

PARASHAT RE'EH

Atonement in Sefer Vayikra and in Sefer Devarim

By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. WHERE ARE THE OBLIGATORY SACRIFICES IN SEFER DEVARIM?

Chapter 12 in parashat Re'eh is of great significance. For the first time in Am Yisrael's history, they are told that God will choose a place for His name to dwell, concerning which they are told, "You shall seek His dwelling place and you shall come to there" (verse 5). It is to this place that Bnei Yisrael are commanded to bring all their offerings to God. The list of these offerings, repeated over and over throughout the chapter (verses 6-7, 11, 26-27), is most surprising. The various voluntary sacrifices (burnt offerings, peace offerings, gifts and tithes, vow offerings and first-born animals) are mentioned each time, but nowhere is there the slightest hint of the obligatory sin sacrifices, brought to atone for the nation - the chatat and the asham.

Elsewhere in Sefer Devarim we find the same perplexing omission:

"Whole stones shall you use to build the altar of Hashem your God, and you shall offer burnt offerings (olot) upon it to Hashem your God. And you shall offer peace offerings (shelamim), and you shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before Hashem your God." (27:6-7)

Why does Sefer Devarim ignore the obligatory sacrifices? The answer, it seems, is related to the fundamental character of this Sefer and the unique perspective that it offers concerning the concept of atonement.

B. "AND HE SHALL ATONE FOR... THE IMPURITIES OF BNEI YISRAEL"

The effect of sin, as we know, is felt not only by the sinner. Sin has an effect on the nation, on the land, on the Sanctuary, etc. The process of atonement, which is directly related to sin, is likewise meant to affect each of these spheres. It is interesting that two Books of the Torah deal with different planes of this issue, each describing a different sphere that sin effects, and correspondingly describing a different process of atonement.

In Sefer Vayikra, the process of atonement is straightforward. In chapter 4, during the description of the various chatat sacrifices, it is clear that atonement is achieved by means of the sacrifice and by marking the horns of the altar with the blood and sprinkling the blood. For example:

"And if the whole congregation of Israel sin by mistake... the congregation shall offer a young bull as a sin offering... And the anointed kohen ... shall dip his finger in the blood and shall sprinkle it seven times before God... And he shall place some of the blood upon the horns of the altar before God... and THE KOHEN SHALL ATONE FOR THEM, AND THEY SHALL BE FORGIVEN." (Vayikra 4:13-20)

Attention should be paid to the fact that atonement and forgiveness are dependent solely on bringing the sacrifice and offering it to God. The verses make no mention of a process of repentance, prayer, or a plea for forgiveness on the part of the sinner. Moreover, the whole process of atonement involves the actions of the kohen, and it is he who, in effect, "atones."

Likewise, later on in the chapter, with regard to the external chatat offerings, we are told:

"If a prince should sin... he shall bring as his offering a young male goat without blemish... And the kohen shall take of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and place it upon the horns of the altar for burnt offerings... And THE KOHEN SHALL ATONE FOR HIM FOR HIS SIN, AND HE SHALL BE FORGIVEN..."

And if a single person sins... he shall bring as his offering a young female goat without blemish... And the kohen shall take of its blood with his finger and place it upon the altar for burnt offerings... And THE KOHEN SHALL ATONE FOR HIM AND HE SHALL BE FORGIVEN..." (4:22-31; see also 4:35, 5:10, 13, 16, 18, etc.)

What is the nature of this atonement? Why is it dependent on the kohen and on the smearing of the blood?

The answer to this question is to be found in the description of the service of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur:

"And he shall atone for the Sanctuary because of the impurity of Bnei Yisrael and because of their transgressions and all their sins; and he shall do likewise for the Ohel Mo'ed, which dwells among them amidst their impurity. And no one shall be in the Ohel Mo'ed when he comes to ATONE IN THE SANCTUARY, until he leaves..." (Vayikra 16:16-17)

Thus we learn that the sins of Bnei Yisrael bring impurity upon the Sanctuary and the altar. The smearing of the blood is like a cleansing of the holy vessels from the impurity that adheres to them because of the sins of Bnei Yisrael. The root of the word "kappara" (atonement) means

cleansing or cleaning (see Rashi, Bereishit 32:20), and it is indeed carried out by the kohen, who has access to the altars and the Sanctuary.

