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בס"ד

Parashat Vayiqra Part I Leviticus 1 - 5

1. Overview and Introductory Remarks

The Book of Leviticus* – all of which is presented while the Israelites remained encamped at Mount Sinai – commences where the Book of Exodus left off.** The Mishkan had been assembled on the first day of the first month of the second year from the Exodus and Moshe was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting “because the [Divine] cloud dwelled upon it and Hashem’s glory filled the Mishkan” (Ex. 40:35). It is addressing that point that the Third Book of the Torah opens with: “He called to Moshe, Hashem spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting” (Lev. 1:1). Since Moshe was unable to proceed – probably in the sense that it would be disrespectful to enter the cloud without being summoned – Hashem “called” to him, presumably summoning him to enter the Tent.

This was the case before the dedication of the Mishkan and Moshe’s first official entry. Afterwards, Moshe entered the Tent when he deemed it necessary (and Aharon for the daily priestly service), as stated in Numbers 7:89: “When Moshe would come to the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him (Hashem), he would hear the voice speaking to him from above the *kaporet*...” We also read of Moshe and Aharon entering the *Ohel Mo`ed* without being summoned probably to pray, or to receive inspiration, when the situation called for it (Lev. 9:23).

The terminology and combination of clauses in the end of Exodus-beginning of Leviticus verses are similar to those when Hashem asked Moshe to ascend Mount Sinai to receive the Tablets; after beginning his ascent Moshe had to wait until Hashem called to him, at which point he entered “into the cloud” (Ex. 24:12-18).

All that interrupts the direct continuity of the narrative from Book to Book is the three-verse “flash

forward” that concludes Exodus. These verses constitute a coda that digresses from the immediate narrative flow. The coda capitalizes on the mention in the preceding verse that “the [Divine] cloud dwelled upon” the Tent of Meeting, to inform us that the cloud (the sign of G-d’s presence) continued to abide with Israel into their future. All three of those last verses make mention of “the cloud.” The coda brings out the point that the manifestation of the Divine Glory that had been present on Mount Sinai, that was associated with the Lawgiving and establishment of the Covenant, was successfully transposed to the Mishkan. This was a most appropriate closing to the *Sefer*. Henceforth, the Tent of Meeting would be the location where Divine messages would be communicated to Moshe and the prophetic leaders who follow him.

But at the end of the narrative proper (before the coda) Moshe is waiting outside the Tent because he cannot enter. It is a point of tension that is not addressed at the end of Exodus and the reader wonders how that situation was resolved. That is where Leviticus begins.

The first seven chapters of Leviticus contain the majority of the Torah’s legislation that prescribe the protocol and procedures of the sacrificial service. That information came first because continuing to fulfill the instructions that were given in Exodus regarding the Mishkan, namely, consecration of the priests and dedication of the structure, required sacrifices, which must be performed according to specific regulations. Priestly consecration and Mishkan dedication will then be described in Chapters 8-9 respectively. (Although introductory to what follows, these first seven chapters contain some material not relevant to the immediately succeeding subjects; once established as a unit, related considerations came into play.)

With priests installed and sanctuary functioning – following narration of the Nadab and Abihu tragedy that teaches the gravity of deviating from the prescribed sanctuary service (Ch. 10) – Leviticus turns to the laws of purity (Ch. 11-17). These are followed by what appears to be the goal of the program, the laws promoting holiness in all aspects of life. Applications of the latter continue through the so-called “Holiness Code” (Ch. 18-25) until the final two chapters of the Book. Leviticus’ penultimate chapter (26) contains the Blessings and Curses, a concluding feature of covenant format. The final chapter is essentially an appendix, as we will discuss in the relevant studies.

