— a space where divine absence is palpably felt but not nihilistically embraced — offers a framework for suffering that does not resolve into explanation. To that earlier argument I now add this further thought: the crematoria constitute not only a trauma to human bodies and to theological discourse but a structural assault on the biblical covenant with the adamah. By depriving their victims of the covered rest that even a slaughtered bird receives under halakhah, the perpetrators mounted a targeted attack on one of the Torah's deepest moral intuitions — an attack whose theological depth deserves recognition even as its empirical horror resists all articulation.



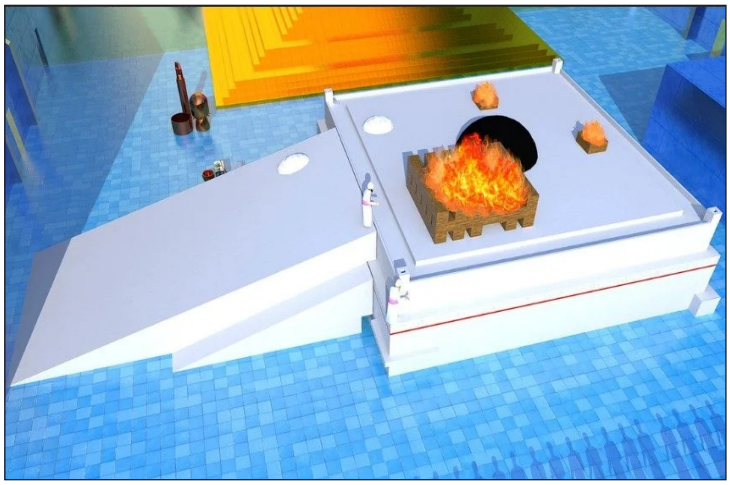
8. The Horror of White Ash

There is an image that has haunted me in my years of reflection on these matters, and it has found its way into some of my poems. In Two Columns of White, written in the spring of 2025 at the time of the papal conclave [44], I placed the white smoke of the Vatican chimney — the traditional sign of a newly elected pope, emerging upon a joyful crowd in St. Peter's Square — alongside the other white smoke that rose over European skies in the middle of the twentieth century. The poem returns, again and again, to the silence of the throne that did not speak against that earlier smoke when it was rising. It asks what weight a shepherd carries when wolves circle close and the lambs are devoured, and it insists that the two whites — one of ecclesiastical announcement, one of industrial murder — are intertwined in memory's chain. Its moral horizon is the question of what silence permits to remain, what the unburied dead continue to witness, and what it costs to choose which sorrows we dare not to name.

I did not write that poem as a polemic against the Church. I wrote it as a meditation on the phenomenology of white ash and the theological problem of a smoke that rises without being received. White ash, dispersed on the wind, cannot be covered. It does not settle in one place. It does not pool. It does not cry from a single spot on the ground. It becomes part of the atmosphere, part of the dust that every living thing breathes. The grandchildren of the survivors, and the grandchildren of the perpetrators, and the cows that graze on the fields around the camps, and the people

who live today in the houses built where the camps stood — all breathe the dispersed remnants of those whom the crematoria consumed. This is a different kind of haunting than the haunting of a single buried corpse. It is diffuse, continuous, inhaled.

The theological question this raises is, for me, the central question of post-Holocaust Jewish spirituality. What does it mean to pray to the God of the adamah when the adamah has been saturated with the ash of victims whose blood was never covered, whose bodies were dispersed before the ground could receive them? The kisui ha-dam imagination suggests that the proper response to shed blood is a ritual covering that quiets the cry and returns the nefesh to its source. But the crematoria have created a form of shed blood for which no covering is possible — because there is no blood left to cover. The blood was boiled off and burned into ash.



