

Parashah Ninety-Three

Leviticus 24:1–23; Hosea 14:1–9; James 3:8–18

notes by Tim Hegg

Leviticus 24 is easily divided by topic: the *parashah* begins with the commandment to the people of Israel to bring pure oil for the menorah and the requirement for the priests to keep it burning continually (vv. 1-4). This is followed by the commands regarding the “Bread of the Presence.” Twelve loaves were to be made ready for the weekly Sabbath, set in order upon the golden table and consumed by Aaron and his sons, presumably after the Sabbath was finished (vv. 5-9). Next the story of an Israelite who profaned the Name is retold, along with the prescribed penalty of stoning (vv. 10-16). This is then followed by a paragraph (vv. 17-23) dealing with penalties for crimes, and reiterating the *lex talionis* (Law of Retaliation), “eye for an eye.”

We may first ask the question of how this *parashah* fits with the chapters that have preceded it. Chapter 22 dealt with the manner in which the priests were carefully to receive the tithes and offerings of the Israelite people. They were to be careful to maintain their own ritual purity in the midst of their service, and thus not to detract from the holy status of the sacrifices and offerings the people were bringing. The section ends with this warning (22:32-33):

“You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel; I am Adonai who sanctifies you, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, to be your God; I am Adonai.”

Then follows chapter 23 and the explanation of the *mo'edim*, the appointed times in which God and Israel would meet in memorial festivals (including the weekly Sabbath). This is immediately followed by our *parashah*, ending with an illustration of one who profaned the Name.

What are we to understand from this arrangement? It seems that Moses intends us to understand that our individual acts of worship (offerings, sacrifices) as well as our corporate worship (appointed times) are not to be divorced from our daily life (*menorah*, bread of the presence) and that it is in our daily living that we sanctify the Name, not just in the special times of offerings and festivals. If this is at least one of the lessons gleaned from the arrangement of the chapters, it is a clear rebuke of “big religion” that has so captivated our society and times. But I would venture to say that the same was true in the ancient world, for the idea that “big religion” is the way we worship God is a function of the sinful heart, not the fruit of this society or that era. We might label it the “cathedral syndrome.” As fallen creatures we come to the conclusion that we actually are able to create an offering worthy of our gods. Of course, since fallen man creates his own gods, he feels entirely adequate to placate the gods through building something wonderful. If, however, we receive the truth as revealed by the One God of Israel, we come to the reality that nothing we can manufacture could ever come close to the majesty and holiness of the Creator. Instead, we confess that only our humble obedience and service is acceptable as worship, and that He is the One who makes our worship acceptable. Once we come to receive this truth, we wonder how we could have ever thought that our selfish efforts could have attracted the applause of the infinitely holy and wonderful Creator! As such, we turn our efforts to know Him, and to learn from Him what He wants, and what pleases Him. We seek to approach our King at an acceptable time, and in an acceptable manner.

What does the *menorah* symbolize? If we take the holy place of the Tabernacle to be symbolic

of the worship of God's people in this world (and the Most Holy Place to mark the worship of God in the heavenlies), then the menorah symbolizes the light of Israel as she manifests (through her obedience) the greatness of her King. The bread of the Presence, then, would symbolize (through the priests who represent the people) the regular communion of Israel with her God. The *menorah* is the daily, sanctified life of the nation leading up to the weekly Sabbath, pictured as a covenant meal with her Master. It is in this way that the Name of God is sanctified.

The *menorah* and the bread of the Presence find a clear connection, even though they emphasize different aspects of Israel's life. The *menorah* has six branches, each with three buds (Ex 25:31ff). One bulb was at the junction of the branch, connecting it with the Shammish, and then a bulb and a flower on each branch. The point is that on each branch there were two objects: a bulb and a flower. Thus, the six branches each represent two tribes, yielding the 12 tribes. The middle branch represents Levi, the priestly tribe—the shammishim who serve the people as they minister before HaShem.

In the same way, the bread of the Presence is specifically 12 loaves, six loaves arranged together to yield two rows of bread. Thus, the 12 loaves represent the 12 tribes, with the added frankincense to represent the tribe of Levi, those who offered upon the fire the sacrifices of the people, a sweet smelling aroma to Adonai.

Why a *menorah* and bread? The bread represents the daily covenant relationship between God and Israel. Like the covenant meal participated in by Moses, Aaron, the elders of Israel, and God, so Israel as a whole (represented by the priests) sit down at the covenant meal on a weekly basis. And the *menorah* is the result of this covenant: the light of the covenant people shines forth in the world to accomplish God's ultimate purpose of blessing all the nations. The obvious lesson is this: only when Israel maintains the covenant is she able to be the light for which she was created. No covenant, no light. The two are bound together. And when the light of the covenant shines forth, then the Name of God is sanctified, for He is shown to be faithful to His promise to bless all the nations in Abraham.

