

## The Structure of the Book of Vayikra, and Its Divisions

By Rav Tamir Granot

### A. Proposed Approach for Defining the Structure and Division of *Sefer Vayikra*

The Book of *Vayikra* differs from the other Books of the Torah in that most of it contains no narrative or moral exhortation, but rather pure halakha. Only twice in the *Sefer* do narratives appear, breaking the continuity of the laws (we shall discuss these instances below). The multiplicity of details sometimes leads us to a feeling of not being able to see the woods for the trees, and it is therefore instructive to pause for an overview of the Book, divided into clearly defined units, so as to consider its structure and division, and thereby its substance and purpose, too.

How are we to go about dividing up the Book and determining its structure? We may divide it by subject – for example: sacrifices, inauguration, the eighth day, etc. This option, however, imposes an external test that relies on opinion and interpretation, since every individual reader may offer his own categories of subject. Hence, we shall attempt here to propose a division and structure of the Book based on purely internal factors, and that will lead us to attempt a definition of the order of subjects and its significance.

I propose that we take into consideration the following criteria, in defining the structure and parts of the Book:

1. Every utterance by God ("God spoke... saying...") shall be regarded as an independent unit/item. Altogether there are 37 such utterances by God in *Sefer Vayikra*; hence, we start with 37 units (to which we must add the narratives, which do not begin with this opening formula). The assumption behind this criterion is that when God speaks with Moshe or Aharon about some subject, His speech is not interrupted. When there are two separate subjects, they will be treated in two separate utterances. A review of the material shows that there are some utterances that are very long, and others that are very short; hence, it is not the length of the speech that matters, but rather the content.
2. General introductions or general conclusions will define larger units.
3. A transition from one genre to another will indicate the end or beginning of a large unit. Therefore, when the *Sefer* ends a story, it must be assumed that a subject is now closed. The reason for this criterion is that God's utterances in *Sefer Vayikra* are not presented in any chronological framework (there are no dates provided); hence, there is no reason to

assume that the narrative appears in its chronological place, merely on the basis of the fact that it appears after the preceding command. It is better that we adopt the literary assumption that the narratives are inserted at their particular places for structural reasons.

4. Units within the Book which are not part of the continuum of halakhic commands (i.e., the Divine utterance is not a continuation of its predecessor conveyed in the *Ohel Mo'ed*, and does not give the impression of being located matter-of-factly, but rather is explicitly identified as belonging somewhere else) will also represent a criterion for defining the larger units in the *Sefer*. Thus, we shall address chapters which, we are told, were commanded to Moshe at Mount Sinai.

5. We shall pay attention to the addressees of the commands. In other words, a distinction will be drawn between commands to Moshe alone (a category to which most of the utterances belong), to Moshe and Aharon (a minority), or to Aharon alone. Sometimes there is also an "utterance" (*va-yomer*) instead of a "command" (*va-yedaber*), and we shall address this difference. It is not necessarily true that the addressees of the utterance are significant in terms of the division of the Book, but the issue is important in terms of characterizing the subjects in question.

### B. Division of the *Sefer*

Let us now set out the list of utterances that introduce subject units in the *Sefer*, and their contents, and at the same time define larger units on the basis of beginnings and endings found in the *Sefer*.<sup>[1]</sup>

1. *Vayikra* chapters 1-3 - **Opening speech from the *Ohel Mo'ed***: burnt offering, meal offering, peace offering – details of the laws of freewill offerings.
2. 4:1-5:13 – list of sin offerings, including (in chapter 5) an "*oleh ve-yored*" offering.
3. 5:14-5:19 – guilt offering for sin involving holy things (*me'ila*), and a guilt offering in the case of doubt
4. 5:20-5:26 – guilt offering for something stolen
5. 6:1-6:11 – **Introduction, "Command Aharon."** Subject of first unit: the ashes and the fire, laws of meal offering – pertaining to the *kohanim*
6. 6:12-6:16 – meal offering of the *kohanim*
7. 6:17-7:21 – laws of the sin offering, guilt offering, peace offering and thanksgiving offering, and their accompaniments – pertaining to the *kohanim*
8. 7:22-7:27 – prohibition of fats and blood
9. 7:28-7:38 – gifts to the *kohanim* from the sacrifices – **conclusion of chapters 6-7 "which God commanded Moshe at Mount Sinai..."**
10. 8:1-10:7 – Command concerning the days of consecration, and **narrative concerning the days of consecration and the Eighth Day, with the death of Nadav and Avihu.**

11. 10:8-10:11 – Utterance to Aharon: warning concerning drinking wine, and the role of the *kohanim*

