

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT EMOR**

**Of Space and Time**

**Rav Chanoch Waxman**

I

Like much of Sefer Vayikra, Parashat Emor seems to be about priests, sanctity, sacrifices, defilement and the like. The parasha opens with a section devoted to the personal sanctity of priests (23:1-15) and continues by listing the physical deformities that disqualify priests from certain sanctuary services (23:16-24). This is followed by a discussion of the laws for consuming sanctified food (22:1-16) and a detailing of the physical deformities that disqualify an animal from being brought as a sacrifice (22:17-33).

However, about midway into Parashat Emor, the Torah switches gears and the topic of discussion undergoes a wrenching shift.

□ □ And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying:  
"Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: These are My festivals (moadai), which you shall proclaim as holy occasions." (23:1-2)

This verse serves to introduce the "parashat ha-moadim," the Torah's most comprehensive discussion of the various holidays. After a brief mention of the Sabbath (23:3), the Torah quickly shifts to Passover and the other holidays, moving along in chronological order. The working through of the holidays takes up quite a bit of space (23:1-44) and comprises not only the most comprehensive, but also the lengthiest "holiday" parasha found in the Torah.

This, of course, raises an obvious question. To paraphrase the classic Rabbinic formulation of "conjunction" questions: What are the holidays doing next to priests, sanctity and deformity? In other words, what is the rationale for the Torah's placing the "parashat ha-moadim" here in the middle of Emor?

Alternatively, we can phrase the problem in broader terms. Most mentions of the festivals in the Torah occur in the context of legal narratives that describe the contents of the covenant between God and Israel (see [Shemot 23:1-19](#), [Shemot 34:10-26](#), [Devarim 14:22-16:17](#)). The holidays are bound up with the historical relationship between God and Israel. While this may be the topic, or at least a central theme, in the books of Shemot, Bemidbar and Devarim, this is not really the subject matter of Sefer Vayikra. If so, what are the holidays doing in Sefer Vayikra?

II

Both Ibn Ezra and Ramban relate to the problem of the placement of "parashat ha-moadim." On their account, the key to unraveling the mystery lies in a verse found towards the end of the section. As part of a preliminary summary, the Torah states the following:

□ □ These are the set times (moadei) of the Lord, which you shall celebrate as sacred occasions, bringing offerings by fire to the Lord - burnt offerings, meal offerings, sacrifices, libations, on each day what is proper to it. (23:37)

Apparently, what is unique about the holidays is that they are a time of "isheh la-Shem," offerings by fire (i.e. sacrifices) to God. In fact, a quick glance through the entire segment should be enough to make us realize that the phrase "and you shall make

an offering by fire," or a slight variation thereof, is mentioned in the context of every single holiday (23:8, 13, 18, 25, 27, 36).

If so, it is the concept of "offerings" that constitutes the explanation for the location of the holiday cycle here. As mentioned earlier, Parashat Emor opens with various laws related to priests, sanctity and sacrifices. As part of an A-B-A-B, sanctity-deformity-sanctity-deformity, ordering of the four sections listed above, the Torah places the laws of physical deformity that disqualify animals from sacrifice and some associated laws of sacrifices as the fourth section in the parasha (22:17-23). According to Ibn Ezra and Ramban, this mention of sacrifices provides a natural opportunity for the transition to the holiday cycle, designated times of sacrifice to God.

Looking at "parashat ha-moadim" as a story of sacrifices not only explains the particular placement of the segment at this juncture in Emor but also the more general issue of the connection to Sefer Vayikra. After all, while Vayikra might not be about covenant and history, it surely is about sacrifices and sanctuary procedures.

Nevertheless, Ibn Ezra and Ramban's theory possesses some glaring weaknesses. First, the story of the holiday-festival cycle seems to open with the Sabbath (23:1-3), a segment which contains no reference to "offerings by fire." It seems strange that the opening segment of the "fixed times" cycle omits the literary and thematic marker. To avoid this problem, Ramban, in a bit of fancy exegetical footwork, claims that the Sabbath is not a "moed," a holiday or fixed time. While this may seem logically correct, it runs counter to the simple flow of the text, which places the Sabbath (23:3) immediately after the declaration of "these are my fixed times" (23:2).

Moreover, if the narrative of the holiday cycle is primarily about sacrifices, we would expect to find that, throughout the narrative, the text details the particular sacrifices required on each holiday. But while this is the case regarding the third "moed" mentioned in the cycle, the continuum beginning with the waving of the first

cutting and ending with the day of the new grain offering (mincha chadasha) (23:9-22), it is not at all the case with regard to the other festivals. The Torah neglects to mention the specific sacrifices mandated by each occasion.

A quick glance at Chapters Twenty-eight and Twenty-nine of Bemidbar should strengthen this last point. Chapter Twenty-eight opens:

□ □ And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: "Command the Children of Israel and say to them: My offering, the provision of My sacrifices made by fire, for a sweet savor to Me, you shall observe to offer Me in their due season (be-mo'ado)." (28:1-2)

From here, the Torah goes on to enumerate the daily sacrifices (28:4-8), the Sabbath sacrifices (28:9-10), the first of the month sacrifices (28:11-15) and the sacrifices of each holiday of the festival cycle (28:16-29:39). In other words, the parasha of "the offerings of the festivals" is located not in Sefer Vayikra but in Sefer Bemidbar. [Bemidbar 28-29](#), and not [Vayikra 23](#), is about offerings.

### III

Before returning to the problem of location, let us take a look at another difficulty raised by the holiday cycle of Sefer Vayikra.