Sefer Vayikra therefore presents the ramifications of sin with regard to the Temple (or Mishkan), and therefore the process of atonement likewise focuses on the "purification" of the Temple from the damage caused to it by sin.

C. "ATONE FOR YOUR NATION ISRAEL"

In contrast to the use of the verb "k-p-r" (atone) in Sefer Vayikra, Sefer Devarim uses a completely different context: in the words spoken by the elders of the city in the ceremony of the "egla arufa" (the procedure undertaken when a person is found murdered outside a city and the murderer cannot be found). After breaking the heifer's neck in a ravine, the elders declare:

"Our hands did not shed this blood, and our eyes did not see. Atone ('kaper') for Your nation Israel whom You have redeemed, God, and do not bring innocent blood among your nation Israel." (Devarim 21:7-8)

Then the Torah adds:

"And the blood shall be forgiven (nikhpar) them."

This atonement is performed by God, through the vehicle of the above prayer. The blemish that in Sefer Vayikra affects the Mikdash and its altars, is portrayed here as adhering to the nation of Israel. So long as justice has not been meted out to the murderer, the "innocent blood" rests upon the nation. This blemish is removed through the breaking of the heifer's neck and the prayer of the elders.

In light of the above, we can also understand the difference between Sefer Vayikra and Sefer Devarim with regard to the prohibition of eating blood. This prohibition is given the following basis in Sefer Vayikra:

"And if any person of the house of Israel or of the strangers who live among them eats any blood, then I shall set My face against that soul that eats the blood, and I shall cut it off from among his people. For the soul of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to atone for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul. Therefore I have said to Bnei Yisrael: No one among you shall eat blood, nor shall the stranger that lives among you eat blood. And if any person of Bnei Yisrael or of the strangers who live among them hunts a living animal or bird (of those) that may be eaten, he shall spill its blood and cover it with the dust. For the soul of all flesh is in its blood, and I have said to Bnei Yisrael: You shall not eat the blood of any flesh, for the soul of all flesh is its blood; anyone who eats it shall be cut off." (Vayikra 17:10-14)

The reason for the prohibition here arises from the inherent holiness of the blood - the same blood that meant to atone for the soul upon the altar. Therefore the blood must be treated with respect: it may not simply be spilled upon the ground; it must be covered.

In contrast, all that we are told in Sefer Devarim concerning the prohibition of eating blood is the instruction that we find in our parasha:

"Only be careful not to eat the blood, for the blood is the soul and you shall not eat the soul with the flesh. You shall not eat it; you shall pour it upon the ground like water." (Devarim 12:23-24)

This verse makes no mention of the function of the blood as atonement. While in Sefer Vayikra we are told that "it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul," our parasha states simply that "the blood is the soul." The concept of atonement is omitted, which obviously changes our understanding of the prohibition. In Sefer Devarim the prohibition arises not from the function of the blood upon the altar, but rather from its inherent representation of the soul. The consumption of the "soul" is itself forbidden, regardless of any other functions that the blood is meant to serve.

Our parasha also makes no mention of the requirement to cover the blood. On the contrary, the verse would seem to suggest that there is no need to cover it: "You shall pour it upon the ground like water!" Clearly, from the perspective of Sefer Devarim, the blood has no special sanctity, and therefore the instruction to cover the blood is conveyed only within the context of the perspective in Sefer Vayikra.