12. (no utterance) 10:12-10:19 – completion of fulfillment of the Eighth Day following the death of Nadav and Avihu

13. chapter 11 – Utterance to Moshe and Aharon: laws of unclean animals and the prohibition against eating them. **General summary dealing with ritual impurity, obligation of sanctity, and separation of Israel from the nations.**

14. chapter 12 – ritual impurity of the birthing mother and the accompanying laws

15. chapter 13 – Utterance to Moshe and Aharon: details of the laws of leprosy manifest on a person and on a garment

16. 14:1-14:32 – laws of purification of the leper after he is healed

17. 14:32-14:57 – Utterance to Moshe and Aharon: laws of leprosy manifest on a house and the order of its purification; **general summary of the laws of leprosy.**

18. chapter 15 – Utterance to Moshe and Aharon: impurity of the body; **general summary concerning impurity of the body.**

19. chapter 16 – order of the Kohen Gadol entering the Holy of Holies – following the death of Aharon's two sons, Yom Kippur.

20. chapter 17 – laws of blood, including warning concerning animals slaughtered outside (the precincts of the *Mishkan*).

21. chapter 18 – list of forbidden sexual relations, preceded by an introduction and general warning to keep distant from the behavior of the land of Canaan, and **followed by a general conclusion in the same style, describing the sanctity and purity necessary to be worthy of the land.**

22. chapter 19 – the laws of *Parashat Kedoshim*, centered around laws between man and his fellow

23. chapter 20 – punishment for forbidden sexual relations, including punishment for worshippers of Molekh; **ending with general conclusion dealing with the separation of Israel from the nations, and summarizing the laws of ritual impurity, the laws and statutes, and more.**

24. 21:1-21:16 – "God said to Moshe" – impurity of *kohanim*

25. 21:16 – 21:23 – blemishes among *kohanim*. Conclusion: Moshe conveys it all to the *kohanim* and to Bnei Yisrael.

26. 22:1-22:16 – laws of eating sacrificial meat, and gifts (*teruma*) to the *kohanim*

27. 22:17-22:25 – laws of blemishes in sacrifices

28. 22:26 – 22:33 – limitations on animal sacrifices: eight days, animal and its young, "that it be accepted for you"; **general conclusion about observing the laws and avoiding desecration of God's Name.**

29. 23:1-23:8 – Shabbat and Pesach

30. 23:9-23:22 – "When you come to the land" – *omer* and offering of the first fruits/Shavuot; appendix – gifts of the field to the poor

31. 23:23-23:25 – Day of remembrance of sounding the *shofar* (Rosh Ha-shana)

32. 23:26-23:32 – Yom Kippur

33. 23:33-23:44 – Sukkot and **general conclusion concerning the festivals.**

34. 24:1-24:12 – *Menora* and show-bread

35. 24:13-24:23 – story of the blasphemer. Following this, utterance and command concerning damages to man and animals, and punishment carried out for blasphemer.

36. chapters 25,26 – God commands Moshe at Mount Sinai: *Shemitta*, Yovel, and their accompanying laws; the covenant with its blessings and curses. General conclusion: **This is what God commanded at Mount Sinai, through Moshe.**

37. chapter 27 – estimated values and dedications; **general conclusion: These are the laws from Mount Sinai.**

### C. Comments on the Division

a. It is easy to see that this division is preferable to both the traditional division into *parshiyot* and the division into chapters, since it gives no weight to the length of the unit, focusing instead only on content. In some cases there are large units which, in the traditional division, are divided into several *parshiyot* or chapters; when they are treated as a single unit it is easy to perceive their integrity of subject. Conversely, the section on the festivals is divided here into several units, so as to highlight the differences between the festivals when they are not treated as a single unit.

b. If we focus on the break in the continuity of halakhic commands given to Moshe from the Tent of Meeting, and ignore for the moment the chapters of laws whose source is Sinai and which for some reason were inserted into *Sefer Vayikra*, we end up with a simple scheme of the structure of *Sefer Vayikra*:

\* section 1 – laws of sacrifices (1-5)<sup>[2]</sup>

\* section 2 – days of inauguration, and the Eighth Day (8-10)

\* section 3 – chapters of laws, statutes, and judgments (11-24)

Appendix – the blasphemer and the laws applicable to him (end of 24)<sup>[3]</sup>

c. Perhaps section 3 should be divided into two sub-sections, based on the same principle, since chapter 16 explicitly relates itself to the death of Aharon's sons – "After the death of the two sons of Aharon." This is true both in terms of content ("that he die not") and in terms of the laws (i.e., the similarity between the Eighth Day and Yom Kippur). We may assert that all of the chapters from 11 to 16 belong to one closed unit. These chapters deal with the details of the laws of the various types of impurity, and the substantial connection between them is clear. Furthermore, a look at the internal criteria likewise points to their uniqueness and unity: only in these chapters – and in all of them – does Aharon receive a command together with Moshe. This fact alone is enough to provide a common denominator for these chapters. Thus, we may amend our division as follows:

\* Unit 1: laws of sacrifices (1-5)<sup>[4]</sup>

\* Unit 2: days of inauguration and the Eighth Day (8-10)

\* Unit 3: chapters addressing the types of impurity and chapters addressing the purification from these forms of impurity: "And atone for the holy place because of the impurity of Bnei Yisrael" (11-16)

\* Unit 4: laws, statutes, and judgments (18-24)

Let us now elaborate on what we have discovered. In chapters 11-15 (as well as in the command concerning priests who have drunk wine), Aharon is commanded together with Moshe. As we know, *Sefer Vayikra* is also known as "*Torat Kohanim*"; indeed, the laws of the sacrifices with which the Book begins, as well as the laws of the various types of impurity, the sacrificial meat and possible blemishes in chapters 21-22, all fit this description. This being so, why is Moshe alone commanded concerning the first set of laws of sacrifices and the last set of laws pertaining to *kohanim*, while the laws of impurity and purification (chapters 11-15) are conveyed to Moshe and Aharon together? The answer is quite simple: when it comes to the sacrifices and the laws pertaining to the *kohanim* themselves, Aharon and the other *kohanim* are nothing but servants: they are the workers in the *Mikdash*, and they must carry out everything that they are commanded to do. From this perspective, there is no real difference between that which is incumbent upon them and that which is incumbent on any other Israelite, qua servant of God, and therefore it is Moshe who commands them. When it comes to the laws of impurity, however, their status is different. Here, the *kohanim* are not merely "clerks" or servants. They are entrusted with determining the status of the impurity and giving instructions with regard to it. Here, Aharon and his sons are not there merely to carry out their tasks, but - like Moshe - play a role in the molding and application of the actual laws. Hence, since their role here is to be teachers and instructors, God commands Aharon directly. It is for the same reason that two *parshiyot* within the laws of impurity are conveyed to Moshe alone: the laws of the birthing woman, and the order of the purification of the leper. The impurity of a birthing woman is a simple determination, with no doubt involved; therefore, there is no difficulty in instructing in this regard. And when it comes to the purification of the leper, the *kohanim* once again become servants who must perform a certain job: they must offer up the sacrifice, sprinkle, etc. Once again they are not partners in the command, but rather subjects, and so Moshe conveys this to them, like the rest of the Torah.

It seems, then, that the section comprising the laws of impurities is placed where it is not because of the story of Nadav and Avihu, which precedes it (as many commentators maintain), but rather as a direct continuation of the chapters describing the Seven Days of Consecration, during which time the *kohanim* were trained and prepared for their service. This training involved practice in offering sacrifices - i.e., the *kohanim* were trained as servants/workers. After the inauguration of the *Mishkan*, the *kohanim* were also commanded to be teachers and instructors, responsible for the impurities of Bnei Yisrael and guarding the *Mikdash* from such impurities: "To teach when it is impure and when it is pure" (14:57); "And you shall separate Bnei Yisrael from their impurity" (15:31).

Seemingly, the prohibition against inebriation, commanded to Aharon, likewise arises not from the death of Nadav and Avihu, but rather from the obligation of the *kohanim* to instruct, such that they cannot be drunk: "And to distinguish between the holy and the profane, and between the impure and the pure" (10:10, in the unit concerning drunkenness).

d. From the above analysis it also arises that the unit discussing forbidden foods is, first and foremost, a unit describing the impurity of those who eat these things; the specifications of the forbidden foods themselves are only a secondary matter here, since the unit belongs to the section

addressing the different forms of impurity. At this point there is a clear difference between the chapters of forbidden foods in *Vayikra*, and their parallels in *Devarim* (the scope of this *shiur* does not allow for further elaboration on this point).

e. Chapter 16, dealing with the entry of the Kohen Gadol into the Holy of Holies, serves two functions: on one hand, it concludes the episode of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, and the fears which that event aroused. On the other hand, it concludes the laws of impurities, by means of the general act of atonement for them that is connected to the Kohen Gadol's entry: "And he shall atone for the holy place because of the impurities of Bnei Yisrael, and because of their transgressions in all of their sins." The essence of chapter 16 is not the details of Yom Kippur, but rather the atonement for the impurities. The command concerning Yom Kippur appears only at the end of the *parasha*, while the general atonement for sins "tags along," as it were, attaching itself to the original context of Aharon's entry into the Holy of Holies: atonement for impurities.