In my poem Avir Ha-Mizbeach (December 2025), I worked with a contrasting image — the air above the altar, the avir ha-mizbeach of the Temple, which receives the smoke of sacrifice and sanctifies it [45]. There I placed the heart itself as the altar, the old vows and unspoken wants and stiff expectations as the wood, the fire as a soft breath rather than a knife, and the rising smoke as thin strands of prayer ascending into an ancient air that grows holy in receiving them. The poem insists that sanctity lies not in the offering but in the space it frees, not in the flames but in the trembling air that receives them. This is the proper theology of ascending smoke: smoke that rises from a consensual offering, from a heart laid down as altar, into an air that is prepared to receive and sanctify. It is the reverse of the ash of the camps, which rose from a non-consensual destruction into an air that could not sanctify because no intentional offering was being made.

The smoke of sacrifice is holy; the smoke of genocide is demonic. The difference lies in the intentionality — the same intentionality that the Talmud insists upon for kisui ha-dam. A human hand, acting with knowing purpose, makes the covering sacred. A human hand, acting with knowing purpose, makes the smoke profane. This is why the industrial character of the Nazi destruction is theologically significant. The gas chamber and the crematorium were not ad-hoc explosions of murderous passion. They were designed, planned, maintained, and staffed by engineers, physicians, technicians, and guards who performed their duties with exactness. The intentionality that halakhah requires for the ritual covering of blood was present here in its inverted form — deliberate, sustained, technical, and directed against the covering itself. The perpetrators intended to uncover the blood permanently, to make it impossible for the ground to quiet the cry.

9. Hermeneutic Medicine After Auschwitz: A Personal Coda

In my own theological-clinical project, which I have called hermeneutic medicine [46–49], I argue that the patient's history and body must be approached as a sacred text requiring the interpretive wisdom that traditional scholarship has brought to Torah and Talmud. The physician, in this framework, is not merely a diagnostician acting upon an object but a reader who stands before a text that demands to be heard. The therapeutic encounter becomes a space of sacred listening — a space within which the nefesh of the patient, material and spiritual at once, is recognized and held [50, 51].

Kisui ha-dam has, in recent years, become for me an unexpected touchstone for this clinical project. When a patient dies under my care — and there have been many, over a long neurology career — there is a moment after the last breath in which the room is

absolutely quiet. The monitors have been turned off. The family, if they are present, has begun to weep. The nefesh has left the body, which is to say the blood has ceased to circulate to the brain, and the life that was present a moment ago is no longer present. This is the clinical equivalent of the moment after the shochet's knife has done its work. What is the ritual gesture that honors this moment?

The hospital does not provide one. The body is wheeled away, prepared for morgue or funeral home, processed as an administrative item. There is no covering of the blood in any literal sense, and often no ritual covering in any figurative sense either. The death is clinically noted, the time recorded, the next patient seen. This absence of ritual at the bedside is, I have come to believe, one of the deep wounds of modern biomedicine — one of the structural failures of a therapeutic system that has lost the vocabulary of the sacred [52, 53]. The Cartesian split between res cogitans and res extensa, whose theological genealogy I have traced elsewhere, leaves us with no conceptual resources for the sacred gesture at the moment when the blood stops [53].

My own father, Wilhelm ("Willy") Ungar, died in early 2023 at the age of 102. He was not a direct victim of the Nazi regime — he escaped, he lived, he saw grandchildren and great-grandchildren — but his life was shaped at every level by the Holocaust he survived, the entire family he lost, and the ash that fell on Europe is, in some sense that defies precise articulation, also the ash of his historical world. When he died, the Jewish ritual of taharah was performed, and he was buried according to halakhah, in the Jerusalem tomb, intact. His blood — the blood of a 102-year-old man who had lived through the century— was not spilled but returned to the ground through the natural dissolution of flesh that burial permits. There was a cry, but it was not the cry of Abel; it was the cry of a son and a family saying kaddish over a life completed. The adamah received him, and the cry was the cry of mourning, not of accusation. (I wrote a hesped and a kaddish poem for him in those months, and a further poem at his tombstone setting) [54–56].

