

PARASHAT ACHAREI MOT - KEDOSHIM

Blood and the Murdering of Animals

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In this week's parasha, we read about the laws of slaughtering animals and their blood. The entire chapter 17 is dedicated to this matter. The chapter is structured by the repeated introduction: "If anyone ..." (Ish ish). According to these introductions, the chapter can be divided as follows:

1. "If anyone from the house of Israel slaughters an ox or sheep or goat in the camp, or does so outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to present it as an offering to God, before God's Tabernacle, blood shall be imputed to that man - he has shed blood; that man shall be cut off from among his people.
So that the Israelites will bring the sacrifices which they have been making in the open - that they will bring them before God, to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and offer sacrifices of well-being (shelamim) to God ..." (Vayikra 17: 1-7).
2. "Say to them further: If anyone of the house of Israel or of the strangers who reside among them offers a burnt offering or a sacrifice, and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to offer it to God, that person shall be cut off from his people" (ibid: 8-9).
3. "And if anyone of the house of Israel or of the strangers who reside among them partakes of any blood, I will set My face against the person who partakes of the blood and will cut him off from among his kin. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it for you to the altar, in order to atone for your lives; for the blood is what atones for life. Therefore, I say to the Israelite people: No person among you shall partake of blood, nor shall the stranger who resides among you partake of blood" (ibid: 10-12).
4. "And if anyone of the Israelites or any stranger who resides among them hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of all flesh - its blood is its life. Therefore I say to the Israelite people: You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off" (ibid: 13-14).

After these four clauses, the text adds another prohibition that relates to the impurity of one who eats an animal that dies naturally (without being slaughtered - neveila) or an animal that was torn apart by beasts (tereifa). This prohibition is

introduced differently - "Any person who eats ..." [compared to "if anyone"]. This prohibition appears here because it is associated with the laws of eating animals, but the different language indicates that it does not belong to the same rubric, as we will explain).

Examining each clause, it is difficult to distinguish between the first and second. Both seem to be teaching that it is forbidden to sacrifice outside of the Temple area. This prohibition appears in both clauses, along with the punishment (karet), so that it is not clear what the second clause comes to add to the first. In order to clarify this matter, we will try to understand the reason for the prohibition to slaughter animals outside of the Temple area according to these verses.

It appears that there are two different reasons for the prohibition in question.

1. In the first clause, the text gives an explicit and central reason for this prohibition: "So that the Israelites will bring the sacrifices which they have been making in the open ... and they will offer their sacrifices no more to the goat-demons after whom they stray" (17:5-7). In other words, the prohibition of slaughtering in the open is meant to prevent slaughtering animals outside of the Tabernacle (or Temple), and more important, prevent sacrifice of animals idolatrously. Any time that a person wants to eat meat, he must eat the animal together with God (as a shelamim sacrifice), and not together with some other gods after whom he lusts.

According to this, there is no intrinsic reason to bring the slaughtered animal to the Tabernacle. The purpose of the command is external - to PREVENT Israelites from sacrificing for idol worship, an occurrence which might ensue if the Torah allowed them to sacrifice anywhere. The place of the slaughter is irrelevant, as long as it is not done for idolatry purposes.

2. However, from the continuation of the verses, it seems as though there is another reason that obligates man to bring an animal that is to be eaten to the Tabernacle and slaughter it there. In the third clause the text forbids eating the blood of an animal. The reason for this prohibition appears immediately: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it for you to the altar, in order to atone for your lives; for the blood is what atones for life. Therefore, I say to the Israelite people: No person among you shall partake of blood, nor shall the stranger who resides among you partake of blood." In other words, blood is intrinsically reserved for the altar, and one who eats it infringes on a type of stealing from God. Blood is not appropriate for eating, but should be offered on the altar only. This concurs with another source where the prohibition for eating blood appears. While issuing a command about how to offer sacrifices, the text states: "All fat is God's. It is a law for all time throughout the ages, in all your settlements: you must not eat any fat or any blood" (Vayikra 3: 16-17). It is clear, from this text, that the prohibition of eating fat and blood stem from the fact that they are related to the altar and are not the property of man.

It is now possible to understand why the second clause repeats the prohibition of the first. These two clauses are differentiated by the two reasons that we mentioned. In the first clause, the emphasis is on preventing any sacrifice outside of the Tabernacle for fear that sacrifices may be offered for idolatrous purposes. The second clause should be read in conjunction with the third clause, where it is clarified that there is a specific destination for the blood, not only when one slaughters an offering, but also when slaughtering any animal, even if it is being slaughtered for the purpose of ordinary consumption. The blood must reach the altar, and therefore it is clear why it is prohibited to sacrifice outside of the Tabernacle, where there is no altar to receive the animal's blood.

