

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

Since the Torah had spoken of the Avodah of Yom HaKippurim, its sacrifices and the casting of blood on the mizbeiach and before the Kodosh Hakodashim, it is fitting that it should then tell us of the negation of the use of blood for sacrificing to the sheidim and for eating or drinking. Although this issur applies to the whole of Israel, Aharon and his sons were also specifically addressed so that it was not passed on to them in the usual chain from Moshe, since they were so involved in the korbanot and with blood.

There are 3 reasons for the extremely severe injunction against eating or drinking the blood even though the eating of animal flesh is permitted. The punishment for this infringement is karet, to be cut off from the Jewish people; "I will set My presence against the nefesh -not haish, the man that eats the blood (13:10). Nefesh tachat nefesh, a soul for a soul":

[1].The blood is the life essence of the animal and is the source of all its vitality and being that is passed by the heart to all the limbs muscles and sinew; the animals very nefesh. We offer the animal's body on the mizbeiach and its nefesh. The body sacrificed comes to atone for our bodies by being offered instead of our own bodies, and the nefesh-blood for our nefesh. However, the blood can atone only for its counterpart, the materialistic and animal nefesh that is within us; the intellectual and wisdom nefesh that sets Man apart from the rest of Creation, requires teshuvah for its atonement and not sacrifices.

[2].People adapt to the food they eat and integrate it into their personalities until they become one. Thus if one were to drink the blood of the animals one would absorb their crude unrefined natures and animalistic characteristics till these become Nature and Man would become an animal. [Abarbanel was certainly aware through the traders and mariners of Spain and Portugal, of the custom among the primitives of Africa and South America who drank blood so that the spirit, courage and strength of the animals would enter their souls]. This effect is not present in eating the flesh of the animal since our digestive system and the passage of the flesh through the various organs of our body can break down the components of their flesh and absorb them, meanwhile transforming the bestial, the animalistic and crudeness. However, since the blood is actually the essence, the concentrated power and the undiluted traits of the animal, our bodies are unable to reduce them to their elements. Therefore, we become integrated with their natures and these become our teva.

[3]. Bnei Noah are enjoined against eating 'ever min hachai', the eating of the animal's flesh while it

is still alive; that is eating the flesh as well as the nefesh of the animal. The drinking of blood is actually that, since it is written " nefesh of all flesh is its blood".

I am the Lord, your G-d. After the doings of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, you shall not do; and after the manner of the land of Canaan where I bring you, you shall not do" (Vayikrah, 18:2-3). No other mitzvot of the Torah, other than these forbidden sexual acts [ariyot] were given with this introduction. Furthermore, we have to ask why they are specified as being identified with the acts of Egypt and Canaan. The words, "My Chukim and Mishpatim you shall keep" are repeated in one verse after the other (18:4-5) as well as "I am the Lord", and this needs to be explained.

Previously the Torah warned against eating of blood and linked this to the Egyptians who were accustomed to it. Now the text warns Israel against acting like the inhabitants of Canaan as well, who while they did not eat and drink blood nevertheless, were guilty of gross sexual immorality. This is the reason for placing the list of forbidden sexual acts in this place in the Torah. Since a person will normally follow the customs and mores of the land of his birth or the land of his domicile, the Torah warned against the acts of Egypt from whence we came as well as those of Canaan that was to be our future home. However, we should not learn from them as their way leads only to destruction and tragedy; "that the land may not vomit you out as it did the nations that dwelt there before you".

The list of forbidden sexual relations contains all those people with whom a man is in constant and close contact which increases the temptation and opportunity for illicit relationships. The list is even in descending order of closeness starting with a mother and the wife of a father. Towards the end of the list there is the injunction against interbreeding of diverse kinds of animals. Unlike sexual acts between animals of the same kind, these need human agency to bring the animals to act. The Torah wanting to keep humans from sexual perversion sees their assisting and witnessing such acts as conducive to immorality and so forbade such interbreeding. Throughout, Torah understands the necessity of divine instruction in the human struggle against sexual immorality. That is the reason why "I am the Lord" is mentioned twice in reference to these forbidden sexual relations; once as the source of the commandment as is common, but also as the Granter of Divine Wisdom that gives us Chukim and Mishpatim. It is they that give us the strength and wisdom to avoid the sexual mores of the nations. So our text teaches, "And live by them [My Chukim and Mishpatim]". Live by them cannot mean long life in this world as these nations also live regular life spans; it must mean life in the World to Come, even as Onkelos translates.

Some scholars see 'ervah' as referring to the nakedness of the parties but this should rather be understood as revealing that which is normally covered. In this way these sexual relations of close relatives are seen also as degrading to their honor. Intimacy with a son's wife is a degradation of the father son relationship, and that with a father's wife or with ones mother or their daughters are negations of honoring father or mother.

[This list is the Torah reading for Minchah on Yom HaKippurim. It seems a strange choice for the

holiest day of the Jewish year. The forbidden sexual relationships are distinct from crimes such as rape and so may be seen as victimless crimes. Perhaps the reading on Yom HaKippurim, is to teach us that even victimless crimes are considered as sins that have to atoned for.

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