This answers the question with which we began: the obligatory sacrifices are mentioned specifically in Sefer Vayikra, since in that Sefer the Mishkan occupies a central place. The direct effect of sin is felt in the Mishkan, which is polluted by the impurity of Bnei Yisrael, and the function of the obligatory sacrifices is to purify and cleanse the damage that these sins have caused to the Mishkan. In contrast, Sefer Devarim emphasizes the effect of sin specifically among Bnei Yisrael. Highlighting this point, the Torah here completely ignores the effect of the sin on the Mikdash, and consequently has no need to mention the obligatory sin offerings. Instead, the Torah here emphasizes the process of atonement for and cleansing of Bnei Yisrael, which is based upon corrective actions and prayer.

D. THE SOURCE OF SANCTITY

The difference in perspective between the two Books seems to arise from a more fundamental difference, which is also related to our parasha: the idea of the source of sanctity.

Sefer Vayikra presents the prohibitions of creating baldness and of eating an animal that dies of natural causes or that is torn by wild beasts, as resulting from the sanctity of the kohanim. In addition, the Torah explains that the sanctity of the kohanim is derived from their involvement in holy service:

"They shall not create baldness upon their heads... They shall be holy to their God and they shall not profane the name of their God, for they offer up fire offerings to God, the bread of their God, and they shall be holy." (21:5-6)

"He shall not eat an animal that dies of itself or is torn by wild beasts, to defile himself by it... I am God Who makes them holy." (22:8-9)

The source of sanctity is thus the Mikdash. And since the kohanim serve there, there are special restrictions that apply to them.

In our parasha, however, a different picture emerges:

"You are children to Hashem your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor create a baldness between your eyes for the dead. For you are a holy nation to Hashem your God, and God has chosen you to be for Him a special nation from among all the nations that are upon the earth." (14:1-2)

"You shall not eat any animal that dies of itself... for you are a holy nation to Hashem your God..." (14:21)

Here the prohibition applies to the entire nation, and again it applies because of their inherent holiness. But while Sefer Vayikra locates the source of sanctity in involvement in the holy service in the Mikdash, Sefer Devarim perceives this holiness as pertaining to the nation as a whole.

Indeed, the expression "holy nation" (am kadosh) appears exclusively in Sefer Devarim. In Sefer Vayikra, the command "You shall be holy" appears several times, but there the concept is presented in reverse: it is not the inherent holiness of Bnei Yisrael that requires the performance of mitzvot, but rather the performance of mitzvot (and avoidance of transgression) that makes them holy.

It is therefore not surprising that Sefer Vayikra, which perceives the source of sanctity as being located in the Mikdash, emphasizes the damaging effects of sin specifically on the Mikdash, and atonement as a process of purification of the Mikdash. Sefer Devarim, which calls Bnei Yisrael a "holy nation," emphasizes the effect of the sin on the nation and relates the process of atonement to the nation as well.

Of course, both perspectives reflect the "words of the living God," and both spheres - although presented separately in the two Books - operate simultaneously.

E. THE LOVE EXPRESSED IN SEFER DEVARIM

In conclusion, let us turn our attention to one additional point that also seems to be related to the special view of Bnei Yisrael that arises from Sefer Devarim. It is specifically this Sefer,

emphasizing as it does the holiness of Am Yisrael, which alone describes over and over the love of God for Israel:

"And because He loved your fathers, He chose their seed after them and brought you out... from Egypt." (4:37)

"For it is because of God's love for you and His observance of the promise that He made to your fathers that God took you out with a strong hand..." (7:8)

"And He will love you and bless you and multiply you, and He will bless the fruit of your womb and the produce of your land." (7:13)

"God delighted only in your fathers, to love them, and He chose their seed after them - you, from among all the nations - to this day." (10:15)

"And Hashem your God would not listen to Bilam, and Hashem your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for Hashem your God loves you." (23:6)

Thus, Sefer Devarim provides a unique perspective with regard to Am Yisrael. This Sefer emphasizes God's love for the nation, and perhaps it is this love that itself imbues Am Yisrael with holiness. And since true love must be mutual, it is not surprising that specifically in Sefer Devarim Am Yisrael is commanded to love God, "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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