

The Festivals of God: Mikra'ei Kodesh

Rav Baruch Gigi

The Torah discusses the festivals in several different places. Since each discussion presents different details regarding these laws, one who wishes to study the holidays must analyze all the sections in order to obtain a complete picture. This rigorous analysis lies beyond the scope of this essay; however, we may reasonably assume that each individual discussion of the festivals emphasizes a particular aspect of the Jewish holidays. Here we will try to understand the unique contribution of Leviticus 23, described by *Hazal* as “the order of *Mo’adim*” (*Sifrei, Parashat Re’eh, 127*). We will examine its place within the *parashot* dealing with the festivals, as well as within Leviticus.

I. DIFFICULTIES IN THE CHAPTER

The first difficulty presents itself at the outset of the *parasha* – the chapter opens with a discussion of Shabbat. The Rabbis ask, “What does Shabbat have to do with the festivals?” To this question we may add that the verses themselves indicate quite clearly that Shabbat should not be considered as one of the festivals. Firstly, the chapter ends, “These are the *festivals* of God... apart from the Shabbatot of God” (vv. 37–8). Furthermore, whereas the discussion of each festival receives its own introduction

of “God spoke to Moses,” only one such introduction appears for the first three together – Shabbat, Pesah, and *Hag HaMatzot*. Seforno on verse 9 notes that in the Torah, the phrase “the Festival of the Pesah” refers not to what we colloquially call “Pesah,” but to what we consider “Erev Pesah” – the fourteenth of Nisan, on which the Paschal sacrifice is offered. The next seven days are exclusively referred to by the Torah as “*Hag HaMatzot*.” Apparently, only *Hag HaMatzot* belongs to the category of the festivals, and the new speech to Moses relates to specifically that discussion.

Another indication that we should consider Shabbat differently from the festivals lies in the absence of the phrase, “You shall bring an offering by fire to God” regarding Shabbat. This brief mention of the *musaf* sacrifice appears with regard to each festival, but is absent in *Parashat Emor* regarding Shabbat.

Finally, there is the simple fact that Shabbat cannot be called a “*mikra kodesh*” – an occasion “declared sacred.” The sanctity of Shabbat does not depend upon the declaration of the New Moon by the *beit din* (Jewish court); Shabbat is fixed, every seven days, regardless of when the court determines that the new month should begin. A *mikra kodesh* – a “declaration of sanctity” – is a day made holy by the court, and thus Shabbat seems to have no place in this chapter.

Among other difficulties, verse 5 mentions the Paschal sacrifice, offered on the fourteenth of Nisan (i.e., one day before the festival of *Hag HaMatzot*). This day, too, seems inappropriate in this context, as it is not a *mikra kodesh*. As well, the *parasha* omits all details regarding the *musaf* sacrifices of each festival, sufficing with a generic expression that repeats itself throughout: “You shall bring an offering by fire to God.” As we know, the details are presented later in *Parashat Pinhas*. Why not here?

Ramban claims that the *musaf* sacrifices were not offered in the wilderness, and therefore these laws appear only towards the end of Numbers, as *Benei Yisrael* prepared for entry into the Land of Israel. Later commentaries challenge his premise based on a statement in Talmud *Menaḥot* that implies otherwise.

The classical commentaries (Rashi, Ramban, and others) raise other issues, including the strange opening word of the discussion of Yom Kippur – “*akh*” (“however”), and the division of the section of Sukkot

into two distinct sections, so that the verses dealing with Sukkot are interrupted by a concluding section: “These are the set times of God that you shall celebrate as sacred occasions” (37–38).

II. CHAPTER 23’S PLACE WITHIN LEVITICUS

The key to resolving these issues lies in the understanding of how this chapter relates to the rest of Leviticus. As a whole, Leviticus can be divided into two parts. The first deals with the laws of *korbanot* (sacrifices) along with *tum’a* and *tahara* (impurity and purity), thus rendering Leviticus worthy of the name *Hazal* assigned to it – “*Torat Kohanim*” (The Law of the *Kohanim*). The second half deals with issues of *kedusha* – holiness – in the more general sense of the term. It is within this framework that our chapter must be understood.

