

PARASHAT RE'EH

The Sanctity of the Nation of Israel in Sefer Devarim

By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. THE PROBLEM

Chapter 12 of Sefer Devarim is one of the most central chapters in the entire Torah with regard to the Temple. In this chapter, we learn for the first time of "the place that God will choose, to make His name dwell there," and the text lists the various purposes of this place and the prohibitions that derive from its selection. We also find in this chapter another interesting phenomenon: again and again the Torah repeats the offerings and gifts that Bnei Yisrael should bring to the Temple, and each time we note that no mention is made of the mandatory sacrifices. Only free-will offerings and other voluntary gifts are mentioned:

"You shall bring to there your burnt offerings and your sacrifices and your tithes and the offerings of your hands, and your vow offerings and free-will offerings, and the first-born of your cattle and your flocks." (verse 6)

"To there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the offerings of your hands, and all your choice vow offerings that you vow to God." (verse 11)

"There shall you offer up your burnt offerings." (14)

"You cannot eat in your gates the tithe of your corn or your wine or your oil, or the first-born of your cattle and flocks, or all your vow offerings that you vow, or your free-will offerings and the offerings of your hands; you shall eat them before the Lord your God." (17-18)

"Only the holy things which you have, and your vow offerings, shall you bring, and come to the place that God will choose. And you shall offer your burnt offerings – the flesh and the blood – upon the altar of the Lord your God." (26-27)

Out of all the different types of sacrifices, then, chapter 12 makes explicit mention only of the burnt offerings (olot) and the "sacrifices" (zevachim) – meaning, the peace offerings (shelamim). [1]

In fact, the concentration of sacrifices in this chapter highlights a striking phenomenon that characterizes Sefer Devarim in general. In the entire Sefer, not a single mention is made of the sin and guilt offerings (chatat ve-asham)! [2] What is the meaning of this phenomenon?

B. THE CONCEPT OF ATONEMENT IN SEFER VAYIKRA

It appears that this phenomenon is connected to a broader issue: the concept of "atonement" (kappara) in Sefer Devarim, and how it differs from that in Sefer Vayikra.

In Sefer Vayikra, what stands out is the idea that the purpose of the obligatory sacrifices – the sin offering and the guilt offering – is to achieve atonement for sin. The process of atonement takes place by means of the sacrifice, placing the blood upon the corners of the altar, and sprinkling the blood. Chapter 4 of Vayikra, which outlines the different types of sin offerings, highlights the critical function of the blood of the ox sacrificed as a sin offering:

"If the anointed kohen sins, making the nation guilty, then he shall offer for his sin which he sinned a young ox without blemish to God as a sin offering. And he shall bring the ox to the entrance of the Ohel Mo'ed before God, and shall place his hand upon the head of the ox, and he shall slaughter the ox before God. And the anointed kohen shall take of the blood of the ox and bring it to the Ohel Mo'ed, and the kohen shall dip his finger into the blood and sprinkle some of the blood seven times before God, towards the veil of the Sanctuary...

And if all the congregation of Israel shall sin unknowingly, for something is hidden from the eyes of the people, and they perform one of all of God's negative commandments, such that they are guilty, and the sin that they sinned becomes known – then the people shall offer a young ox as a sin offering, and shall bring it before the Ohel Mo'ed. And the elders of the people shall place their hands upon the head of the ox before God, and the ox shall be slaughtered before God. And the anointed kohen shall bring some of the blood of the ox to the Ohel Mo'ed. And the kohen shall dip his finger into the blood and sprinkle it seven times before God, towards the veil. And he shall place some of the blood upon the horns of the altar that is before God... and he shall do with the ox as he did with the ox for the sin offering – so shall he do with it, AND THE KOHEN SHALL MAKE ATONEMENT FOR THEM, and they shall be forgiven."

The kohen's act of sprinkling the blood upon the veil and on the altar represents the required atonement, and only through the blood is it attained. The same is true concerning the goat offered by the national leader who has sinned ("AND THE KOHEN SHALL MAKE ATONEMENT FOR HIM for his sin, and he shall be forgiven," Vayikra 4:25-26), and likewise the female goat offered

by one of the common people ("AND THE KOHEN SHALL MAKE ATONEMENT FOR HIM, and he shall be forgiven," 4:30-31).