The Leviticus program began with instructions for the Tabernacle. They began (in Ex. 25) after the finalization procedures of the Covenant – a facet of the preceding Lawgiving – had begun (Ex. 24), but before they were concluded, inserted in their midst. The giving of the Tablets and the Blessings and Curses would conclude Covenant format. The latter were given toward the end of Leviticus to include the preceding legislation in the Covenant. Viewing the Exodus-Leviticus continuum, it appears that the holiness laws serve to enrich the law compendium that is attached to the Decalogue, expanding the holiness dimension that in the earlier formulation of the Covenant was in a limited and rudimentary form.

Unfortunately, perhaps because the section on sacrifices appears first and is relatively long, there has been a widespread misimpression as to the primary focus and goal of the Book of Leviticus. It surely misses the point to state, in the words of a popular present-day commentator, that: “...the central concern of the book is the conduct of the cult, with elaborate stipulation of how the sacrificial animals are to be butchered, what parts of them are to be burned on the altar, how their blood is to be ritually sprinkled on the altar or in certain instances daubed on various extremities of the celebrant of the rite. Purification is a paramount consideration in all of this...” (Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, p. 539).

2. On Sacrifices

The Torah word for sacrifice is קָרְבָּן (*qorban*), derived from קָרַב, a root that means “near” and, as a

verb, denotes “coming close” or “to bring forth.” In the latter sense the word is used in the secular realm for presenting a gift to a potentate (Jud. 3:17-18; Ps. 72:10; Mal. 1:8). Here, as a noun, it very likely has the meaning of a gift designated to be presented to G-d. Similar usage is found in the contemporaneous languages of neighboring nations. The motives prompting sacrifices were the full range of religious feelings: a desire to glorify G-d, to merit His favor, to express gratitude, to greet Him upon entering His presence, to dignify one’s petition, or as an accompaniment to repentance and a hope to repair or restore a proper relationship with Him. Regardless of the specific motivation, a sacrifice is to be a sign of devotion to G-d.

In the pre-Torah Near East there was a long-accepted form of worship of gods that was deeply ingrained in people’s religious conceptions. It was widely thought that gods, as was the case with all living beings, required nourishment. It was also commonly assumed that an incinerated animal – converted from a bulky mass to a small heap of ashes and whose smoke ascended to the heavens – went to the sphere of the gods and was there available to them for food. Since humans felt deeply dependent upon the gods for their well-being, a widespread notion had it that it was incumbent on humans to provide sustenance to the gods in the form of animals. Such thoughts were repugnant to the Biblical conception of a single, all-powerful and independent G-d who created the heavens and earth. Nevertheless, weaning Israel off many of the prevailing notions and practices was an undertaking of enormous proportions. Thus, in protesting the many objectionable views associated with idolatrous cults, the Torah adopted external formalities of the widely accepted practices of the time into its sacrificial program, but made crucial modifications to it. Some of the basic principles of the Torah’s philosophy of life and religion were articulated through its sacrificial program, as we shall see in the following section and in coming studies.

Leviticus 1-5 (*Parashat Vayiqra*) describes the various classes of sacrifices, and specifies which animals, birds or grains are suitable for each. It provides some particulars concerning which conditions necessitated which sacrifices. It prescribes certain preparation and procedural rites and some regulations pertaining to priestly function and

performance. For the most part, this subsection is presented from the perspective of the potential donor. Chapters 6-7 focus on laws that are mostly in the priestly domain, essentially the procedures and regulations for each sacrifice, the sacrificial portions allocated to the priests, and stipulations regarding eating thereof. Emphasis is placed on assuring that the sacredness of the sacrificial program be preserved. There is some overlap between these two subsections.

Five basic categories of sacrifices are delineated: *olah*, *minḥa*, *shelamim*, *ḥattat* and *asham*, each of which we will discuss in some detail in the next study. As for animal sacrifices, only unblemished cattle (bovine), sheep, and goats were acceptable; the only admissible bird species were doves and pigeons. Sacrifices were only permitted within sanctuary precincts and *kohanim* (priests) had to attend to the critical procedures.

