BS”D

Parshas Achrei 5776

Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

*Life has pleasure, but its purpose is not pleasure.*

Where’s the Beef?

or

When to Eat or Not Eat Meat

In this week’s portion, the Torah forbids the slaughter of an animal unless it is brought as a sacrifice in the Sanctuary. In fact, it is such a grave sin that it is compared to bloodshed, and one who violates it “shall be cut off from his people.” The Torah explains that this will prevent the Israelites from sacrificing to the goat-demons to whom the Jews were then attracted. “This shall be an eternal law for them for all generations. (See Vayikra 17: 1-7)

In the next two passages (17: 8, 9) the Torah seems to repeat itself. “If anyone of the people of Israel… offers a sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (the Sanctuary)… the person shall be cut off from his people.

There are two main ways to understand these passages based on how we define the prohibition of slaughtering an animal outside of the Sanctuary.

Rashi understands the prohibition as referring to animals that have been designated as sacrifices (mukdashin). Once you have designated an animal to be sacrificed to G-d, you may bring the sacrifice only in the Sanctuary, and nowhere else. If you were allowed to sacrifice it elsewhere, you might be tempted to sacrifice it to the goat-demons that “dwell out there.” Only by limiting the bringing of your offering to the Sanctuary can the temptation to offer it to strange gods and /or demons be avoided. This explains the seriousness of the punishment. A sacrifice outside of the Temple, even when it is made to G-d, is just one small step from a sacrifice to a demon.

The Abarbanel explains why the Torah compares such a sacrifice to bloodshed. By sacrificing outside of the Sanctuary, you are encouraging others to do likewise. You are in effect encouraging potential idolatry. Thus, the particular gravity of the sin.

The main question according to Rashi’s view is why does the Torah seem to repeat itself in passage 8 and 9. Rashi explains that first the Torah forbids the actual *slaughter* of the sacrificial animal. Then the Torah states an additional specific prohibition for *offering* the sacrifice. Offering means burning the limbs of the sacrifice on the altar. Thus, let’s say, if one person did the slaughtering and the other the “offering,” they would both be equally liable.

The second approach is discussed by the Ramban. The Jewish people were not supposed to eat non-sacrificial meat while they were in the desert. Only upon entering Israel was ordinary meat allowed, as the Torah says (Devarim 12: 20, 21), “When G-d enlarges your boundaries… and you say, ‘I shall eat meat’… you may eat meat… If the place where G-d has chosen to establish His Name is too far from you, you may slaughter… cattle or sheep…”

Our passage is referring to this prohibition. The slaughtering outside of the Sanctuary of *non-sacrificial* meat is not allowed (for the time being).

Later in 17: 8 and 9, the Torah forbids offering a sacrifice outside of the Sanctuary. This refers to an animal designated as a sacrifice that may be offered only in the Sanctuary and nowhere else.

According to the Ramban’s interpretation, there is no hint of redundancy in the Torah. The first part of the chapter is about the prohibition of *all* meat except for sacrificial meat that is offered in the Sanctuary. The later passages are about the prohibition of offering a sacrificial animal outside of the Sanctuary.

I would like to point out what appears to me to be a difficulty in the Ramban’s view. After the prohibition of all non-sacrificial meat, the Torah says (17: 7), “This shall be for them a law forever in all generations.” However, according to the Ramban, it was forbidden only before the people entered Israel at which point it was permitted. Rashi, on the other hand, does not have this problem; it is always forbidden to bring sacrificial meat outside of the Sanctuary.

Now in Tractate Chulin, 16b, Rabbi Yishmael states that the Jews were not allowed to eat non-sacrificial meat until they entered Israel. (See there that Rabbi Akiva disagrees.) This seems to support the Ramban’s position. In fact, the Ramban cites Rabbi Yishmael as the source of his interpretation.

However, Tosfos (ad loc) disagrees. The strict prohibition of eating meat in our Parasha refers only to meat designated for sacrifices eaten outside of the Sanctuary (like Rashi’s interpretation). The prohibition of eating meat altogether is by inference only. Since the Torah in Devarim allows non-sacrificial meat once the Jews entered Israel, the implication is that before that time, it was forbidden. But the comparison to bloodshed and the punishment of being “cut off” mentioned in the Torah portion applies only to sacrificial meat offered outside of the Sanctuary.

I would like to cite two passages in Talmudic-era sources. One of which seems to follow Rashi and Tosfos’ view while the other supports Ramban.

In the Sifri on the passage in Devarim (12: 20), “and you say I shall eat meat, for you desire to eat meat,” Rabbi Yishmael comments that this teaches you that [non-sacrificial] meat was forbidden in the desert and became permitted only when they entered the Land. This seems to agree with Tosfos that *this passage* is the source of the prohibition and not the passages in our parasha which entail a stricter prohibition.

On the other hand, the Midrash Rabba in Devorim (4: 6) (cited by the Ramban) supports the other view.

“There are many things that the Holy One forbade at one time and permitted at another time… He forbade the Jews to slaughter unless they brought it to the Sanctuary as it says, ‘If he does not bring it to the Sanctuary… and he will be cut off from his people… it is considered as if he spilled blood…” and here (in Devarim) it is permitted as it says ‘according to the desire of your heart you may slaughter and eat meat… in all of your gates (cities)…’ Here the Midrash clearly follows the view that our parasha strictly prohibits all non-sacrificial meat and permits it in the Book of Devarim when the Israelites enter their Land.

The idea that originally meat was allowed only for sacrifice and permitted only at a later period when the Israelites were spread out in the land and many did not live near the Temple can be given a broader application.

Meat is a delicacy. It represents material pleasure in general. The ideal use of material things is in the direct service of G-d as a sacrifice brought in the Temple. But physical pleasures are, in fact, allowed even when experienced in a less holy setting. The purpose of life is not to have fun. It is not to have pleasure. It is to serve the A-lmighty by doing His well. We are physical creatures. We may have permitted pleasures, we may have fun as long as we realize that what life should be about is not the meat on the barbecue, but the sacrifice in the Temple. Life has pleasure, but its purpose is not pleasure. It is sacred service. It is living by the Divine values of Torah. You want a little beef? Okay, but don’t overdo it.