f. Some comments on the units that we have skipped, and which appear to have been dislodged from their proper place (item numbers refer to the numbering in the scheme above):

1. Items 5-9 (chapters 6-7): This section contains the laws of the sacrifices, from the point of view of the priest's role. This section originated at Mount Sinai, and was conveyed - as testified at the end of the section - together with the command concerning the consecration. The reason for this is clear: the purpose of the days of consecration is to prepare the *kohanim*, through training and practice, to perform the sacrificial service; therefore, they need to be commanded in advance concerning the details of their service and their rights. From this perspective, the command precedes the building of the *Mishkan*, like all the commands that anticipate the *Mishkan* and its service, which belong in *Sefer Shemot*. These chapters are inserted here because *Sefer Shemot* does not deal with the offering of sacrifices at all. The Torah chooses to forego their proper, chronological place, preferring to include this list of laws of sacrifices, meant for the *kohanim*, along with a parallel list that discusses the same sacrifices from the perspective of the Israelite who offers them (chapters 1-5\*), so as to treat all the laws of sacrifices together.

2. In item 11 (chapter 10), Aharon is commanded concerning the prohibition of wine. This command is wedged, as it were, in the middle of the narrative about the eighth day, since it is followed - in item 12 - by certain elements that complete the Eighth Day. Why does the Torah not first finish the narrative, and only then present the prohibition against wine for the *kohanim*? We have already noted that the wine prohibition serves as a sort of introduction to all the chapters addressing the special role of the *kohanim* in the sphere of ritual impurity. If the Torah chooses to place this command to Aharon in the middle of the Eighth Day, apparently it seeks to relate the prohibition to the event that takes place on that day, and to the suspicion that entering the holy place while drunk brings death. It is this juxtaposition that leads *Chazal* to conclude that Nadav and Avihu were punished for entering the *Mishkan* while drunk, since

otherwise there would be no need for the Torah to create this break in the middle of the narrative.

3. Item 20 (chapter 17), dealing with the prohibition against blood, is not part of the preceding units, nor is it part of those that follow. It addresses prohibitions and obligations related to sacrifices and the Tent of Meeting, but also other obligations – such that covering the blood and the prohibition against eating blood – which apply outside of the context of the *Mishkan*, too. From the introduction at the beginning of chapter 18 it would appear that the main body of laws begins only after this unit. What, then, is the role of this unit here? It would appear to serve as a sort of bridge between the first three sections of the *Sefer*, all of which involve – from some or other perspective – the *Mishkan* (sacrifices; consecration and the Divine Presence; impurities) and the rest of the *Sefer*, which covers statutes and laws that apply throughout the land. The prohibition against sacrificing meat slaughtered outside of the *Mishkan* defines the obligation of serving God through sacrifice only within the *Mishkan*, but it also connects to more general prohibitions that are not related to the *Mishkan*, but rather to other values: "For the blood is the soul." Since these prohibitions straddle the *Mishkan* precincts and what lies outside of it, the Torah place them in between the first part of the *Sefer* (the first three sections), dealing with the *Mikdash*, and the second part, dealing with the rest of the territory of Israel.

4. Item 36 (chapters 25-26) do not belong to the basis of this *Sefer*, but rather are "imported" from Mount Sinai. What is this section doing here? We shall explain this matter at length in future *shiurim*. In general, the Torah wants the covenant with the blessings and curses, forged at Mount Sinai, to be included along with the lists of laws in *Sefer Vayikra*, even though chronologically those laws were conveyed later on. Therefore, the conclusion of the covenant appears at the end of *Sefer Vayikra*, rather than in *Sefer Shemot*.

5. Unit 37 (chapter 27, the final chapter of the *Sefer*), dealing with dedications to the *Mishkan*, was also commanded at Mount Sinai. It is not part of the covenant, since it is located after the conclusion of the covenant. Why, then, it is located here? It would seem that since the subject of this unit is gifts given voluntarily, it is not part of the covenant, all of which is obligatory. Its connection with the subject of *Shemitta* arises from internal halakhic reasons: the calculation of the value of a field that is to be dedicated is dependent on the time remaining until the Jubilee year; likewise, other laws related to the status of the field (its return in the Jubilee year, etc.). Hence, this unit in fact belongs to the laws of Jubilee, which were listed in the preceding unit (chapter 25). However, as mentioned, since the issue here is not an obligation, these laws are separated from the other laws of the Jubilee year, which are included within the covenant; instead, they are appended afterwards.

g. We shall conclude this *shiur* with a review of the sub-sections that comprise the larger bodies; these we identify on the basis of the beginnings and endings that are exceptions to the usual "God spoke..." (as emphasized in the scheme above):

**Unit a** may be divided into two parts:

Chapters 1-5: all the laws of the sacrifices, from the perspective of the person bringing them; these were commanded in the Tent of Meeting.