Before the slaughter, a donor made *semikha*, placing his hand (Talmud: hands) on, or perhaps leaning upon, the live animal's head. This may have merely been a sign to validate ownership and officially designate the animal for the purpose. It may also have symbolically appointed the animal as the donor's representative, as a vehicle to assist in his purification from sin, thus prompting contrition and confession of any wrongdoing. The statement attached to the requirement of *semikha*, "and it shall be accepted on his behalf, to achieve expiation for him" (Lev. 1:4), which presents expiation as a result of this procedure, seems to point to the latter consideration. This ritual also helped make the sanctuary accessible to non-priests, a subject we will discuss shortly.

Included among the laws is mention of the dire consequences for one who eats from a sacrifice while in an impure state; that person "shall be cut off from his kin" (Lev. 7:20-21). The sanctuary and its rituals are directly in G-d's realm and He will severely punish one who knowingly transgresses its sanctity. The same penalty is applied to an individual who ate prohibited fat (v. 25) or blood (v. 27), substances that in sacrificial cases are presented on the altar. (Prohibited fat is that which surrounds the liver, kidney and entrails, termed חֵלֵב, not "ordinary" fat.) The prohibition of such fat and blood apply even in

non-sacrificial contexts. In 7:22 the law regarding "fat" is qualified as applicable only to those species of animals from which sacrifices may be brought.

Biblical ritual, particularly that of the sacrificial system, appears to be thoroughly permeated with symbolism of various forms. On occasions, we will refer to concepts derived from such an understanding.

3. Innovations

As a program that derives from the one G-d and promotes the values He cherishes, the laws concerning sanctuary worship were a unitary system and possess many significant differences from the neighboring cultures.

At the beginning of our *parasha*, Hashem instructs Moshe to inform the Israelites of the details of sacrificial legislation. In other societies of the time, knowledge of temple rituals was invariably the exclusive possession of the priesthood, zealously guarded by its members. Not only were details not taught to non-priests, the latter were often prohibited from becoming informed, sometimes banned from looking at the documents containing ritual instructions. In Israel, although non-priests could not become priests, the knowledge of what priests did and all laws associated with the sanctuary were accessible to everyone. This "demystified" priesthood and sanctuary, forged a connection between non-priests and the sanctuary, and provided at least some measure of accountability on the part of the priests to the laity.

Related to the above, and also contrary to the widespread practice of the ancient Near East, the Torah permitted the slaughter of the sacrificial animal to be performed by a non-priest, presumably the donor or his representative. (Indeed, in many societies the slaughtering was the primary sacrificial service, the animal often seen as representing the donor, with everything else subordinate to it.) The Torah also permits the non-priest to perform a number of other procedures attached to the sacrifice, including skinning and sectioning the animal, washing certain parts, and, as regards a *minḥa* offering, mixing the flour and oil and engaging in the baking.

All this is indicated in the text. Thus, in the first verses of Leviticus the priests are not mentioned until after the animal is slaughtered. That procedure is performed near the altar, “before Hashem,” presumably by the individual bringing the sacrifice. Of course, the donors may defer to the expert priests*** but, by allowing non-priests into the sanctuary precincts to observe and participate, albeit to a limited extent, the Torah promoted familiarity with the sanctuary and its program. This lessened the possibility that the priesthood would become a secret confederacy, an aristocracy, or a “power base,” as often was the case in other societies. (Despite these precautions, at times, even in Israel, the priesthood became a center of corruption and exploitation.)

A major innovation in Torah ritual is that the most essential feature of sacrificial service – performed only by *kohanim* – was the blood service. According to the case, the blood collected from the slaughtering was poured, dashed, or sprinkled on and around the altar and, on several occasions, various purification rites were performed with it. It appears that such rituals were unknown in the neighboring cultures. In Torah thought, blood represented the life principle of living creatures – *כִּי נַפְשׁ הַבֶּשֶׂר בַּדָּם הוּא* (Lev. 17:11a); *כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַנֶּפֶשׁ* (Deut. 12:23). Further, *כִּי הַדָּם הוּא בְּנַפְשׁוֹ* (Lev. 17:11c), apparently to be translated as “for it is the blood, by virtue of it being the life, that effectuates expiation.” Some have interpreted its sprinkling on the altar to have been considered as the donor returning the animal to its Creator, but it appears more likely that it symbolically represents his giving over his own life to G-d’s fire, a tangible allusion to what he must do in committing himself to rededication to the Covenant.