As mentioned previously, Chapter Twenty-three of Vayikra constitutes but one of many references to the holidays found in the Torah. Interestingly enough, many of these references occur in the context of what might be termed "loyalty" narratives and focus heavily on the imperative of pilgrimage.

For example, Chapter Twenty-three of Shemot mentions the holidays (23:14-17) immediately after the prohibition of mentioning the name of foreign gods (23:13). As part and parcel of loyalty to the Lord, God demands that "three times a year you

shall hold a festival for Me" (23:14). God demands that "all shall appear before their Master, the Lord" (23:17) and that none shall appear empty-handed (23:15).

Similarly, Chapter Thirty-four of Shemot mentions the festivals (34:17-24) immediately after the prohibition of "molten gods" (34:16), the penultimate verse in an extended discourse on the temptations of idol worship (34:11-16). Once again, the focus is on the mandate of "seeing the face of the Lord" (34:20, 23-24). Finally, in Chapter Sixteen of Devarim (16:1-17), the final mention of the festivals, the Torah refers to "the place that God shall choose to rest His name" six times (16:2, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16), and reiterates both the requirement of pilgrimage at the prohibition of arriving empty-handed (16:16-17). Remembering the exodus from Egypt and the Israelites' consequent obligation to God, i.e. "loyalty," constitutes a recurring theme throughout the parasha (16:1, 3, 6, 12).

Given the above, we would expect "parashat ha-moadim," the lengthiest and most comprehensive treatment of the holiday cycle in the Torah, to highlight loyalty, pilgrimage and the like. Yet rather strikingly, the segment never mentions the obligation of journeying to the sanctuary or the prohibition against "seeing God" empty-handed.

Apparently, just as the "holidays" of "parashat ha-moadim" are not really about the laws of sacrifices, so too they are not about the requirement of pilgrimage and of meeting God at the holy place. But if so, what constitutes the character and inner essence of the festivals in Sefer Vayikra? If the holidays in "parashat ha-moadim" are not primarily about sacrifices, or loyalty to God and pilgrimage to the holy place, what are they about?

#### IV

Let us return to our point of departure. As cited previously, the Torah introduces the holiday cycle of Sefer Vayikra with the following verses:

□ □ And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: These are My festivals (moadai), which you shall proclaim as holy occasions (mikraei kodesh)." (23:1-2)

Both the term "moed," here translated as "festival," and the term "kodesh," meaning holy or sanctified, are familiar to us from Sefer Shemot and Sefer Vayikra until this point. In fact, these two terms are often linked together in the context of the mishkan. For example, in describing the regime of daily sacrifices and the sanctification of the Mishkan, Chapter Twenty-nine of Shemot states:

□ □ This shall be a regular burnt offering throughout the generations, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (moed) before the Lord. For there I will meet (iva'ed) with you, and there I will speak with you. And there I will meet (ve-noadi) with the Israelites, and it shall be sanctified (ve-nikdash) by My glory. I will sanctify (ve-kidashti) the Tent of Meeting (moed) ... I will dwell (ve-shakhanti) among the Children of Israel and I will be their God. (29:42-45)

The complex of concepts can be structured as follows. God's presence dwells in the Mishkan and thereby conveys holiness upon it. Moreover, the Mishkan constitutes a vehicle for "meeting" with God, for engaging in a religious relationship with God. In other words, holiness, in this case the holy place, comprises an opportunity for meeting with God.

This brings us back to Sefer Vayikra and the festivals. The term "moeid" translated above as "festival," "holiday" or "fixed time," is based upon the same stem, v-a-d, as the term for meeting. In other words, an encounter with holiness, a meeting with God, takes place not just in the fixed space of the Tent of Meeting but also in the fixed time of the holidays. The holidays are "mikraei

kodesh," proclaimed as sacred (23:1, 4). Just as Israel meets with God in the space of the sanctuary, so too they meet with Him in time, in the holiness of the holidays. God is present not just in space, but also in time.

This overlap between "meeting" and "time" is evident in one of the first occurrences of the term in the Bible. In chastising Sara and Avraham for Sarah's laughter upon hearing the news of her bearing a child, God states that nothing is too hard for God and reiterates that "at the appointed time (la-moed) I will return to you, in this season, and Sara shall have a son" (18:14). God is present not just in space, but also in time.

Understanding the sanctity of time, the meeting with God in the dimension of time, as the primary theme and innovation of the holiday cycle of Chapter Twenty-three should help resolve the difficulties raised earlier. We should no longer need to wonder about the omission from the parasha of the imperative of pilgrimage. After all, the holiness of place and the centrality of the sanctuary are not the focus.

Likewise, the placement of the holiday cycle in the middle of Parashat Emor should cease to trouble us. The fourth segment of Emor, the laws of disqualified sacrifices (22:17-33), ends with a flourish.

□ □ And you shall keep My commandments, and do them: I am the Lord. Nor shall you profane My holy name, and I will be sanctified among the Children of Israel; I am the Lord who makes you holy, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord. (22:31-33)

It is precisely after this short discourse on the God-holiness-Israel relationship that the Torah places the holiday cycle, which is another version of the God-holiness-Israel relationship.

Finally, we need no longer wonder about the placement of "parashat ha-moadim" in Sefer Vayikra. After all, although Vayikra is about priests, sacrifices and the sanctuary, it is primarily about meeting with God. Whether the discourse is technically about sacrifices, the rules for sanctified objects, defilement or the conditions for approaching the sanctuary, on the fundamental plane Vayikra is about holiness. It is about the conditions and details of the encounter with God. As such, "parashat ha-moadim," the meeting with God in time, fits right in.

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