I think of his burial, in contrast to the non-burial of those whose ash drifted over the fields around Birkenau. The difference is the difference between kisui ha-dam and the anti-kisui of the camps. It is the difference between a cry that is mourning and a cry that is accusation. It is the difference between adamah and ash. To have a father who was buried is, after Auschwitz, a theological inheritance that one does not take for granted. The mitzvah of kisui ha-dam teaches us what it means for blood to be received by the earth in honor. The Shoah teaches us what it means for that reception to have been denied, on a scale that has altered the spiritual atmosphere of the world.

The moral imperative that emerges from this reflection, I think, is something like the following. The mitzvah of kisui ha-dam — small, specific, easily overlooked — encodes a fundamental ethical insight: that the taking of life, even permitted life, even the life of a sparrow, imposes an obligation of ritual acknowledgment. That the blood shed must be covered by a deliberate human hand, returned to the earth, blessed in the returning. That this small gesture constitutes the human recognition of the nefesh that has been taken. And that the alternative to this gesture— the uncovered blood, the dispersed ash, the silenced cry — is the moral horizon of Cain, of Auschwitz, of every atrocity that has sought to deny its victims the dignity of the received earth.

To practice medicine, to practice Judaism, to practice being human after the twentieth century is to work within a world in which the anti-kisui has occurred on a scale that has changed what it means to say that blood cries from the ground. The ground is saturated. The cry is continuous. The task of the physician, the rabbi, the poet, the ordinary human being is to perform, insofar as we are able, the gestures of covering that would quiet some small portion of that cry — not by denying it, not by burying it again, but by the deliberate acts of honoring, witnessing, and returning that kisui ha-dam teaches. We cover the blood. We recognize the nefesh. We return what has been taken to the earth that receives it. We bless the commandment. This is what remains to us after the century that removed so many bodies from the ground. It is not nothing. It may, in the end, be almost everything.

10. Conclusion

Kisui ha-dam is a small commandment that has carried, in the reading offered here, an extraordinary theological weight. Across the halakhic literature it is treated as the gemar shechitah, the completion of the act of slaughter; across the rishonim and acharonim it is read as a polemic against idolatrous blood-cults, an ethical pedagogy of humility, an ontological recognition that blood is nefesh, and a kabbalistic enactment of tzimtzum in miniature. Against the ancient Near Eastern ritual world from which the Priestly tradition drew its vocabulary, the mitzvah constitutes a distinct moral intervention: blood is

neither smeared on the cult nor offered to chthonic powers nor consumed for magical efficacy, but is quietly returned, by a deliberate human hand, to the adamah from which all flesh comes and to which it returns.

Read against the narrative of Cain and Abel, this small ritual reveals its theological stakes. The uncovered blood cries; the covered blood rests. The difference between cry and rest is the deliberate gesture of a hand that knows what it has done. It is precisely this gesture—and the moral universe within which it is intelligible—that the twentieth-century crematoria were designed to abolish. The argument advanced here is that the Nazi extermination apparatus must be understood not only as a system of mass murder but as a system of structural anti-kisui: an industrial machinery whose dispersal of human blood into ash too fine to be gathered, too diffuse to be buried, too thin to cry, constituted a targeted assault on one of the deepest moral intuitions of biblical theology. The adamah has been saturated with ash that no covering can quiet, and this saturation alters, irrevocably, the spiritual atmosphere within which Jewish and human existence continues.

Three implications follow. First, post-Holocaust theology must reckon more explicitly with the crematoria as a technology of theological anti-covering, alongside its existing reckonings with mass death, divine absence, and covenantal rupture. The categories of Fackenheim, Berkovits, Greenberg, and Raphael remain indispensable, but they have not yet, to my reading, located the specific theological crime that lies in the dispersal of ash as such. Second, the ritual logic of kisui ha-dam offers a framework within which to think the contemporary practice of medicine, where the moment after life leaves a body is almost universally unmarked by any gesture of sacred acknowledgment. Hermeneutic medicine, as I have developed it elsewhere, asks the physician to read the patient as a sacred text; the mitzvah of covering asks the physician, and the family, and the institution, to honor the nefesh that has just departed with a gesture that knows what has occurred. Third, and most fundamentally, the moral imperative of kisui ha-dam survives the century that violated it on the largest possible scale. The blood we are still able to cover, we must cover. The earth that is still able to receive, we must allow to receive. The cry we are still able to quiet by honoring rather than denying, we must quiet by honoring. This is what remains to us of the commandment after the smoke has cleared. It is not nothing. It may, in the end, be almost everything.