Chapters 19–22 deal with personal sanctity, dividing it into three levels:

1. The regular Jew: “You shall be holy, for I, HaShem your God, am holy” (19:2), continuing through the concluding verse, “You shall be holy to Me, for I, God am holy” (20:26);
2. The special sanctity of the *kohanim* (21:1–9);
3. The high level of sanctity of the *Kohen Gadol* (21:10–16). The Torah then elaborates on this level, enumerating the laws of *kohanim* unfit for service due to physical defects (end of chapter 21), the laws of *tum’a* as applied to *kohanim*, the *kedusha* of *kohanim* as relevant to the laws of *teruma*, and then, as an aside, the laws of animals unfit for sacrifice due to physical defects. This section of the sanctity of the human being concludes, “You shall not profane My holy Name... for I am God who sanctifies you” (22:32).

Chapter 23 brings us from the sanctity of the individual to the sanctity of time.

III. THE FESTIVALS OF GOD – SACRED OCCASIONS

In light of this analysis, it seems clear that our chapter intends merely to list those festivals whose sanctity results from the *beit din*’s determination of the calendar – “These are My festivals... which you shall proclaim

as sacred occasions.” Therefore, the verses here present only those features that directly relate to this quality of *mikra kodesh* – having been declared sacred by the people. As such, three main points appear in the discussion of each festival:

1. “*mikra kodesh*”;
2. the prohibition of work;
3. a brief reference to the *musaf* sacrifice.

The essence of a *mikra kodesh*, which embodies the concept of the active sanctification of time, includes: (1) the prohibition of performing work; (2) festive attire and feasts (see Ramban, citing the Sifrei). The *musaf* sacrifices, however, do not reflect this quality, as a *musaf* sacrifice is required even on Rosh Hodesh, which does not constitute a *mikra kodesh* (see Arakhin 10b). Therefore, rather than presenting the *musaf* sacrifices in detailed fashion, our chapter merely makes a general allusion: “You shall make an offering by fire.”

It should be noted that these elements are *components* of a *mikra kodesh*. The *definition* of a *mikra kodesh*, however, lies in its having been established by the *beit din*, which creates the sanctity and infuses it within a given time frame. Once the *beit din* has done so, these days turn into festivals of God, “*mikra’ei kodesh*.”

IV. A SHABBAT OF COMPLETE REST – MIKRA KODESH

This distinction can help us understand the conceptual relationship between Shabbat and the festivals. Shabbat contains all the *components* of a *mikra kodesh*, but, fundamentally, it cannot be classified as such. The basic definition of this term involves a day declared holy by the Jewish court. In spite of this, the discussion of the festivals opens with Shabbat, since this section’s theme is the sanctity of time. Such a concept is made possible only by the sanctity with which God Himself infused Shabbat during Creation. If not for the fact that “God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy,” man would be totally incapable of sanctifying even a brief moment.

“You shall be holy, for I, HaShem your God, am holy.” God is the source of *kedusha* in the world. Therefore, the sanctity of time draws

its strength, as it were, from the sanctity of Shabbat that God Himself initiated. This may be the intent of *Hazal*, cited by Rashi (v. 3): “Whoever desecrates the festivals is considered as if he desecrated the Shabbat, and whoever observes the festivals is considered as if he observed the Shabbat.” By extension, the recognition of the sanctity of the festivals automatically involves the recognition of the sanctity of Shabbat.

If this is how we are to understand the relationship between Shabbat and the festivals, then it stands to reason that the sanctity of the holidays is inferior to that of Shabbat. Shabbat constitutes the *source* of the *kedusha*; the sanctity of the festivals is merely derivative. This accounts for the more severe punishment meted out to Shabbat violators, as well as several other leniencies regarding Yom Tov.

The clearest expression of this hierarchical relationship between Shabbat and Yom Tov appears in the writings of the medieval talmudic commentator, Ra’avan (Pesahim, chapter 10):

They therefore instituted [the text for *havdala* after Shabbat which occurs on a festival], “You separated between the sanctity of Shabbat and the sanctity of Yom Tov.” This means that the sanctity of Shabbat is greater, since the Almighty sanctified it Himself, as opposed to Yom Tov, which Israel themselves sanctify, as it is written, “which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions.” The festivals of God require the sanctification of *beit din*.