Of course, Israel is finally and best represented by Messiah, and even the Sages connect the shining of the *menorah* with the “lamp of Messiah.” On the phrase “a lamp to burn continually” (24:2):

R. Hanin said: By reason of the merit of causing a lamp to burn continually you will be worthy to welcome the lamp of the King Messiah. What is his reason? Because it says, “There will I make a horn to shoot up unto David, there have I ordered a lamp for Mine anointed” (Ps 132:17), and it says, “I rejoiced when they said unto me: Let us go unto the house of the Lord (Ps 122:1). [Mid. Rab. Lev. 31.11]

The *menorah* is referenced in our text as a *ner tamid* (נֵר תָּמִיד). This use of the *tamid* (“perpetual”) is in reference to its daily appointment, and not to the notion that the lamps were never extinguished. A rabbinic legend had it that all of the lamps burned out by the time daylight arrived, except the western-most lamp. This one burned throughout the day, even though it was the first to be lit, and contained the same amount of oil as all the rest. This was considered a manifestation of God's presence since such a phenomenon could only be the result of a miracle. It was further thought that as long as the people of Israel maintained a covenant faithfulness, this western-most lamp remained lit throughout the night and into the day. When evening came and it was time to

replenish the oil, the wick of the western-most lamp would be carefully lifted from its bowl and used to light the other wicks. In this way it never went out. But after the death of the last legitimate high priest, Shimon HaTzaddik, who served in the early years of the Second Temple, the western-most wick would go out during the night with the others (cf. b.*Shabbat* 22b; b.*Yoma* 39a). Did the western wick symbolize a faithful remnant? Whatever the case, the fact that the *menorah* was lit to give light during the dark hours of the day must emphasize that God’s light is never diminished by the darkness—as long as Israel was faithful to the covenant she would shine as a light to glory of HaShem’s Name.

The Israelites were to bring oil for the *menorah*. Originally (Ex 27:20) the Israelites brought oil for the initial lighting at the dedication of the Tabernacle. This command extended the commandment for a regular supply of olive oil. It is to be “clear olive oil, pressed for lighting” (v. 1). In ancient Israel olive oil was pressed three times: first the olives were crushed and placed in a basket sieve. The oil that dripped from the basket was the first pressing. Then the remaining olives are crushed again with a beam for the second pressing. Finally, they were ground and pressed again for the third pressing. In this scenario, only the first pressing is free from foreign particles, and is thus clear. There was a very practical reason for this: the pure oil would give off far less soot, something which could have been a problem in the enclosed structure of the Tabernacle. But the symbolism should not be missed: the oil that would give forth the light would have to be pure—unmixed with foreign matter. In the same way, Israel must be completely sanctified to her God if they were to sanctify the Name.

The Bread of the Presence (לֶחֶם פָּנִים, cf. Ex 25:30, though the term is not used in Lev 24) was placed in two rows, six loaves (חֲלוֹת) per row upon the “pure table” (הַשְּׁלֶחֶן הַטָּהוֹר), so called because it was made of “pure” gold. The place where God and Man meet for the covenant meal is a place of complete holiness. This “place” is none other than the person of the Messiah. Here in symbolic beauty the mystery of the incarnation is manifest.

Frankincense was placed upon each row of bread, noted as “a remembrance for the bread, a fire-offering to HaShem” (v. 7). The bread upon which the frankincense was sprinkled was burned upon the altar as the sacrificial portion to HaShem. In this way the altar (and by extension God) consumed part of the bread, and the priests (representatives of the people) ate the remainder. Rabbinic legend had it that the bread remained fresh even though it sat upon the table each week until it was replaced every erev Shabbat (cf. b.*Menachot* 96a). In reality, it may have been that the bread was consumed by the priests following the end of the Sabbath. Thus, even like the two loaves of *challah* on the Shabbat table, the Bread of the Presence represented a sacrificial meal participated in between God and His people. And the fact that there were two rows reminds one of the double portion of manna gathered on erev Shabbat. That Yeshua referred to Himself as the לֶחֶם מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם, “the bread from heaven” (John 6:31-58), incorporating both the manna symbolism as well as that of the Bread of the Presence, completes the picture.

The text goes on to describe the blasphemous act of an Israelite. He went outside of his tent and fought with another man. In the heat of the altercation, he cursed using God’s Name and blasphemed. Being public, there was no doubt regarding his sin—witnesses were many. They therefore incarcerated him in order to ascertain the proper punishment. Apparently Moses approached HaShem (cf. Ex 34:34) to inquire about the proper punishment. The Almighty gave the sentencing: the man was to be taken outside of the camp and stoned to death after all the witnesses to his sin had laid their hands upon his head. The stoning was to be done by the whole congregation, not

merely by those who were witnesses.