Kisui ha-Dam and the Blood of Hevel

ADDENDUM

Primary and Secondary Sources

Two corrections to my previous answer

First: I was wrong to say that the classical midrashic corpus does not make this connection. It does. Midrash Tanchuma, Bereshit 10, makes the connection explicitly — the birds are rewarded with kisui ha-dam because one of them taught Cain how to bury Hevel. I should have placed this before the medieval material, not after, and I apologize for the misstatement.

Second: I said the Kli Yakar on Vayikra 17:13 was "the locus classicus" for this theological reading. Having now consulted his actual commentary ad loc., I find that he does not make the Cain–Hevel connection there. His account of kisui ha-dam on Vayikra 17:13 is pragmatic — the covering functions as a visible marker (heker) against inadvertent consumption of blood, unnecessary for beheimot whose blood goes on the altar. I should not have cited him from memory, and I have removed that claim below.

1.The Biblical Terms of the Connection

The intertextual hinge is in the shared vocabulary of blood and earth. In Bereishit 4:10, the earth (adamah) receives Hevel's blood and cannot contain it; the blood cries out. In Vayikra 17:13 the earth (afar) is commanded to receive and conceal the blood of a hunted animal. The substance is the same; the theological disposition is reversed. This verbal pairing is what the tradition works with.

1.1 Bereishit 4:10

הָמָ֔דְאָה-וְמ יַלֵּא סיקָעצָ֖דיחָא יֵמִ֣ד לוֹק֑תיִשָׁע הֶ֣מ רֶ֔מאֹיַו

"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground."

1.2 Vayikra 17:13

הָיַח דיֵצ דוּצִי רֶ֣שֲא סָכוֹתְּב הָגָה הֵגָה-וְמוּ לְאָרְשִׂי יֵנְּבמ שִׁיא שִׁיאִוּ
רָ֖עָב וּהָסְכִּו וֹמָּד־תָּא ֲרַכָּשִׁוּ לְכֹאַי רֶ֣שֲא רוֹע-וֹא

> "Any Israelite or any stranger residing among them who hunts down a wild animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth."

2. The Classical Midrashic Source

Midrash Tanchuma, Bereshit §10 (printed/"Warsaw" recension)

This is the source I should have cited in my previous answer. It appears in the discussion of the mark God placed on Cain (the sign referenced in Bereishit 4:15). Among several opinions on what the "sign" was, the midrash offers:

הָיָה, לֶבֶה תָּא וַיִּק גַרָוֶשׁ הָעָשָׂב. וּחְצַמְּב עַבָק וָרֶק :סִירְמוֹא שִׁיְו אוּה דְוּחְבָּ שׂוֹדָקָה וֹל וָמיז .תוֹשָׂעַל הַמ וַיִּק־עַדּוֹי הָיָה אֹלְוֹ דָלְשׁוּמ ,וֹרָבְקוֹ וֹדָיְב רַפָחוֹ ,וֹרֵבָח תָּא וָהַמ דָחָא גַרָוֹ ,סִירוֹהְט תוֹפוֹע יֵנְש תָּא תוֹסַכְל תוֹפוֹעָה וּכְז דָכִיפְל .לֶבֶה תָּא רַבָקוֹ רַפָחוֹ וַיִּק דַמָל וּנָּמְמוּ .נָמָּד.

> "And some say: [God] set a horn upon his [Cain's] forehead. At the hour when Cain killed Hevel, [Hevel's body] was cast out and Cain did not know what to do. The Holy One, blessed be He, summoned for him two pure birds, and one killed the other. It dug with [its claw] and buried it, and from this Cain learned, and he dug and buried Hevel. Therefore the birds merited that their blood be covered."

