

פרשת ראה

OVERVIEW

Soon after taking possession of the land, the people will be told where the sanctuary will rise, where the obligatory and voluntary sacrifices have to be offered and where they will receive the teachings of their leaders. Contrary to the practice in the desert, animals that were part of the nation's food supply were permitted to be slaughtered outside the temple's confines.

The text uses harsh language against false prophets or anyone who would attempt to introduce a foreign cult.

There follow laws regarding clean and unclean animals, the tithe, the Sabbath year, slaves.

The Sidrah concludes with the commandment to celebrate the three pilgrimage festivals and to assemble all men of Israel on these occasions.

COMMENTARY

Laws regarding the consumption of meat

The time of the entry in Canaan approaches. More and more, Moshe concentrates on the instructions pertaining to the peoples settling in the land. One of the important innovations is the suspension of the law requiring animals that are destined for the Jewish table to be brought before the priest and to be released for consumption only after they had been offered as sacrifices. In view of the great distance between the sanctuary and the people living in the

countryside and other cities, the Torah permits meat to be eaten "in all your gates" (12:15), i.e. in the entire land.

It is fully in the spirit of the Torah to infuse even the mundane activities of daily life with sanctifying thoughts and concrete symbols of holiness. Excessive consumption of meat can lead to a brutalization of the human spirit. This was the reason why the Torah ordered that animals designated as human food should be offered as sacrifices before their use. The Jew shall receive his nourishment from the hand of the priest (and not in the butcher shop).

The seemingly insignificant change in the law could have had serious consequences. But the Torah did not want to complicate the consumption of meat for those who lived in the provinces, often at great distances from the sanctuary. While the general use of meat was permitted, the laws regarding slaughtering (Shechita) and the blood and fat remained unchanged in order to retain the memory of the sacrifices that was the original designation of every animal. Thus the use of the blood and fat that were normally offered on the altar was prohibited in its absence. It is as if the family table was placed at the side of G-d's altar. (The salt on the table also reminds us of the sacrifices on the altar).

Here too, we find the imprint of the divine, the holiness in our daily activities, as we find it on every page of our sacred literature and in every epoch of our history.

The false Prophet

Israel's history forms an uninterrupted chain of traditions whose object and purpose is the Torah law as received and transmitted by Moshe Rabbenu. During moments of crisis, divinely inspired leaders arise who teach the authentic interpretation of the law to serve as guiding principles in the development of Jewish thought. The authority of these leaders is unassailable as long as they adhere in thought and deed to the true sinaitic Revelation. Their authority is further enhanced by the performance of miracles. Yet in chapter 13 of our Sidrah the question is raised as to the manner in which the prophet's qualification can be determined. The answer is unequivocal: "if he (the prophet) gives you a sign or performs a miracle.... and he tells you "let us go after other gods whom you do not know, and let us serve them", then do not hearken to the words of that prophet because G-d, your G-d, is testing you with this to know whether you truly love your G-d, with all your heart and all your soul". The sign or miracle that he so desperately used to convince the people of his divinely inspired authority must be ignored and the false prophet immediately expelled. (It is remarkable how this chapter could serve as an accurate description of the activities of the founder of Christianity).

Judaism's existence and survival is secured through the divinely revealed teachings and the absolute authenticity of the words from Sinai. To reduce the Revelation to the ranks of a collective inspiration and the Torah law to a spontaneous expression of religious emotions would sound the death knell for true Judaism and pale the way for a

gradual introduction of bona fide pantheism. That is why the law of the false prophet assumes such an important place in Jewish teaching. It will serve as a yardstick for the conduct of future generations attracted by the lures and challenges that threaten the purity and integrity of G-d's Torah.

"You are sons of G d, your G-d, do not cut yourselves...." (14:1)

This verse contains two statements whose proximity calls for an explanation. Relations between man and his fellowmen and among members of a family should be based on love and mutual trust. Our relationship to G-d is subject to these same qualities but is distinguished by the imperative requirement of unconditional adherence to the precepts of the divine law. Our text illustrates this axiom by citing an ancient practice that contains a profound lesson for all time to come.

In numerous cultures it was an established custom to mutilate oneself as sign of mourning, undoubtedly to stimulate one's emotional suffering by way of physical pains and to demonstrate one's despair over the loss of a loin or friend. Outlawing such practices signifies our respect for the human body as a divine creation that does not allow an exception even in the most trying circumstances. For "you are sons of G-d, your G-d".