Attention should be paid to the fact that atonement and forgiveness are dependent upon the bringing and offering of the sacrifice alone; the text makes no mention of any process of repentance, prayer or even a request for forgiveness on the part of the sinner! Moreover, the process of atonement is related to actions performed by the kohen; it is he who actually "atones." What is the nature of this atonement? Why is it dependent upon the kohen and the placing and sprinkling of blood?

A clear answer to this arises from a description of the service performed by the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, where the Torah describes how the Kohen Gadol "atones for the Sanctuary":

"He shall take of the blood of the ox and sprinkle with his finger upon the covering eastward, and before the veil he shall sprinkle seven times from the blood with his finger. And he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is for the nation, and bring its blood inside the veil, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the ox, sprinkling it upon the covering and before the veil. AND HE SHALL ATONE for the Sanctuary from the defilement of Bnei Yisrael and from their iniquities, for all their sins, and so shall he do for the Ohel Mo'ed that resides with them in the midst of their defilement." (Vayikra 16:14-16)

In other words, the sins of Bnei Yisrael cause the Sanctuary to be defiled. The process of placing and sprinkling the blood is comparable to a process of STERILIZATION or PURIFICATION (chitui, as in the phrase "ha-kohen ha-mechateh," Vayikra 6:19) of the holy vessels from the soiling that adheres to them due to the sins of Bnei Yisrael. "Atonement" (kappara) is an expression of wiping and cleaning (see Rashi on Bereishit 32:20), and indeed – it is performed specifically by a kohen, who has access to the Sanctuary.

Similarly, the Kohen Gadol acts for atonement for the altar, which is likewise "soiled" by the sins of Bnei Yisrael:

"He shall go out to the altar that is before God AND MAKE ATONEMENT FOR IT, and take of the blood of the ox and of the blood of the goat, and place it upon the horns of the altar around. And he shall sprinkle upon it some of the blood with his finger, seven times, AND PURIFY IT AND SANCTIFY IT FROM THE IMPURITIES OF BNEI YISRAEL." (ibid. 18-19)
[3]

When atonement for the Temple and its vessels is achieved, Bnei Yisrael must also be atoned for:

"HE SHALL MAKE ATONEMENT for the holy Sanctuary and the Ohel Mo'ed, and for the altar SHALL HE ATONE, and for the kohanim, and for all of the people of the nation SHALL HE ATONE. And this shall be for you an eternal statute – TO ATONE for Bnei Yisrael from all of their sins once a year." (ibid. 33-34)

Sefer Vayikra thus expresses the ramifications of the sin concerning the Sanctuary. Hence, the process of atonement likewise focuses on "purification" of the Temple from the damage caused by the sin.

C. "ATONE FOR YOUR NATION, ISRAEL"

In contrast to the many appearances of the verb "k-p-r" (atone) in Sefer Vayikra, in Sefer Devarim it appears in only one context – in the words of the elders of the city, in the procedure involving the "egla arufa" (the calf whose neck is broken as atonement by the elders of the city adjacent to the site of an unsolved murder). After the calf's neck is broken in the ravine, the elders declare:

"Our hands did not spill this blood, nor did our eyes see. ATONE for Your nation, Israel, whom You redeemed, O God, and do not lay innocent blood among Your people, Israel.' And the blood shall be forgiven them." (Devarim 21:7-8)

This atonement is performed by God Himself, through the prayer of the elders. The stain, which in Sefer Vayikra adhered to the Sanctuary and its altars, adheres in Sefer Devarim to the Nation of Israel. So long as the murderer is not brought to justice, innocent blood is laid upon Bnei Yisrael, and it is only through the breaking of the neck of the heifer and the prayer of the elders that this stain is removed. [4]

This difference between Sefer Vayikra and Sefer Devarim must necessarily give rise to another difference – the reason for the prohibition against eating blood. In both Sefarim this prohibition is listed, but it is explained differently in each. In Sefer Vayikra we read:

