

Parashah Eighty-Eight

Leviticus 17:1–16; Isaiah 66:1–11; John 6:52–59

notes by Tim Hegg

Our *parashah* lists five laws all relating to the issue of blood, and the central prohibition of the passage that prohibits ingesting blood. The first law (vv. 3–7) deals with the slaughter of permitted domesticated four-legged animals, and the need to have them slaughtered at the Tabernacle rather than in the open field. The second law (vv. 8–9) prohibits sacrificing to pagan gods. The third law (vv. 10–12) gives the absolute prohibition against ingesting blood. The fourth law (vv. 13–14) mandates that the blood of hunted animals must be buried in the place where they are slaughtered (i.e., the open field). The fifth law (vv. 15–16) gives instructions for how one who is defiled by eating from the meat of an animal that has died may become ritually clean. The manner in which these five laws are given emphasizes the middle (third) law prohibiting the ingesting of blood. The rationale given is that the blood contains the life, and that it therefore belongs to God as the life-giver.

First Law: Slaughter of Domesticated, Permitted Quadrupeds.

It is evident in the rabbinic literature that debate raged over the interpretation of this opening section. This debate is recorded as occurring primarily between R. Akiva and R. Ishmael (b.*Chullin* 16a–17a; cf. Mid. Rab. *Lev* 22.6). The two viewpoints are as follows:

1) [R. Ishmael’s view, which is the majority view] all domesticated livestock (four-legged) had to be slaughtered at the Tabernacle, because every animal that was slaughtered was to be viewed as a sacrifice to HaShem. The blood was to be put on the altar, and the fat portions offered up on the altar as a burnt offering. (cf. also *Sipra Acharei*, § 1:5; b.*Avoda Zera* 51b, 52b; b.*Zeb.* 106a; *Tanchuma* Naso 21, as well as Rashi and Rashbam).

2) [R. Akiva’s view] Akiva read the words of vv. 3–4 to mean: “if anyone slaughters an offering to the Lord in the camp, he must bring the blood and fat to the doorway of the tent of meeting.” Presumably, Akiva’s understanding was that if someone slaughtered his own sacrifice to the Lord (because that person was ill-informed and did not understand that he was to bring the animal to the priest for slaughtering), then he must bring the blood and fat to the Tabernacle, even though by having slaughtered the sacrificial animal in an improper fashion (i.e., having not brought it alive to the Tabernacle) it was rendered unfit for a sacrifice.

Support for Akiva’s view may be found in v. 5: “The reason is so that the sons of Israel may bring their sacrifices which they were sacrificing in the open field, that they may bring them in to the LORD, at the doorway of the tent of meeting to the priest, and sacrifice them as sacrifices of peace offerings to the LORD.” Here, the slaughtered animal is specifically detailed to be a sacrifice, and more specifically, a peace offering (שְׁלָמִים, *shelem*).

Verse 7 gives us additional insight into this debate: apparently the Israelites, when they slaughtered animals from their herds, were dedicating some part of the slaughter (most likely the blood) to the goat demons. The word translated “demon gods” is שְׂעִיר, *sa’ir*, and means “a hairy goat, billy-goat,” but can also refer to a pagan god depicted as a goat who was thought to rule the open fields. Thus, in order to make sure that the Israelites were not in any way giving credence to the pagan gods as they slaughtered animals for meat, God instructed them through Moses that all slaughtering would have to be done at the doorway of the tent of meeting.

Moreover, this measure was apparently viewed as corrective and therefore temporary, since in

Deut 12:15 we read: “However, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your gates, whatever you desire, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you; the unclean and the clean may eat of it, as of the gazelle and the deer.” Once Israel had entered the Land, the need for this corrective measure ceased, since there would not be the same impetus to appease the gods of the pagans through whose lands they had journeyed.

The penalty prescribed for one who failed to follow the regulation to perform slaughter of animals at the Tabernacle was equal to that of blood-guilt: that person was to be cut off from his people. Here we see that syncretism with idolatry was never tolerated by HaShem. It was viewed as spiritual harlotry, for the covenant between God and Israel was offered in the form of a marriage contract.