V. “IT SHALL BE A SACRED OCCASION FOR YOU; YOU SHALL AFFLICT YOUR SOULS”

As stated earlier, the essence of a *mikra kodesh* features, among other elements, festive eating and drinking. Therefore, the inclusion of the fast of Yom Kippur in our chapter seems, at first glance, problematic. Its inclusion underscores the fact that the critical issue involves the determination by the *beit din* of the festival, a point certainly as relevant to Yom Kippur as to any other festival. The fact that it lacks a critical component – eating and drinking – may account for the Torah’s peculiar introduction to Yom Kippur, “*akh*” – “however.” The added emphasis may be understood as teaching us that although not all the components of a *mikra kodesh* apply on Yom Kippur, nevertheless, “It shall be a sacred occasion

for you.” This unique dichotomy of Yom Kippur may also explain the Torah’s emphasis regarding the two conflicting components of Yom Kippur – the prohibition of work (representing the *mikra kodesh*) and the requirement of fasting (the seeming antithesis of the *mikra kodesh*): “Indeed, any person who does not practice self-denial *throughout that day* shall be cut off”; “and whoever does any work *throughout that day*” (vv. 29–30). The Torah stresses that throughout this day, these two contradictory prohibitions apply.

VI. THE PASCHAL SACRIFICE

Earlier, we raised Seforno’s question regarding the fourteenth of Nisan, the day of the offering of the Paschal sacrifice. The verses here in *Emor* mention this festival, despite the fact that this day seems not to belong to the category of *mikra kodesh*. One simple answer might be that this day appears here only by association with *Hag HaMatzot*, the seven-day festival that follows the Pesah. This claim may be supported by the fact that no new introduction of the phrase, “God spoke to Moses saying,” interrupts between *Hag HaPesah* and *Hag HaMatzot*.

However, we may explain the inclusion of *Hag HaPesah* differently, based on the first mishna of the fourth chapter of *Pesahim* (40b): “A place where the custom is to perform work on Erev Pesah before noon – one may do work; a place where the custom is not to – one may not.” After midday, however, one may certainly not engage in work. Tosafot there (citing the Talmud Yerushalmi) say that since the Paschal sacrifice may be offered from midday, performing work during such time would be highly inappropriate, and is thus forbidden. Although Ran questions whether this prohibition is of biblical or rabbinic origin, the simple reading of the passage in the Yerushalmi implies that the prohibition is, in fact, biblical.

If so, then the fourteenth of Nisan, the day on which the people offered the Paschal sacrifice, features at least one *mikra kodesh* quality, namely, a prohibition of work. However, since the prohibition of work does not evolve directly from the proclamation of the *beit din*, but rather from the concurrent offering of a sacrifice, it cannot be considered a *mikra kodesh* in the full sense of the term. Therefore, the Torah does not employ this expression in the context of the fourteenth of Nisan. Nevertheless, the Torah does see fit to make mention of this quasi-festival

among the other festivals, as it does reflect one element of a *mikra kodesh*. (Another possible manifestation of the “festival” quality of the fourteenth of Nisan may be the “*hagiga*” sacrifice offered on that day; see Exodus 23:18.)

VII. THE OMER AND SHETEI HALEHEM SACRIFICES

If the Torah chooses not to relate the *musaf* offerings here, why does it include the *omer* and *shetei halehem* sacrifices in this chapter? The answer relates to the fact that *Yom HaBikkurim* (the holiday we call “Shavuot”) has no fixed calendar date; it occurs fifty days after the fifteenth of Nisan (Pesah). In order to establish the festival of Shavuot as *mikra kodesh*, the Torah needs to record the entire process: the offering of the *omer* sacrifice on the sixteenth of Nisan, the counting of forty-nine days, and the offering of the *shetei halehem* sacrifice on the fiftieth day.

VIII. THE TWO MENTIONS OF SUKKOT

Finally, we must account for the peculiar division of the Torah’s discussion regarding the Festival of Sukkot. It seems that only the first half – verses 33–36 – relate to the central theme of the chapter. These verses establish the first and eighth days of Sukkot as *mikra’ei kodesh*, during which work is forbidden. This information effectively concludes the discussion of this chapter – the concept of *mikra kodesh*. Naturally, then, these verses are followed by a concluding formula for the *mikra’ei kodesh* section. However, since the *omer* and *shetei halehem* sacrifices were previously mentioned, the Torah must, for purposes of literary consistency, record as well the “gathering sacrifice”: “On the first day you shall take the product of *hadar* trees.”

This second section does not relate at all to the concept of *mikra kodesh*, as clearly indicated by the absence of this phrase in these verses. For the same reason, the *musaf* sacrifice and the prohibition of work are also omitted. Since the Torah returned to the issue of the festivals after having already formulated a conclusion passage, a second conclusion is required: “Moses declared the festivals of God to *Benei Yisrael*.” However, the term “*mikra kodesh*” does not appear in this second conclusion, but rather only in the initial conclusion: “These are the festivals of God that you shall celebrate as sacred occasions [*mikra’ei kodesh*].”