

טועמיה - חיים

לחיות עם הזמן בשבת קודש

A Taste of Shabbat – Parshat Vayikra 5777

By Rav Mordechai Elon (edited and translated by his students)

Sacrifice of wood

Our parsha begins with the laws of burnt sacrifices from cattle or flock, moves on to sacrifices of birds and then the five sorts of Menachot- meal offerings, but before that, there is a less known sort of sacrifice- a wood sacrifice.

Our Rabbis¹ state about the verse

וַיִּנְפֹּשׂ כִּי יִקְרִיב קִרְבָּן מִנְחָה לַיהוָה סֵלֶת יִהְיֶה קִרְבָּנוֹ...²

And if a person brings a sacrifice of a meal offering to God

"The Torah doesn't say "a meal offering" but "a sacrifice of a meal offering" – In other words the word "sacrifice" looks superfluous. From here they conclude that just as a meal offering can be a sacrifice, also all of its components by itself can be an offering – oil, wine and, as our Rabbis teach, even wood. In other words, donation of the wood used to make the fire is called a sacrifice. We shall see that a wood sacrifice has an attribute that is not shared with any other, it is the happiest sacrifice. We will see how a piece of wood can become a sacrifice, and what makes it's donation a happy event

The Gemara³ teaches us that when the first people came back from Babylon to build the second temple, there was a shortage of wood for the fire on the alter. A number of families volunteered to donate wood. As a reward it was decided that every year the temple would use wood donated by the same families on the day of their first donation, even if there was a huge stock of other wood. Not only that, but the day was designated for each family as a mini holiday, in which there were no eulogies or fasts, and it was forbidden to work. There day was so happy, that if Tisha BeAv had been delayed from Shabbat to Sunday, the family who celebrated the 10th of Av would delay the first to the 11th. What makes this day so happy for each family?

Our Rabbis teach us in the famous Mishna:

The happiest days of Israel were the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur⁴

One of the reasons given in the Gemara was

Rabba and Rav Yosef both say that the 15th of Adar was the day that the tree cutting season for the alter fire ended.⁵

In order to insure the quality of the wood for the alter; the trees had to be cut down in the hottest season and from the 15th of Av onwards the weather starts to become milder. For this reason no more trees were cut from this

date, so, the reason the day is considered so happy is because it is the time the collection of wood for the temple ended every year.

This is strange, we can understand happiness after collecting meal offerings, but wood is just wood. How could wood collection be the reason for the happiest day in the year?

The Lubavicher Rebbe Ztl gives a fascinating answer⁶. The Ramban explains that when a person brings a sacrifice, it is as if he is offering up himself – as the Torah says

אָדָם כִּי יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קִרְבָּן לַיהוָה...⁷

When a man from [among] you brings / will be brought as a sacrifice to the Lord

When bringing a sacrifice one should meditate on the idea that every organ of the animal burnt on the alter should really have been a part of your own body, but God has had mercy on us and allowed us to sacrifice an animal instead.

If we look deeper we can see that despite the fact that a person should have sacrificed himself, there is still something egoistic in an offering, they atone or are a symbol of gratitude etc. . Wood, on the other hand, is completely destroyed on the alter leaving nothing over. When a person brings a wood offering he isn't trying to atone, isn't trying to bring his emotions or understanding, he is sacrificing his self, his essential being.

For man is a tree of the field⁸

As we have said, the purpose of the sacrifices are to mend and repair. the wood sacrifice work on man's self. The pieces of wood are anonymous, there is no sign with a list of benefactors, they are just burnt. When a family donated the wood when there was not enough, they were offering up their selves, and this was why it was such a happy occasion. It was as if they were saying, "I want to make sure the fire burns in the temple, without any personal interests. I don't want anything from it, I am giving my self". Even Tisha Be'av is pushed aside if a Jew gives his self, anonymously, without any definition – just like a piece of wood.

¹ ספרא ו(יקרא פרשת ח)

² ויקרא ב', א'.

³ משנה תענית ד':ו'

⁴ משנה תענית, ד', ח'.

⁵ בבלי, תענית, ל"א.

⁶ ליקוטי-שיחות כרך כב, עמ' 11

⁷ ויקרא א', ב'.

⁸ דברים, כ', י"ט.