Contrary to neighboring cultures, priests were prohibited to have contact with the dead. When such contact did occur, the priest was prohibited from entering the sanctuary until undergoing a purification process. This distanced the priesthood from the widespread contemporary superstitious practices and idolatrous rites that were carried on in the presence of the departed and often in the cemetery. It focused the priests’ attention on the life-promoting needs of the nation.

No service called for bodily mutilation as was practiced in some idolatrous cultures (see 1 Kings

18:28). Indeed, the Torah specifically prohibited bodily mutilation, as the priests must be holy to their G-d and such practice “desecrates His name” (Lev. 21:5-6). This prohibition was extended to all Israelites since they were “sons to Hashem their G-d” (Deut. 14:1).

A far-reaching innovation of the Torah that greatly limited the scope of the cult and focused its meaning concerns the two classes of sin offerings that provide atonement, the *hattat* and *asham*. These sacrifices basically address unintentional transgressions (with an exception in each case of a category that relates to one’s fellowman, which we will comment upon in the next study when describing the *asham*). Placing intentional transgressions beyond the atonement power of sacrifices raised awareness of the importance of cleansing from unintentional transgressions. It immeasurably promoted concern for an individual’s underlying orientation and subconscious promptings, elements of behavior that had been widely ignored previously. Striving not to transgress even unintentionally facilitates “internal purity,” greatly refining the nation. This law also taught a most valuable lesson in regards to intentional transgressions. Since the sanctuary cannot cleanse from them, one had to fully face up to his actions. He had to repent and live with his conscience. To some extent, this detail would serve as a deterrent to sin.

A basic principle of the sacrificial code is that when monetary restitution was called for, sacrifices could not exonerate the individual from payment. This reinforced the Torah teaching that man’s service of G-d, no matter how devout, cannot substitute for a proper relationship with one’s fellow man. The prophets are most emphatic on this point, declaring sacrificial worship valueless when it is not accompanied by concern for human welfare and social justice.

To provide for the poor, the sanctuary system included options of offering birds – turtledoves or pigeons, male or female – and in some cases merely a measure of flour. This counteracted what was an elitism regarding sanctuary service in many societies.

Consistent with the monotheistic revolution, Leviticus is careful not to prescribe the recitation of magical-type formulae or rituals attached to the

sacrifice. These were often associated with angelology or demonology, widespread practices that usually were linked with idolatry. It is likely that it was to prevent stepping on the “slippery slope” that the Torah does not prescribe any fixed recital to accompany any sacrifice.

Finally, the Torah’s insistence on there being just one sanctuary for sacrificial worship radically restricted the practice of bringing sacrifices. It taught that the daily offering in the sanctuary of one lamb each morning and one each afternoon covered all members of the nation.

We intend to add to, and elaborate upon, aspects of this section in forthcoming studies.

The Torah employed the institution of sacrifices to reinforce many of its values as well as help an individual get closer to G-d. In the continuous absence of this system these past two millennia there have been various views concerning the proper approach to the Torah’s intentions and the future. The Sages promoted study of the sacrificial order details, declaring it as equivalent to the act itself and understood prayer to be a substitute for sacrifices. In the Talmud, Rabbi Eleazar states: “Prayer is greater than sacrifices” (BT *Ber.* 32b). A leading rabbinic authority of the early twentieth century, Rabbi Abraham Yishaq Kook (d. 1935), interpreted the legislation of animal sacrifices as applicable until the nation properly appreciated the sanctity of animal life. At that point, aspirations for reinstatement of sacrifices would focus on grain offerings. He points out that during the period of mankind’s dwelling in the Garden of Eden, which signified an ideal state of man, G-d had provided Adam and Eve – as well as the animals – with a strictly vegetarian diet. (The rabbi was primarily a vegetarian.)