Source: Midrash Tanchuma (printed Warsaw edition), Bereshit, siman 10. Text reproduced from Wikisource (https://he.wikisource.org/wiki/תישארב_אמוחנת_שרדמ) and parallel printing at Daat (daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/tanhuma/1.htm).

Three observations on this passage. (1) The connection is explicit: the concluding clause — le-fikhakh zakhu ha-ofot le-khasot et daman — "therefore the birds merited that their blood be covered" — ties the mitzvah of kisui ha-dam directly to the Cain and Hevel narrative. (2) The causal logic runs in an unexpected direction: the birds earn the dignity of being "covered" because they performed the first act of burial for a human body. The mitzvah is not presented as a response to Hevel's uncovered blood but as a reward to the teaching species. (3) The birds are described as ofot tehorim — "pure birds" — anticipating the halakhic category of birds subject to kisui ha-dam (kosher fowl, not beheimot).

Textual note. The Tanchuma exists in multiple recensions. The passage above is from the printed (Warsaw) Tanchuma. The Buber recension and Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer ch. 21 preserve related but not identical traditions; see §III below. On the dating of Tanchuma traditions, scholarly opinion ranges from the fifth to the ninth century; the bird/burial tradition appears to be ancient, as parallels exist in the Qur'an 5:31 (Surat al-Ma'ida), which presupposes the story.

3. A Related but Distinct Midrashic Tradition

3.1 Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 21

In this parallel tradition, the student is Adam (not Cain), and the teacher is a single raven rather than two doves. Crucially, this version does not make the kisui ha-dam connection. I include it here to clarify what the Tanchuma passage is and is not

,לֶבֶהָב תוֹשָׂעַל הַמ וּעְדָי אֹלְוֹ וּיָלָע סִיכּוֹבוּ סִיבְשׁוֹי הָנָחוּ סָדָא וּיָה תָּא רַבָקוֹ הָמָהֲאָב רַפָחוּ דָחָא בֵּרוֹע אָב .הָרוּבְק וְיִד סִיעְדּוֹי וּיָה אֹלֵשׁ לֶבֶה תַּלְבִנ תָּא אָשָׁנ דָּיִמ .הָז בֵּרֹעְכ הָשָׁעָא :סָדָא רַמאָ .וְנְיֵעל וֹרֵבָח .רָפָעָב וֹרָבְקוּ.

> "Adam and his companion were sitting and weeping and mourning for him, and they did not know what to do with Hevel, for they were unacquainted with burial. A raven came whose companion had died, and it dug in the ground and buried its companion before their eyes. Adam said: 'I will do as this raven.' Immediately he took Hevel's body and buried it in the earth."

Source: Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 21. Translation adapted from Friedlander (1916) and the Hebrew editio princeps.

Note the differences from Tanchuma. Here the teacher is a single raven, not two doves; the student is Adam, not Cain; Hevel is buried in the adamah (ground) without any mention of kisui ha-dam as a subsequent institution. Critically, the PRE tradition does not close with the formula "therefore the birds merited…" The kisui ha-dam linkage is specific to the Tanchuma recension.

4. The Halakhic Sugya — Chullin 83b–88b

The Talmudic treatment of kisui ha-dam, which spans the sixth perek of Chullin, does not invoke the Cain–Hevel narrative directly. The midrashic-aggadic motifs developed there concern the dignity of the mitzvah itself (Chullin 87a: one should not cover with the foot, lest mitzvot be treated as bizui), the obligation that the shochet himself perform the covering, and the beracha question discussed by Rashi, Rosh, Rambam, and the Tur. The absence is itself informative: the halakhic corpus secures the dignity of the mitzvah on internal grounds, without needing the Kayin/Hevel frame. That frame is aggadic, not halakhic, and enters

the halakhic literature only through later harmonizing commentary.

4.1 The Medieval Commentators on Vayikra 17:13

4.1.1 Rashbam and Hizkuni

Both read the mitzvah pragmatically — the blood is covered so that it will not be eaten inadvertently. Neither invokes the Cain–Hevel frame. Cited at Vayikra 17:13, s.v. ve-khisahu be-afar (Rashbam) and ad loc. (Hizkuni).

