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 To: Judaic Seminar <j-seminar@shamash.org>
 MIME-Version: 1.0
 Content-Type: text/plain; charset="US-ASCII"
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Judaic Seminar
 Volume 7 Number 24

Insights on Parashat HaShavuah
 Vayiqra [Ralph Tawil]

[Additional articles on Parashat Vayiqra can be found in J-Seminar issues 3:50, 5:33 and 6:33.]

 Insights

Date: 3/16/00 1:09:47 PM
 From: Ralph Tawil <RTawil@judaic.org>
 Subj: Vayiqra

The book of Leviticus contains laws concerning sacrificial service, purity and holiness, and has very little narrative. It appears to be a "break" in the story of the Torah that had proceeded from the creation of the world until the building of the tabernacle. Yet, when we read Leviticus in the context of the closing passages of Exodus we see it to be a continuation, with connections to what preceded.

The first verses of Leviticus continue the final verses of Exodus:

When Moses had finished the work the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:33-38)...And the Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of the Meeting, saying...(Leviticus 1:1)

Leviticus continues the narrative of Exodus. Israel's fashioning and worshipping of the golden calf almost irreparably ruptured the intimate relationship between them and God. The Torah illustrated this idea structurally by placing the golden calf incident between the plan of the tabernacle and its execution-intervening between the "planned" closeness between God and His people ("and I will dwell within them," Exodus 25:8) and its actualization. Moses interceded with God to restore that closeness, and God agreed to once again dwell within the people. God's "enthusiastic" filling of His "dwelling" (literal translation of Mishkan) emphatically showed this closeness. Just as the fashioning of the calf was followed by worship, so the construction of the Mishkan was followed by instructions as to proper worship. God indicated His desire for closeness to Israel through the first laws to be told to Moshe from the Mishkan, the message of "qorban."

The Hebrew word "qorban" should not be understood as "sacrifice" a word that focuses more on what was lost than the Hebrew q.r.b., which expresses what was done or achieved. The root of the Hebrew word is, "q.r.b.," which means "to approach." The usual translation of "qorban" is "offering" or literally, "that which is brought near, offered." This definition concentrates on the mechanics of the qorban, bringing the offering near (God or the altar).

The word "qorban," could imply something else as well. It is "that which achieves the closeness" between God and Man. This nuance emphasizes not the mechanics of offering but its goal, the closeness of God and Man. When looked at in this way the laws of qorban occurring at this point in the narrative express the meaning of the full reconciliation along with God's desire to strengthen His relationship with Israel.

The view here is not that God desired "qorban" in the sense of wanting the offered animal, but that God allowed man to express his need of closeness to God through the action of qorban. (Perhaps, God even wants man to have these feelings of closeness and to have a need to express them.) In this sense qorban is God's gift to man, and not the

converse.

Man's need for qorban is the basic idea proposed by Shemuel David Luzzatto in his comment to the first verse of Leviticus. According to Luzzatto, man initiated offerings on his own.

Man, desiring to express his gratitude to God, or to assuage His anger, or to ingratiate himself to God to have his prayers answered, treated God as he would have treated a mortal king--he brought gifts. How does one give a gift to God? By burning the gift it appeared to man that he was conveying the item heavenward--to God*.

Since the Torah's objective is not to teach man knowledge and information, but to inculcate within him righteousness and justice, the Torah did not invalidate sacrificial service. This is not because the Torah could not to do so (against Maimonides**, Moreh, 3:32; see Rabbi Shamah's discussion, J-Seminar 5,33--RT), rather because offering is not inherently wrong, or harmful to man's character. On the contrary, it benefits man. For if the Torah would teach that God does not care for the offerings of man, it could lead man to conclude that God is completely unconcerned with our behavior and "what does it benefit him if we are righteous or not?" (see Job 22:2-RT)

Since one of the tenets of the Torah is the belief that God is involved with man's affairs, loving the righteous and detesting the wicked, it was necessary for God to belittle himself and not present himself in his full exaltedness. God did this by depicting himself as a great king, who is aware of all his subjects' actions, responding to their prayers, and accepting their offerings. Though God truly does not need the honor of mortal man, He commanded offerings for mankind's benefit.

Luzzatto explained other details of the sacrificial service in the same vein--as benefiting man's character.

Luzzatto's explanation fits well with the Torah's description of the early offerings, which all seem to be spontaneous expressions initiated by men. The first offering that the Torah describes is that of Qayin. Qayin and Hebel both bring their offerings of their own initiatives. God enjoined Qayin, albeit unsuccessfully, to better himself and rise above his distress. God was seeking Qayin's improvement and not a better offering. Noah, and Abraham also initiate their offerings of gratitude, which God accepted.

