

פרשת שמייני

OVERVIEW

On the eighth day after the consecration of the sanctuary, Aharon and his sons are formally installed in the priestly service. Solemn sacrifices accompany the ceremony as Aharon blesses his people. Fire descends from heaven and consumes the ascent offering.

Two sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, lose their lives as a result of their disregard for the strict rules that govern the divine worship in the sanctuary, "I will be sanctified by those who are close to Me".

The section dealing with the consecration concludes by citing the rule that forbids the priests to partake of wine before entering the Ohel Mo'ed ("the tent of appointed meeting").

This is followed by the dietary laws regarding animals that may be eaten and those that are prohibited. The characteristic features of both categories among the quadrupeds, birds, insects and reptiles are enumerated.

COMMENTARY

The death of Aharon's sons

It is remarkable that the Torah text refers to offerings rejected by G-d whenever it makes explicit mention of accepted sacrifices. Such is the case of Kayin and Hevel and such it is in the case of these two young priests which is in striking contrast to the previous chapters. What was their wrongdoing? Numerous commentators provide answers. In summary: "Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire into them and placed incense upon it, and thus they brought a strange fire before G-d which He had not commanded them".

It appears that the two young men acted spontaneous to give expression to their ecstatic joy in coming close to the altar. It was this impetuous gesture that proved to be their undoing. For nothing may serve as an excuse to upset the order established by the law. No additions or changes, however well meant, may be tolerated, in particular not by the attending priest. No one has the right to elect himself the proper manner in which to serve G-d if this implies abandoning the way taught us by

divine wisdom. We are given the task of using all our energy and resources to turn our way of life into the service of G-d.

Divine judgment dealt harshly with these two priests just because they were close to G-d. They should have maintained iron self-discipline. Their erroneous action was fatal in that it was committed by men who, as leaders, were to set the example of total allegiance and discipline to the precepts of the law.

Permitted and prohibited animals - General Concepts

The quadrupeds are divided into two categories: those that chew the cud and have split hooves are permitted, all others are prohibited. Fish are also divided into two categories: those that have fins and scales are permitted, all others are prohibited. As to birds, the text lists a certain number of those that are prohibited, including birds of prey. With few exceptions (whose exact nature we do not know) all creeping creatures are prohibited.

What are the reasons for these laws? It is difficult to establish the main motive that guided their formulation. An interpretation that centers on the two distinguishing marks taught, enables us to determine the underlying reasons for this legislation.

Two activities are essential in every animal's existence: the search for food and the fight for survival. While these activities are also basic conditions of human life, they certainly should not form the essence of our existence. Our physical needs must be subordinated to our spiritual values. Therefore the Torah prohibits those animals that feature in a pronounced manner the parts of the body that are essential, for their survival: the claws of the beasts of prey and the stomach that digests anything the animal devours. The animal that chews the cud is, as it were, more dignified, almost human in the manner in which it eats its food. While it is able to repel an attack, its split hooves only serve its defense and never for aggressive purposes. The simple yet significant teaching emanating from this law doubtless enhances the exalted character of the Jewish people.

Similarly, the requirement of fins and scales aims at the exclusion of a large number of fish that feast on the flesh of other fish. Fins and scales symbolize the two qualities every Jew is expected to exhibit if he is to surmount the troubled waters of history's trials and tribulations. Fins and scales: we must equip ourselves with an impenetrable armor to enable us to remain true to ourselves.

(In this connection we are reminded of a Talmudic story of the rabbi who, in a discussion with a Roman, likened Israel to the fish which can only survive in their element and wisely reject the fox's deceitful invitation to enjoy the pleasures of the sun-filled meadow.)

We cannot, however, remain in a static state of isolation. We must learn to adjust ourselves to changing situations without sacrificing one iota of our Torah way of life. The dietary laws speak a language of profound symbolic significance as they demonstrate the destiny of a people that will go to any length to preserve its character as the Nation of G-d.

There are indeed the theories that attempt to advance merely practical reasons for the dietary laws. Some believe them to date back to a primitive cult reflecting the Egyptian practice of differentiating between "profane" and "sacred" animals. Others cite climatic and housing conditions of that period and view the dietary laws as a preventive measure of hygiene to eliminate food that may easily spoil in excessive heat.

There can be no doubt that these laws have neither been inspired nor affected by heathen practices or time-bound conditions of climate and environment. On the contrary: repeatedly and in the strongest terms, the Torah condemns any imitation of a foreign culture or ideology. "Do not follow in their ways" is the fundamental principle that determines Judaism's attitude towards non-Jewish civilizations. The very essence of Torah is based on the spiritualization of all human activity culminating in man's supreme task: the service and worship of G-d.

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Such is the mystery of the dietary laws. He who creates life also charts the ideal course for man's physical and moral existence. This presupposes one fundamental axiom: The divine origin of the Torah law. Without it, Judaism will forever remain at the mercy of time's ever-changing tastes, ideals and laws.

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