"Any man of the house of Israel or of the strangers that dwell among them, who eats any type of blood – I shall set My face against that person who eats blood, and cut off that soul from its people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, AND I HAVE GIVEN IT TO YOU UPON THE ALTAR TO MAKE ATONEMENT FOR YOUR SOULS, FOR IT IS THE BLOOD THAT MAKES ATONEMENT FOR THE SOUL. Therefore I have said to Bnei Yisrael, No person among you shall eat blood, nor shall the stranger that resides among you eat blood. And any person from Bnei Yisrael or from among the strangers that reside among you who hunts for the meat of animals or birds that may be eaten – he shall pour its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of all flesh is in its blood, and I have told Bnei Yisrael: You shall not eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of any flesh is its blood; anyone who eats it shall be cut off." (Vayikra 17:10-14)

The prohibition against eating blood arises from the fact that the blood atones for the soul by being placed upon the altar. This also explains the caution required in the treatment of blood, and the obligation to cover blood. But in our parasha, the prohibition against eating blood is mentioned only in its own right: "Only be strong, not to eat the blood, FOR THE BLOOD IS THE LIFE, and you shall not eat the life together with the flesh. You shall not eat it; you shall pour it upon the ground like water" (12:23-24). There is a prohibition against eating the life together

with the flesh, without any connection to the function of the blood upon the altar. For this reason, there is also no mention here of the requirement to cover the blood, since this arises from the special function of the blood in Sefer Vayikra. Rather, we are told here only, "You shall pour it upon the ground like water."

Now let us return to our original question: Why is no mention made of the obligatory sacrifices in Sefer Devarim? Since Sefer Devarim emphasizes the effect of the sin on Am Yisrael, the text ignores the effect on the Mishkan. The highlighting of the concept of atonement amongst Am Yisrael leads to a general orientation that sets aside any attention to the obligatory sacrifices, whose essence is atonement via the Temple and the holy vessels. Instead, Sefer Devarim emphasizes the process of atonement of Am Yisrael, which is based upon acts of repair and prayer.

D. THE SOURCE OF HOLINESS

This difference between Sefer Vayikra and Sefer Devarim is not coincidental. It is interwoven in many parashiot that occur in both places. An obvious example occurs in our parasha. In parashat Emor, in Sefer Vayikra, mention is made of the prohibition against creating a bald patch on the head of a kohen, which arises from the sanctity of the kohanim. The Torah explains there that the sanctity of the kohanim derives from the fact that they are engaged in Divine service:

"They shall not make a baldness upon their heads, nor shall they shave the corners of their beard, nor shall they make any cut in their flesh. They shall be holy to their God, and they shall not profane the name of their God, for they offer the offerings by fire – the bread of their God – and they shall be holy... and you shall sanctify him for he offers the bread of your God; he shall be holy to you, for I, God Who makes you holy, am holy."
(Vayikra 21:5-8)

Later on, we find the prohibition against eating dead meat or animals torn apart by wild beasts, arising from the obligation for the kohanim not to pollute the holy offerings of Israel by causing them to become impure:

"Speak to Aharon and to his sons, that they should separate themselves from the holy things of Bnei Yisrael, which they offer to Me, and not profane My holy name – I am God. Tell them: For all your generations, anyone who comes close, from all of your seed, to the holy things that Bnei Yisrael offer to God – while he is defiled – then that soul will be cut off from before Me, I am God... THAT WHICH DIES BY ITSELF, OR IS TORN BY WILD BEASTS, he shall not eat to defile himself with it; I am God." (22:2-8)

In light of what we read in parashat Emor, it would appear that the prohibitions against creating a bald patch and eating from carcasses are unique to kohanim, as a result of their special sanctity as those who perform Divine service.