A contemporary commentator on Leviticus, Baruch A. Levine, agrees with Luzzatto that offering is expressing a human need to give a gift to God.*** According to Levine, the purpose of offerings and other laws of Leviticus is to

formalize or reaffirm and, at times, to repair the relationship between the worshiper and God, and between the community of worshipers and God.... Human beings have always sought the nearness and presence of God. We are filled with anxiety at the prospect of God's withdrawal, or absence, or distance from the human scene....

Despite the avowed belief in God's omnipresence, it was seldom satisfying or reassuring to the human psyche. Emotionally, we expect that God, as the power who sustains the universe and grants the petitions of His worshipers, responds to our needs more readily if He is near and present and that He is less likely to do so from heaven. This feeling is a projection of human dependence on God. But to retain the nearness of God it was necessary to provide a sacred environment acceptable to Him. It was feared that if the purity of the earthly environment were compromised, God would become enraged and withdraw His presence from His people, often punishing them as well. (Baruch A. Levine The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus_ pp. xxiv-xxv)

The human need of offering is apparent from Levine's comments. Taken in the context of the connection between Exodus and Leviticus, God anticipated the need of Israel to strengthen their relationship with Him and instructed Israel as to the proper way to do offerings.

Some Points About the Offerings in Parashat Vayiqra

1) The Torah, in a very systematic way, describes the three types of "Olah" offerings (cattle, sheep and bird), the four types of meal offerings (raw, baked, griddled, fried) and the three types of "shelamim" offerings (cattle, sheep, goats; For a more detailed description of these offerings see J-Seminar 3:50). The Torah next describes the types of hattat offerings. It is to these offerings we now turn.

In Leviticus, the Torah did not specify the reason for bringing these offerings of Olah, Shelamim and Minha. Regarding Olah, it is possible to use biblical narratives to elucidate the occasions for bringing it. Noah offered "olah" offerings after the deluge. Abraham was commanded to raise up his son Yishaq as an "olah," and ends up offering the ram as an olah (Genesis 22). Gid'on and Mano'ah presented "olah" offerings following an appearance of an angel of God (Judges 6:26 and 13:16). David offered an olah offering when the plague stopped at Aravnah's threshing floor (2

Sam. 24:22). Shelomo offered thousands of olah offerings on the Giv'on altar at the beginning of his reign (1 Kings 3:4). In his competition with the Ba'al officiants, Eliyahu offered up an "olah" (1 Kings 18:38). Iyob offered weekly olah offerings "one for each of [his children]; for Job thought, perhaps my children have sinned and blasphemed God in their thoughts." There does not seem to be a common element in these examples.

>From the various occurrences of the shelamim offering in Biblical narrative, it is seen to be a offering that was primarily concerned with having a festive meal that was sanctified by the fact that its meat was offered on the altar. (see 1 Samuel 9:12-13; 1 Samuel 16:3-5; 1 Samuel 20:29)

In contrast, to the Olah and Shelamim, there are no biblical narratives that describe the offering of the Hattat. The reasons are spelled out in Leviticus:

(Any) person--when one sins in error regarding any of the Lord's commandments that should not be done, by doing any one of them: if the Anointed Priest should sin, bringing-guilt upon the people, he is to bring-near, for the sin that he has sinned, a bull, a young of the herd, wholly-sound, for the Lord as a hattat/decontamination offering. (4:2-3; SB)

In the following sections, the Torah describes three other situations and the type of hattat required by each. The second situation is one where the whole nation had transgressed.**** This is followed by the hattat of the chieftain who had transgressed inadvertently and then two options for a common man who had transgressed (female goat or female sheep.)

These four situations can be grouped into two types of hattat. The first two situations require a bull to be brought, the blood of which is sprinkled within the mishkan toward the separating curtain (parochet), placed on the golden incense altar within the tabernacle and poured out on the bronze altar outside the tabernacle. The second two situations call for a goat (male and female respectively) whose blood is not brought into the mishkan. A further distinction between these two groups (called the internal and external hattat by the sages) is that the flesh of only the second group is consumed by the priests. The parts of the offering not offered on the altar from the first group was removed from the camp and burned. (This is distinction is more clearly described in Leviticus 6:17-23.)