"You shall not eat any abomination"

Chapter 14 that lists the forbidden foods as a supplement to Chapter 7 in Vayikra, is introduced with the word "you shall not eat any abomination". Logically this prohibition

refers to the enumeration of the forbidden foods that follows. However, the Talmud extends the prohibition to other forbidden mixtures, such as meat and milk that are not mentioned in this chapter. Maimonides derives from the verse the prohibition of consuming animals that were destined to be sacrificed on the altar and became unfit due to a bodily injury. The verse emphasizes the timeless character of this prohibition that tolerates no change or substitution as a result of possible scientific discoveries. Usually attacks on the doctrines of the Torah begin with a critical analysis of the dietary laws. (This may be a reason why this verse follows the section dealing with the false prophet).

Verses 4-5 list the ten categories of animals we are allowed to consume. Those mentioned in V. 4 belong to the group of "Behema" (domestic animals). Those parts of their fat that were normally offered on the altar are prohibited. The animals listed in V. 5 belong to the group of "Chaya" (non-domestic animals) whose fat is permitted but whose blood must be covered after the "Shechita" as is done in the case of birds. (The only kind listed here that is exempt from this rule is the תאו (T'o) whose exact status is unclear).

Also listed are the twenty-four unclean, i.e. prohibited kinds of birds. This means that those not included in this list are permitted. However, we may eat only those birds that are traditional on the Jewish table.

The Tithe

The Jewish tithe comprises three categories that are distinct from each

other in regard to the recipient as well as their specific use:

- 1- The "first tithe" is reserved for the Levites;
- 2- The "second tithe" is brought to Jerusalem by the donor and consumed there;
- 3- The "tithe for the poor".

The following sequence was to be followed: each period of six years was divided into two three-year cycles. No tithe was given in the seventh year that was a Sabbath (or Shemitta) year. During each of the cycle's three years the first tithe is given to the Levites. During the two first years of each cycle the second tithe is set aside for offering and consumption in Jerusalem. In the third year of each cycle the tithe for the poor is given. Thus in a six-year period the first tithe (levites): every year; the second tithe (Jerusalem): year one, two, four, five; the tithe for the poor: year 3 and 6.

The nation which is how being settled in Canaan will have as its major task the formation of a society based on a spirit of solidarity and mutual trust. "If there will be among you a needy person from among one of your brothers within one of your gates, in the land that G-d, your G-d, is giving you, you shall not harden your heart and not close your hand to your brother, the needy person" (15:7). This verse is directed to the public ("among you" refers to the community) as well as to the individual (to whom the "do not close your hand" is addressed). This command can only be fully realized by joint action on the part of the Community and its individual members. The poor are "among you",

meaning that they are part of the society and entitled to its support.

(Perhaps it is opportune to quote here a beautiful chassidic thought: "G-d assigns to every person the same share of the world's resources. When we see people acquiring more than their allotted share, it is because G-d entrusts them with the care and administration of a part of their fellowmen's share, referring to those whom we call "poor" and who may not be able to manage their affairs properly. Therefore the poor person who turns to a prosperous neighbor for assistance is entitled to claim a share of that which really belongs to him").

"Do not harden your heart". Generally, the so-called "Jewish heart" is spontaneously ready to help, to assist and to save. It cannot be very easy to silence the voice of one's Jewish heart when one rebuffs the outstretched hand of a needy person. "The sons of Abraham are distinguished by three qualities: good breeding, piety and generosity". Or, in the words of the famous Dubno Maggid, "our brother", meaning any poor man who comes to you for help, brings a letter of recommendation from our Father (Hashem) Who asks for his son to be received with consideration and brotherly love.

The annulment of debts

Among the various aspects pertaining to the Sabbath-year (Shemitta) is the annulment of all debts that have not been paid before the seventh year. In the wrong hands, this rule could cause severe problems such as deliberate defections by dishonest

debtors. However, the Torah assumes that a person in need of loans generally will do his utmost to repay them within the pre-arranged time limit. When circumstances beyond his control prevent him from fulfilling his obligation, the law eases his conscience by cancelling the debt after six years. While the creditor cannot demand payment, the debtor has a moral duty to repay the loan, even after twenty years, if he is in a financial position to do so. If he does not do so voluntarily, the court is empowered to collect the debt via a legal warrant. (This supplementary rule to the Torah law is owed to the initiative of Hillel, the great Tanaite). In this way, the law upholds the legitimate interests of both parties: it eases the burden on the needy and provides a certain amount of security for the creditor.

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