Second Law: Sacrifices Could Be Made in Only One Place

The second law of our *parashah* is given in vv. 8–9, stating that all sacrifices to HaShem were to be brought to the Tabernacle. Once again, the need to reinforce this otherwise obvious directive is that some who may have been slaughtering in the fields, and dedicating part of the slaughter to the demon gods, were contending that they were also dedicating part of the slaughter to HaShem. Thus the need to reinforce the law that all sacrifices to HaShem must be brought alive to the Tabernacle and slaughtered there. This unified the worship of HaShem and centered it in the Tabernacle and eventually in the Temple. This centralization of sacrifice around the Tabernacle/Temple was essential for maintaining the important symbolism of the sacrifice itself. Sacrifice, from God’s perspective, requires the appointed and ordained priest (cf. Lev 16:32). Thus, the sacrificial system was to foreshadow the coming Priest Who would also be the offered sacrifice. The two must always be joined together. And thus, the penalty for disregarding the statute was also *karat*, to be cut off from the people of Israel.

Third Law: Blood is Not to be Eaten

The third law given in our *parashah* comes to the heart of the issue, namely, that the blood contained the life (נֶפֶשׁ, *nefesh*) of the animal (or the flesh, בָּשָׂר, *basar*). Many modern scholars have seen in this principle as throwback to Israel’s “pagan origins” (based primarily upon the work of Wellhausen), when it was believed that the spirit of the gods ran in the veins of all living things. Thus pagans believed that ingesting the blood caused the spirit of the gods to enter a person’s life-force. In fact, contemporary paganism (particularly in so-called Third World countries like many of the countries in Africa) still believe this to be true.

But it is not that the life of the gods is contained in the blood, nor even primarily that God is the fountain of all life (though this is certainly true) that forms the basis for this Torah prohibition. If ingesting blood was prohibited because to do so showed a disregard for the Life Giver, then one wonders how living plants could be ingested. Rather, the prohibition against ingesting blood was that the blood was to have a special and unique function in terms of sacrifice upon the altar. This is specifically stated in our text: v. 11, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.” To ingest blood not only gave in to pagan notions about the life-force of their demon gods, but it more specifically rendered the blood common rather than uniquely qualified as the symbol of atonement upon the altar.

This is the point of the author to the Hebrews when he writes: “And according to the Torah, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” It is the blood, poured forth on the altar, that symbolized the life given in exchange

for the sinner. No sacrifice was valid until the blood had been dashed or poured on the altar. This foreshadowed the unique aspect of Yeshua's death. When He proclaimed that "no one can come to the Father but through Me," He was affirming the fulfillment of the Tabernacle/Temple sacrifices. The blood, symbolizing the life, must be offered up to God before atonement can be accomplished.

Fourth Law: Blood of Non-Sacrificial Animals is to be Buried

Even the blood of non-sacrificial animals was to be considered sacred. It was to be poured out on the ground and covered, distinguishing it from sacrificial animals whose blood is never covered but is openly displayed on the altar. Everywhere a living creature was slaughtered, the blood was to be viewed as an important symbol of life, because the exchange of life-for-life was connected to the blood of the sacrificial animals. Thus, blood itself was to be understood as symbolic of the whole life. When we talk of Yeshua shedding His blood for us, we mean that He willingly gave His life in exchange for our lives. "For as for the life of all flesh, its blood is identified with its life. Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, 'You are not to eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off' (17:14).

Fifth Law: Eating Meat from an Animal that Dies or is Torn Requires Ceremonial Cleansing

This seems to contradict other Torah commands that prohibit the eating of flesh from an animal that has died or is torn by a predator (Lev 22:8; Deut 14:21). The context may help us understand this final law of our *parashah*, however. Since it follows immediately after the instructions given regarding game that is caught, this final section may be dealing with game that was caught, but that was killed in the process. Another scenario is the situation of game that is caught (as in a net or trap) but is torn by predators before the hunter begins the slaughter. In either case, we must presume that the hunter is still able to pour out the blood and cover it with dirt. But since the animal was not killed through slaughter (cutting the throat), it still renders those who eat of the meat unclean. They must bathe and remain unclean until evening. The main point, however, is that the blood is important. Indeed, this whole *parashah* has centered upon the importance of the blood, for the sacrificial system pointed the way to the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29).