Chapters 6-7: completion of the laws of sacrifices from the perspective of the *kohanim*; these were commanded at Sinai.

Unit b: a complete and chronological narrative; we have already discussed the sole break, discussing the prohibition of wine.

Unit c: clearly divisible into four sub-sections, by subject:

1. impurities of animals and their prohibitions
2. leprosy
3. impurity of the body
4. entry of the Kohen Gadol to the Holy of Holies to atone for the various impurities, etc.

Unit d: here the division is more complicated, but clear and structured in the general sense. We propose an initial suggestion:

1. item 21: forbidden sexual relations (chapter 18)
2. items 22-23: *Parashat Kedoshim*, with the punishments for forbidden sexual relations (19-20)
3. items 24-28: laws of the *kohanim* and the aspects of the sacrifices that pertain to them (21-22)
4. items 29-33: section on the festivals.

Attention should be paid to the fact that this proposed structure is not based on identifying subjects, etc., but rather upon the division determined by the Torah itself, in the form of the opening and closing formulas. Hence, we must try to understand the logic of this division, in light of the above criteria.

Let us consider some of the questions that require further investigation, in light of the above structure:

\* Why does the Torah define the punishments for forbidden sexual relations (chapter 20) as an independent section, separate from the laws of forbidden sexual relations (chapter 18), with a different subject (*Kedoshim* – chapter 19) creating a break between them? And why do the punishments for forbidden sexual relations belong to the same section as the social laws of *Parashat Kedoshim*, rather than sharing a section with the prohibitions against those forbidden relations?

\* How are the laws of the *kohanim*, in unit d-3, connected to the preceding and succeeding subjects, and why are they not part of one of the first three sections, which deal with the *Mikdash* and the *kohanim*? The same question applies concerning the few laws of sacrifices that appear in that *parasha*.

\* Item 34, following the laws of the festivals, deals with the laws of the *Menora* and the show-bread. It is difficult to understand why this is a separate unit, outside the framework of any general section either in *Sefer Shemot* (where the laws of these vessels are detailed) or the beginning of *Vayikra*, or as part of the laws of the *kohanim* listed in chapters 21-22. Why do they appear here?<sup>[5]</sup>



\* Finally: is the episode of the blasphemer a narrative appendix placed at the end of section d. of the *Sefer*, or does its location serve some purpose?

These and other questions still require some clarification, and the answers to them are, at most, hinted at in our discussion above. Some will hopefully be resolved in the future *shiurim*, while others will be left open, for readers to research and hopefully solve. To these we must add the need to explain the division of the smaller units, which is interesting and different from the generally accepted division. This applies both to the section on the sacrifices, which testifies to a perception that is different from the regular one, and to the division of – for example - the section on the festivals, according to which the festivals should be divided as follows: Shabbat and Pesach, Omer and first fruits (Shavuot), Yom Ha-zikaron (Rosh Ha-shana), Yom Kippur, Sukkot. There is no division into pilgrim festivals vs. High Holy Days; Pesach is separated from the Omer and also from Shavuot; Pesach and Shabbat are treated together; there is a separation between Rosh Ha-shana and Yom Kippur. In short, the structure proposed above, with its system of divisions, gives rise to no small number of surprises, all of which we shall have to try to explain, and this we shall hopefully attempt in future *shiurim*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

- 
- [1] Owing to the scope of the *shiur*, we shall obviously have to limit ourselves to a brief overview, such that not every point will be able to be proved at length. The reader is advised to follow the discussion with a *Tanakh* accessible. We do not note here all the places where there is a regular utterance by God to Moshe ("God spoke to Moshe saying..."); we emphasize only the unusual cases.
- [2] Chapters 6-7 were commanded at Mount Sinai, and therefore we skip them here.
- [3] Chapters 25-27 were given at Sinai.
- [4] Chapters 6-7 were commanded at Mount Sinai, and therefore we skip them here.
- [5] It is possible that the Torah seeks to relate the service of the *Menora* and the table with the show-bread to the overall system of the sanctity of time, treated in chapter 23 in the form of the laws of the festivals. Still, the laws of the *Menora* and the show-bread (which is related to Shabbat, which we have discussed above) are not directly connected to the holy convocations and the laws of the festivals; for this reason they appear as an appendix to the section on the sanctity of time.

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>