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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

Converts as the Shadow of Redemption

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Sefer Vayikra is an anticlimax, and there's a very good reason for that; it really shouldn't have been necessary. The sacrificial rite as presented in Vayikra is largely about atonement for errors; in other words, it is about the intrusion of human fallibility and inattention into Divine space, or about the failure of history to end.

History could have ended twice. If Adam and Chavah had waited until nightfall to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, we would be living in eternal Shabbat. If the Jews had waited until nightfall for Mosheh to come down with the Tablets, we would never have left Sinai.

Ramban suggests that human sin cannot really prevent those perfect worlds from existing; in a Platonic/Brisker sense, our historical world is only a shadow of the Redeemed world. The Mishkan is the place where history and metahistory meet. It is the place where God "dwells among us", but also the boundary that keeps G-d's presence from consuming us. In the aftermath of Initial Sin, G-d exiled human beings from Eden, and places the Cherubs to guard the pathway back.

This demonstrates that the entrance to that pathway is at the heart of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was originally intended to be a gateway, but instead it became a gatehouse. What happens to commitments made in the expectation of imminent Redemption? When the Jews said *naaseh venishma*, they were expecting life to be a bowl of pitless cherries, and G-d k'b'yakhol was expecting them to be perfect servants. Did the covenant at Sinai survive the nearly immediate radical breach by one party?

Ramban's commentary on this parshah apparently offers a startling answer – no. Understanding how he gets to this answer, and its implications, require us to digress for a bit. I also need to emphasize again that for Ramban, human sin can never **completely** undo Redemption.

Rashi famously asks at the beginning of Parashat Behar: What is the connection between shmittah (=the Sabbatical year) and Mount Sinai? He begins his response by citing the Midrash Halakhah on Vayikra, known as Torat Kohanim or Sifra: "Just as the general principles, specific rules, and fine details of shmittah were said at Sinai, so too all the mitzvot had their general principles and fine details said at Sinai."

How do we know this about shmittah? Rashi suggests that shmittah is unique in that the Torah discusses it in Vayikra but does not return to it in Devarim. This proves that **all** its details must have been received at Sinai. With this in mind, we can conclude with regard to the other mitzvot that even when Devarim adds details to their presentation in the earlier books of the Pentateuch, it does not mean to imply that those details were not revealed earlier, at Sinai.

It should be clear that for Rashi this statement refers exclusively to principles, rules, and details **that are found in the Torah**. "All its fine details" means all the fine details found in the Torah. It says nothing whatever about the origins and authority of details not found in the Torah. Rashi's supercommentator Mizrachi notes that this beraita is simply taking the side of Rabbi Akiva in a dispute found on Zevachim:

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רבי ישמעאל אומר: כללות נאמרו בסיני ופרטות באהל מועד וחזרו ונשנו בערבות מואב.
ורבי עקיבא אומר: כללות ופרטות נאמרו בסיני ונשנו באהל מועד ונשתלשו בערבות מואב."

Rabbi Yishmael said: The general principles were said at Sinai, and the specific rules in the Tent of Meeting, and then they were reviewed in the Plains of Moab:

But Rabbi Akiva said: The general principle and the specific rules were said at Sinai, reviewed in the Tent of Meeting, and taught a third time in the Plains of Moab.

Ramban finds Rashi unconvincing. He argues that Shemittah is chosen to illustrate this point not because it **isn't** repeated in Devarim, but rather because it **is** repeating laws already found in Exodus 23:11, Parshat Mishpatim.

But Ramban is not satisfied. Why, he asks, was it necessary for Mosheh to teach the laws repeatedly? For the Plains of Moab he has a simple solution: So that the next generation would hear them from Mosheh directly. But why both at Sinai and at the Tent of Meeting?

Ramban adds one more question: Why does the Torah teach us that Shmittah, and by extension all the mitzvot, were taught in detail at Sinai, here in Behar? Behar is part of Sefer Vayikra, which opens by setting itself in the Tent of Meeting. Why didn't the Torah teach us about Sinai while still reporting from Sinai?

Ramban's answer is that Mosheh didn't review the Sinai covenant at the Tent of Meeting – he renewed it.

וביאור הענין, כי בתחילת ארבעים יום הראשונים של לוחות הראשונות כתב משה בספר הברית את כל דברי ה' ואת כל המשפטים הנאמרים שם וזרוק דם הברית על העם (שמות כד ח), וכשחטאו בעגל ונשתברו הלוחות כאילו נתבטלה הברית היא אצל הקדוש ברוך הוא, וכשנתרצה הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה בלוחות שניות צוהו בברית חדשה שנאמר (שם לד י) הנה אנכי כורת ברית, והחזיר שם המצות החמורות שנאמרו בסדר ואלה המשפטים בברית הראשונה . . .

The explanation of the matter is that at the outset of the first forty days of the first tablets, Mosheh wrote in the Book of the Covenant all the words of Hashem and all the mishpatim said there, and he threw the blood of the covenant over the people" (Shemot 24:8). When they sinned via the Calf and the tablets were broken, it was as if that covenant was annulled with regard to the Holy Blessed One, and so when G-d acceded

to Mosheh via the second tablets, He commanded him about a new covenant, as Scripture says (34:10) "Behold I am being koreit a covenant"; and he repeated there in the new covenant the grave mitzvot that had been said in Parashat Mishpatim . . .

The Torah closes Sefer Vayikra (27:34) by declaring

ואלה המצות אשר צוה יקוק את משה אל בני ישראל בהר סיני:
These are the mitzvot which Hashem commanded Mosheh toward the Children of Israel at Mt. Sinai.

The purpose of this declaration is to teach us that the renewed covenant had all the content of the original.

But, Ramban says, the renewed covenant was not established in the same way as the original.

ולא הוצרך עתה שיזבח זבחים וזרוק חצי הדם על העם וחצי הדם על המזבח כאשר עשה בראשונה, אבל קבלו עליהם הברית הראשונה באלות ובקללות אלה

It was not necessary at this point to bring sacrifices and throw half the blood on the people and half the blood on the altar as he did in the original, rather they accepted the original covenant via these imprecations and curses.

The sacrificial rite was originally the heart of a covenant which was the natural expression of a healthy relationship. The renewed covenant is held together by discipline and even coercion, and sacrifices are merely a way to atone for breaches. But is there a way to live the covenant as originally intended? On Keritut 8b, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi describes the conversion process as follows:

מה אבותיכם לא נכנסו לברית אלא במילה וטבילה והרצאת דם
אף הם לא יכנסו לברית אלא במילה וטבילה והרצאת דמים
Just as your ancestors could enter the covenant only through (male) circumcision, immersion, and a blood-rite,
so too they (converts) can enter the covenant only through (male) circumcision, immersion, and a blood-rite.

According to Ramban, it follows that converts enter the original covenant, not the second. They enter a Jewish people who have not yet made the Calf.

I don't accept this implication uncritically – being fully part of the Jewish people means identifying with our sins as well as our triumphs, feeling both shame and pride. But we should recognize that every sincere convert is a reflection of our best religious selves, and recognize that it is our job to be worthy of them, not the other way around.

Shabbat shalom!

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