4.1.2 Ibn Ezra

The covering prevents an appearance of pagan sacrifice in the field; blood left exposed might be misread as evidence of idolatry. Vayikra 17:13, s.v. o of asher ye'akhel. No Cain–Hevel connection.

4.1.3 Ramban (Nachmanides)

Vayikra 17:11–13. Ramban gives several reasons for the blood prohibition and for kisui ha-dam specifically: blood is God's "portion" (analogous to chelev); the mitzvah prevents the inferencethatblood of chaya/of should reach the altar when in fact it cannot. He also cites the Rambam's position (from the Guide III:46) that the covering breaks pagan rites of communion with demonic spirits through ingested blood. Ramban does not make the Cain–Hevel connection here, though elsewhere (Bereishit 4:10) he develops the theological weight of "blood crying from the earth" in its own right.

4.1.4 Seforno

Wild animals are typically slaughtered in open fields where, in Seforno's schema, demons are concentrated. Uncovered blood attracts them; the covering disrupts their proliferation. Vayikra 17:13, s.v. ki yatzud tzeid. No Cain–Hevel connection.

4.1.5 Ohr ha-Chaim

Chaim ibn Attar, ad loc., focuses on the anomalous word order (ve-khisahu rather than yekhasehu) and argues that the initial term ve-shafakh ("he shall pour out") carries its own prohibitive weight, implicit before the covering is commanded. The passage is a close grammatical reading and does not invoke the Cain–Hevel frame.\

4.1.6 Kli Yakar

Here I must correct myself. My previous answer claimed the Kli Yakar on Vayikra 17:13 was the locus classicus for the tikkun-of-Hevel reading of kisui ha-dam. On inspection of his actual commentary (verified against Wikisource and the Torat Emet database), he offers two explanations, neither of which invokes Cain or Hevel. The first: kisui ha-dam serves as a visible marker (heker) against inadvertent consumption of blood; the marker is unnecessary for behemot because their blood reaches the altar, which is marker enough. The second: because chaya/of meat is rare and obtained through hunting, and therefore especially desired, the consumer is at heightened risk of impatience — the covering disciplines that impatience. The Kli Yakar ad Vayikra 17:13 does not make the argument I attributed to him. I apologize for the misattribution.

4.1.7 Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto)

This is the commentator who actually develops the pragmatic intertextual argument, and I should have named him rather than the Kli Yakar. Shadal on Vayikra 17:13 (s.v. ve-khisahu be-afar) offers two readings in addition to the pagan-rites reading: first, that uncovered blood invites other animals to consume it — a degradation of the slaughtered creature; second, that exposed blood on the ground might be mistaken for human blood, giving the impression of a land saturated with murder. It is this second reading that resonates with Bereishit 4:10 — the trope of "uncovered blood as testimony to injustice" that runs from Kayin through Yehezkel 24:7–8 ("for her blood is in her midst, she set it upon the bare rock; she did not pour it on the ground to cover it with dust") through Iyov 16:18 ("O earth, do not cover my blood") through Yeshayahu 26:21. Shadal's argument does not explicitly cite the Tanchuma; it is the peshat analogue of the midrashic intuition.

Several biblical passages participate in the semantic field the Tanchuma is drawing on. The key verses, in order of theological weight:

5. Bereishit 37:26

וּמָה־בֶּצַע כִּי נַהֲרֹג אֶת־אָחִינוּ וְכִסִּינוּ אֶת־דָּמוֹ׃

"What profit is it if we slay our brother and cover his blood?" — Yehudah's question about Yosef uses the identical verbal pair (shafakh/kisui) that structures Vayikra 17:13. The passage is the most explicit internal echo in the Torah itself. A darshan reading Vayikra 17 cannot fail to hear Bereishit 37.