We will further comment upon this issue in our next study.

4. Several Other Laws

Chapter 2 focuses mostly on the various grain offerings (קִרְבַּן מִנְחָה). Before the final case of the chapter, that of *minḥat bikurim* (first fruit offerings), several items of general applicability are incorporated in the section, including:

- Leaven and honey were not to be burnt on the altar. The Rambam conjectured that the reason may be that idolaters of the time used these items on their altars (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:46). At first sight, this is inconsistent with modern findings. The regulations regarding many sacrificial rituals, including the species of acceptable animals, use of wine and oil with the sacrifice and placing salt on it were long-established components of the contemporary idolatrous program but were “sanitized” for Torah use. However, many variables affected the question of which practices of the idolaters could be accepted, which required modification and which were to be rejected.

- Leaven and honey were to be brought as an offering of first fruit, although they were prohibited to be placed on the altar (Lev. 2:12). The case of leaven corresponds with the two loaves of wheat bread baked as *hametz* from the first of the year’s new wheat crop offered in the sanctuary on the festival of *Shabuot* (23:16-17). The offering of honey has traditionally been understood to refer to fruit nectar, from dates or figs and not to bee honey. It corresponds with the law of bringing first fruit to the sanctuary (Ex. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 26:2). Both the leaven and honey rituals do not involve placement upon the altar.

(Regarding bee honey, it is difficult to view it as having a seasonal “first” as fruit. And it is questionable if beehives were cultivated in Biblical Israel.)

- Salt must be placed on all sacrifices, explicitly described as having a covenantal association: וְלֹא תִשָּׁבֵית מֶלַח בְּרִית אֱלֹהֶיךָ מֵעַל מִנְחֹתֶיךָ (“Do not cease [placing] salt of the covenant of your G-d atop your grain offerings,” Lev. 2:13) and וְהָיָה מֶלַח עוֹלָם הוּא לְפָנֵי ה' (“an everlasting covenant of salt it shall be before Hashem,” Num. 18:19). The background to this is thought to be a feature of concluding covenants in the ancient Near East. It was the practice that the two parties partook of a sacrificial meal, thus bringing their mutual commitments before their gods. They placed salt on the sacrifice apparently symbolizing the permanence of the covenant,

based on salt's preservative characteristic. As stated earlier, this was a feature of pre-Torah ritual the Torah "sanitized" and integrated into its system.

Endnotes

* The term "Leviticus" is derived from the Greek word meaning "pertaining to the Levites," referring to the priestly component within the tribe of Levi – the *kohanim*. Both this designation, and the rabbinic one of *Torat Kohanim* ("instruction for [or to] the priests") have been a source of misunderstanding to many, as the Book works its way toward transmittal of extremely sublime, universal messages. The more common Hebrew name *Vayiqra* is taken from the first word of the Book.

** The Book of Leviticus will, in turn, flow directly into the Book of Numbers, which will open on the

first day of the second month of the second year, one month after the opening of Leviticus.

*** In the Book of Ezekiel, the sharp distinction between slaughter of the sacrifice and the service that follows is highlighted. It is there a central feature associated with the demotion of some Levites, including former priests. "They shall slaughter the *'olah* and the *zebah* for the people...but because they ministered to them before their idols...they may not approach Me to serve Me as priests, to approach any of My sacred offerings, those items that are most holy" (Ez. 44:11-13). The latter responsibilities were given to the faithful priestly Levites. It should be noted that in 2 Chronicles 29:21-24, as part of Hezekiah's reconsecration of the Temple, a point was made that he specifically had the priests slaughter the sacrifices, apparently for that occasion only, implying that ordinarily laymen might perform that function.

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