However, it seems as though there is an additional problem that disturbs the Torah when it comes to the subject of slaughtering animals. Already in the beginning of the first clause we find a different phrase regarding one who slaughters outside of the Tabernacle: "blood guilt shall be imputed to that man: he has shed blood." The expression "shed blood" is familiar to us from the laws of murder. For example, after permitting Noah to eat animals, the Torah draws the distinction between man and beast: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Bereishit 9:6). Here, to our surprise, the same wording appears regarding the slaughter of animals!

It seems to me that we cannot ignore the conclusion that there is an element of murder in the killing of animals, even for consumption. True, this "murder" is permitted; however, one who slaughters an animal in violation of the rules, meaning he does not bring the animal to the Tabernacle of God, is considered a kind of murderer, a shedder of blood.

How does slaughtering an animal in the Tabernacle solve the problem of bloodshed? The entire chapter is focused on the laws of the blood. The Torah's use of the expression "sheds blood" to describe murder is not unintentional, for "... the life of the flesh is in the blood ..." Returning to the prohibition of eating blood (clause three), we find that there is a certain aspect of stealing from the altar when an animal is slaughtered [and his blood is not brought to the altar], as we have said, but that claim is also based on the close connection that exists between the animal's life and its blood: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar." There is one case where it is permitted to murder an animal: God gave Israel the blood of the animal to use in order to redeem their own souls. As a substitute for the life-blood of the sinner, he brings the life-blood of the animal to the altar.

Since killing an animal is not allowed except so that its blood be offered on the altar, it is obviously unthinkable that one could be permitted to eat the blood itself. Furthermore, slaughtering outside of the Tabernacle is prohibited not only to prevent idol worship, and not only because it is stealing from the altar, but because it is the murder of a living thing. Only when one brings the animal to the Tabernacle and the blood of the animal is brought to the altar and redeems the life of the person who is

offering it, only than it is permissible to slaughter a living thing. Otherwise, "blood guilt shall be imputed to that man: he has shed blood."

In this context, the nation of Israel returns in a certain sense to the period before the flood, when it was only permissible to eat vegetation. The nation of Israel is not permitted to eat living things except under specific circumstances, when there is a need for the blood of the animal to be brought onto the altar. [I am focusing on today's parasha, ignoring the permission to eat meat freely as appears in Devarim. The connection between these two parshiot is hard to explain and deviates from our shiur.]

We are left with one problem. If the entire permissibility of slaughtering animals is dependent on throwing the blood on the altar, what can one do about hunting wild animals which are not appropriate as sacrifices, or fowl (fowl is brought on the altar but its blood is not thrown onto the altar; why this is true is not our topic).

In order to solve this problem we will analyze the fourth and last clause in our chapter. First, we must examine the Torah's outlook regarding the blood of a murder victim.

After a person is murdered, his spilled blood cries out for revenge; therefore Job issues the following request: "Earth do not cover my blood; let there be no resting place for my outcry!" (Job 16:18). If the earth would cover his blood, his cries will rest and will no longer be heard.

A similar idea is expressed in Yechezkel:

"For the blood she shed is still in her;
She set it upon a bare rock;
She did not pour it out on the ground
To cover it with earth.
She set her blood upon the bare rock,
So that it was not covered,
So that it may stir up [My] fury
To take vengeance" (Yechezkel 24:7-8).

The prophet describes the terrible sins of the inhabitants of Yerushalayim, and he emphasizes that God made sure that the blood of the murdered remain on barren rock, so that it not fall on the ground and be covered with dirt. This was done to ensure that the blood cry for revenge. Again, if the blood had been covered with earth, its cries for revenge could not be heard. (Cf., in this context, God's words to Cain, after killing Abel his brother: "Therefore you shall be more cursed than the ground which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand;" Bereishit 4:11).

Animals not offered on the altar have a special ritual, "he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth." In other words, the blood must be covered so that it cannot cry out against the one who spilled it. Basically, the permission to kills stems from the

blood being offered on the altar, but when it is not possible to do so, the Torah does not prohibit the killing, but demands that the blood be covered, and to try, as much as possible, to remove oneself from the murder.

In summary, if at the beginning we saw the external reason for the demand to bring every animals to God's house in order to prevent the possibility of sacrificing to an idol, at present we are reasoning that the basis for permitting the slaughter of animals is so that the blood can be offered on the altar in God's House, and this can only be done in the Tabernacle. The license to kill is extended to other animals that are not offered on the altar, but then there are special requirements that are meant to reduce the call for revenge from the slaughtered animal that was murdered.

The Torah's ambivalence with regard to the slaughter and killing of animals emerges in our chapter in full force. With the building of the Tabernacle, the Torah returns us to the basic tension that existed between man and animal in the beginning of creation before meat was permitted to Noach (see the shiur on parashat Noach).