The lesson of the event is specifically given (v. 15): anyone who blasphemes the Name of God was to be put to death by stoning—“he shall bear his sin” (אָטוֹן אֲשָׁן). The fact that the verb אֲשָׁן, “to lift up, bear” is also used in the sense of “forgive” (e.g., Lev 10:17), “to bear away the guilt” shows that the important issue is who bears the sin. If one bears his own sin, he can only expect to be punished for it. But if another takes the sin upon himself and bears it, there is forgiveness. The text before us illustrates the severity of the Third Word:

“You shall not take the name of Adonai your God in vain, for Adonai will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.” Ex 20:7

Why is such a severe penalty placed upon the sin of blasphemy, that is, cursing God’s Name? In essence, to curse God is to deny openly that He is the One true God. His Name stands as the quintessential summary of His character—the revealed truth of His mysteriously hidden nature. Thus the Name is holy because He is holy, and is to be handled with care because it represents His entire being. There is no hope for someone who is cursing God. While he engages in demeaning the Creator, he can expect nothing less than to receive the Almighty’s indignation and wrath. This does not mean that there is no way back for someone who has raised his fist to God and blasphemed His Name, but it does mean that there *may* be no way back. If there is a path of repentance, it is because God has graciously opened that path to the sinner. Repentance is a gift of God, not something manufactured by the heart of sinful man (cf. Acts 5:31; Romans 2:4).

But there is something more going on here: the text is quite explicit that the blasphemer was the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father. This incident thus becomes a fitting illustration of the final teaching of our portion: both the native born and the foreigner who joins Israel fall under the same Torah regarding the Name. The blasphemer is punished regardless of his bloodline: if he has attached himself to Israel, he must abide by the Torah given to Israel.

Furthermore, this illustrates another point: those who are attached to Israel (whether native born or foreigner) are held to a higher standard than those who live in the surrounding nations. Israel was never given the duty to stone the blasphemers in the countries round about them. They were only to maintain this sanctity within the confines their own community of Israel. This illustrates a point: the high standards of conduct expected of God’s people should not be expected of the world at large. It should not surprise us when those who have denied God act out their base lifestyles. I’m not suggesting that this is okay, only that we should not be surprised when idolaters act as pagans. But the converse is also true: as those who have confessed the One true God to be our God and we His servants, we must maintain a righteous life whether in or outside of our community. Nothing undermines a Jewish community more than when they operate under two different rules of ethics. Within the community there is strict honesty and uprightness in relationships and transactions. If, however, to those outside of their community the same high standards are not always held, the sanctity of God’s Name is tarnished. This, of course, is not what the Torah teaches, nor what HaShem wants. We live out of the reality of who we are. If we have been born from above, this means that our lives have been changed to conform to His standards, and to love His justice. If our hearts have been circumcised, we live out the covenant of our God because it is our heart to do so. This means that we live as His servants regardless of our whereabouts or with whom we are dealing.

The final paragraph of our text takes up the penalties for murder and damages. It is interesting that throughout the previous paragraph the English phrase “any man” is the common Hebrew אִישׁ אִישׁ, *’ish ’ish*. But in v. 17 the wording is: And a man—if he strikes mortally any human life (אִישׁ אָדָם כָּל-נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם). “Human life” (נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם) specifically takes into account all manner of life that is human, regardless of its station. Surely this includes the baby in the womb of its mother as Exodus 21:22-25 teaches. In fact, the reiteration of the *lex talionis* in our text links it to Exodus 21:22-25 where it is also listed. Thus, “any human life” includes the living soul before it is actually birthed from the mother.

Lex talionis (“eye for an eye”) has always been understood as a monetary exchange. Never in the history of Israel is there any indication that the judges or sages actually engaged in mutilation as a form of punishment. Rather, the meaning of the text is to be understood as “punishment of equal value.” Since a life taken cannot be valued in monetary units, the Torah requires the life of the murderer be taken. But injury can be measured, and so monetary compensation is meted out. For example, a damaged finger on the hand of a singer would not be measured the same as a similar injury to a pianist. The judges, then, would make the determination and the one who wrongfully injured another person would be required to pay the price.

Note carefully that a distinction is made between humans and animals. Wrongfully killing an animal requires restitution of the fair market value of that animal. But it in no way stands in equal position to wrongfully taking the life of a human. This distinction, which is made obvious in the Torah, has, in some cases, been lost in our society. Many people who spend a great deal of energy attempting to save animals are sometimes those who support and attempt to further the abortion of humans. When God’s ways are mocked, the value of life is diminished, and finally lost.

Thus our portion calls us, once again, to be holy because our God is holy. We are called to holy living, not just on a few important days of the year, but as a matter of life lived out before Him. And in the context of this sanctified life, made possible by the strength He gives, we are enabled to be His light shining in a world darkened by sin. May we feed daily upon the Bread of the Presence, and shine as lights for the sanctification of His Name upon the earth.