Before discussing the order of the four situations, it is important to explain the term "hattat." It obviously derives from the root hh.tt.a. , which means "to miss (a goal or way), go wrong, sin" (BDB, p. 306). The most common understanding of the hattat is expiatory--removing the sin from the sinner. Thus Levine writes: The object of the Hattat, usually translated "sin offering," was to remove the culpability borne by the offender, that is, to purify the offender of his guilt. (Levine, _The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus_ p. 18)

Jacob Milgrom (Encyclopedia Miqra'it vol. 7, columns 237-238), has argued for another understanding. He suggests that sin and impurity defile the Mishkan itself, requiring "decontamination." The alternate understanding of the word hattat is to see it as a kind of cleanser and purifier of the tabernacle or temple. The higher the standing of the inadvertent transgressor, the more serious the "damage" to the mishkan, requiring the blood of the offering to be brought in deeper into the mishkan. The sin offering of the chieftain and that of the common person are not brought within the tent. The blood of the high priest's bull is brought in to the temple as is the blood of the sin offering of all the congregation. Milgrom explains, that the reason for bringing the blood of the Day of Atonement hattat offerings into the holy of holies" is to purify the inner sanctum from intentional sins.

Milgrom's interpretation explains why the inadvertent sin of the "anointed priest" is discussed first. He is most directly involved with the mishkan. The secular chieftain does not impact the mishkan as much, that is why his hattat is third in the list.

According to Milgrom, the idea is that sin and impurity, even inadvertent sin and unwitting impurity, required a hattat to be brought to "cleanse" (hh.tt.a.= tt.h.r see Ezekiel 43:20-26) the mishkan from the effects of the sin or impurity. Perhaps Milgrom's idea of impurity itself defiling the mishkan, even without entering it, can explain the need to bring a offering for "touching something tameh (impure) and it is hidden from him" (5:2-3). It might also explain, 15:31:

You are to have the Children of Israel avoid their tum'a, that they not die from their tum'a when they make my dwelling tameh that is in their midst.

This verse does not say that the infraction occurs upon entering the mishkan--just by being impure. Yet, the Rabbis have taught that impurity itself does not require offering, unless the person inadvertently enters the sanctuary (see Sifra 12,7 and Sifre Zutta to Bemdibar 19:13).

2) Chapter 5 describes the offering to be brought upon various sins of omission or those relating to speech. These include:
a) not testifying after an adjuration was put forth against any who have information on a case and do not testify;

b) becoming tameh and forgetting about it (and entering the sanctuary, see above :

c) making an oath and forgetting about it. These are in contrast to the inadvertent sins of commission for which a hattat is required (the verb " `s.h " -- "committed," recurs in that chapter .

The sages call this offering an "oleh veyored" ("goes up and down") because the type of offering to be brought and its cost depends on the ability of the transgressor to pay. The Torah wanted to make this offering accessible to all as it involves what some might consider a minor sin because there is no action involved. This also inculcates the seriousness of oaths and imprecations.

3) A homiletic aspect of the hattat is found in the Yerushalmi. The degree that the Torah went not to embarrass the person who has sinned can be seen from the verse:

.And it (the hattat of the chieftain) is to be slain at the place where the `olah is slain, before the presence of the Lord; it is a hattat offering. (4:24)

Why didn't the Torah spare words by stating the actual place and not referring to the olah offering?

R. Levi said in the name of R. Shimon b. Laqish: ". . . and it is to be slain at the place where the `olah is slain," in order not to publicize the sinners.

People watching a person would not know whether the worshiper was bringing an olah or hattat by looking at the place where it was slaughtered. It is done at the same spot in order not to embarrass the sinner (also see Babli Sotah 32:).

Endnotes

* Supporting Luzzatto's view that qorban is an attempt to give a gift to God, is the possibility that the term "olah," (from a Hebrew root meaning "to ascend") reflects the rising smoke of that wholly-burnt sacrifice.

** The contrast between Luzzatto's position and that of Maimonides is great. According to Maimonides, animal sacrifice was the mode of worship current when the Torah was given. God was unable to abolish it without completely changing man's nature, therefore He made a concession to man's habit of worship. According to Luzzatto, animal offerings were less objectionable to God, provided they were done in the right way, and could even serve the end of making man more aware of God's providence.

*** This need has expressed itself independently in many different cultures throughout history who have forms of animal offering. Offering, in other cultures, can be grouped in five basic types. A) To provide sustenance to the deity, B) as a gift to the deity, C) Substitute for the offering D) Offering of purging E) Ceremonial meal (Source: Encyclopedia Miqrait 7, 223).

****The Sifra (Hoba 4,2) defined this law as referring to the error of the Sanhedrin.

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