In our parasha, in contrast, we find both these prohibitions, this time as applying to all of Am Yisrael. In our parasha, too, the reason for these laws is the sanctity of the people. What is interesting is that the source of the sanctity is not Divine service in the Temple, but rather the special quality of holiness that is inherent to Am Yisrael in general. Thus we are told, concerning the prohibition of making a baldness:

"You are children to the Lord your God; you shall not mutilate yourselves nor shall you place A BALDNESS between your eyes for the dead. For you are A HOLY NATION to the Lord your God, and God has chosen you to be a special people from among all the nations that are upon the face of the earth." (14:1-2)

The Ramban comments:

"Now the text explains that it is not only because of the special status of the kohanim – concerning whom it is written there that they are holy to God – that they are commanded in this matter, but rather the entire congregation is holy: 'You are all holy and you are all children of the Lord your God, like the kohanim. This being so – you, too, must take care concerning this law, just as they do.'"

Likewise we find, later on, concerning the prohibition of eating from carcasses:

"You shall not eat any ANIMAL THAT DIES BY ITSELF; you shall give it to the stranger who is within your gates that he may eat it, or you shall sell it to a gentile, for you are a HOLY NATION to the Lord your God." (ibid., 21)

Sefer Devarim, then, emphasizes the sanctity of Am Yisrael, which gives them a status parallel to that of the kohanim. Therefore, it is specifically here that the text lists the prohibitions that pertain to the entire nation by virtue of their sanctity.

It should be noted that the expression "a holy nation" appears only in Sefer Devarim: twice in our parasha, and twice elsewhere – 28:9 and, as we shall discuss, 7:6. In the latter verse, the Torah prohibits intermarriage with the other nations of the land:

"You shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to marry their sons, nor shall you take their daughters to marry your sons... For you are a holy nation to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be for Him a special nation from all the nations that are upon the face of the earth."

This expression, which repeats itself in our parasha almost verbatim, again relates to an aspect that we find as applying to the kohanim in Sefer Vayikra – limitations on marriage. The sanctity of the kohanim prohibits them from marrying certain women even from among Bnei Yisrael: "They shall not take a woman who is a prostitute or profaned, nor shall they take a woman who has been divorced from her husband, for they are HOLY to their God" (Vayikra 21:7). Similarly, the sanctity of Bnei Yisrael prohibits them from intermarrying with idolatrous nations. Admittedly,

the nation is not on the same level of sanctity, and hence the prohibitions themselves are also on a different level. Nevertheless, here again we find the idea that sanctity influences the circle of eligible marriage partners. It is clear, then, why the prohibition of Bnei Yisrael intermarrying with the nations is mentioned specifically in Sefer Devarim, which emphasizes the holiness of the nation as a whole.

In Sefer Vayikra, in contrast, there is no mention of the special holiness of Am Yisrael. On the contrary – Bnei Yisrael are commanded several times, "You shall be holy," with the reasoning precisely the inverse: it is not their holiness that obligates them to observe the commandments, but rather the performance of the commandments (and avoidance of transgression) that will bring them to holiness.

NOTES:

[1] The peace offering is often referred to as the "zevach shelamim" (sacrifice of peace): see Vayikra 3:1, 3, 6, 9; 19:5; 22:21; 23:19; Bamidbar 6:17; Shmuel I 10:8, and many more.

[2] The word "sin" (chatat) is mentioned only once in all of Sefer Devarim, in the context of jurisprudence: "One witness shall not rise up against a person for any wrongdoing or for any SIN, for any sinful thing that he commits" (19:15). The word "asham" (guilt) appears nowhere in the entire Sefer.

[3] The blood serves as a "disinfectant" for impurity in other contexts, too. For instance, concerning murder: "You shall not pollute the land which you are in, for blood pollutes the land, and the land shall be atoned for the blood that is spilled in it only through the blood of he who has spilled it. Nor shall you defile the land in which you live, in which I dwell" (Bamidbar 35:33-34). The blood of the murderer's victim pollutes the land, and the only way of purifying and atoning for the land is through spilling the blood of the murderer.

[4] The subject of atonement is mentioned on only one more occasion in Sefer Devarim – at the end of the song of Ha'azinu: "Rejoice, O nations, with His people, for He shall avenge the blood of His servants and bring revenge upon His enemies, and ATONE for His land, and His people" (32:43). Despite the difference in context, here too the atonement is carried out by God, and the subject of the atonement is the land/people, rather than one of the holy vessels.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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Yeshivat Har Etzion
Alon Shvut, Israel, 90433
office@etzion.org.il