6. Yechezkel 24:7–8

כִּי דָמָהּ בְּתוֹכָהּ הָיָה עַל־צְחִיחַ סֶלַע שָׂמָתְהוּ לֹא שְׁפָכַתְהוּ עַל־הָאָרֶץ לְכַסּוֹת עָלָיו עָפָר׃ לְהַעֲלוֹת חֵמָה לָנְקֹם נָקָם נָתַתִּי אֶת־דָּמָהּ עַל־צְחִיחַ סֶלַע לְבִלְתִּי הִכָּסוֹת׃

> "For her blood is still in her; she placed it upon a bare rock; she did not pour it upon the ground to cover it with dust."

This is the prophet's inversion: Jerusalem's bloodshed is catastrophic precisely because it was not covered— it remains visible, crying out. The verse is the negative image of the Vayikra 17 procedure. Later aggadah about Zecharia's boiling blood in the Temple courtyard (Sanhedrin 96b) extends the same logic.

7. Iyov 16:18

יִתְקָעֲזִל סוֹקָמ יִהְי-לֹאַו יִמָּד יִסַכְתִּ-לֹאַ ץֶרֶא

> "O earth, do not cover my blood, and let my cry have no resting place."

Iyov explicitly associates the uncovered blood with the survival of the victim's cry — the exact valence of Hevel's blood crying out in Bereishit 4:10. The passage confirms that "covered blood" and "blood that cries" are theological opposites in biblical Hebrew.

The Tanchuma passage is cited in contemporary halakhic and homiletic literature on kisui ha-dam— e.g., the OU Torah "Dalet Amot of Halakhah" treatment of the mitzvah, where it is identified as "the Midrash" behind the reward-to-birds logic. Michael Kurin's recent essay "The Duality of Kisuy Ha-Dam" (Lehrhaus, April 2026) develops the broader intertextual argument rigorously: kisui ha-dam inhabits both the register of civilized burial (covering the dead with dignity) and the register of concealment (Yehudah's proposal regarding Yosef), and the Torah's deliberate invocation of both registers is itself the moral pedagogy. Kurin does not cite the Tanchuma but his reading is fully consistent with it.

8. A Contemporary Observation

In halakhic decisor terminology the Tanchuma's logic is sometimes called the "gratitude" or "reward" rationale for kisui ha-dam, distinguished from the (more common) "heker" rationale of the Kli Yakar and from the "dignity of the animal" rationale associated with the Sefer ha-Chinukh mitzvah 187 ("ra'ui lanu lekhasot ha-nefesh u-lehastiro me-ein ro'av terem nokhal ha-basar" — "it is fitting for us to cover the soul and conceal it from the sight of its viewers before we eat the flesh"). The three rationales operate on different planes — aggadic-etiological, halakhic-didactic, and ethical-sensibilizing — and can be held simultaneously.

9. Revised Position

Given the sources above, the honest statement of the matter is this. The connection between kisui ha-dam and the blood of Hevel is made explicitly in the classical midrashic corpus (Tanchuma Bereshit 10), though not in the Talmudic halakhic sugya (Chullin 83b–88b) and not in the Amoraic midrashim I checked (Bereishit Rabbah, Vayikra Rabbah). The peshat commentators on Vayikra 17:13 — Rashbam, Hizkuni, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Seforno, Ohr ha-Chaim, Kli Yakar — develop other rationales and do not invoke Cain. The pragmatic intertextual argument that the Vayikra 17 language deliberately echoes Bereishit 4 (and Bereishit 37, and Yechezkel 24, and Iyov 16) is most fully worked out in Shadal and in modern commentators such as Kurin. The strongest claim that can be made responsibly is: the midrashic tradition in Tanchuma Bereshit 10 encodes an aggadic reading in which kisui ha-dam is structurally related to the burial of Hevel, and this reading is supported by the dense biblical intertext of blood, earth, covering, and crying, even though the peshat commentators generally do not foreground it.

I should not have suggested in my previous answer that the Kli Yakar was the locus classicus for this reading. The locus classicus is Tanchuma Bereshit 10. The pragmatic intertextual version is Shadal.

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