

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



The Freshest Grain

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If you bring a meal offering of the first fruit to the Lord, you shall bring grain in season parcel with fire, grits of fresh ear, as your meal offering of first fruits. . . . And the priest shall turn a token portion of it into smoke: some of the grits and oil, with all of the frankincense, as an offering by the fire to the Lord.

—Lev. 2:14–16

In a long narrative dedicated to sacrifices we find one hidden command to offer only the freshest and best grains, mixed with oils and scents. Through a multi-sensory description the reader can sense the heavy kernels of grains, smell the scents, and vicariously participate in the powerful event of giving thanks to God with the offering of the first fruit.

One of my most vivid childhood memories is the offering of the first fruit during the holiday of Shavuot in a kibbutz in Israel. The difference between working the land and observing the biblical laws of the holiday disappear as the whole community participates in the most colorful, happy, and opulent celebration. Children wearing white cloths, adorned with flower wreaths on their heads, sit on the tractors and other heavy machinery, participate in a parade of dancing troupes and singing choruses. Observing the holiday away from our land and the natural home of our religion makes me long for the experiential aspect of giving thanks to God.

To see a video of a Shavuot celebration on a kibbutz, visit www.jtsa.edu/the-freshest-grain

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ויקרא תשע"ט



Sacrificing Identities

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The early rabbinic midrash on the Book of Leviticus (*Sifra*) begins its interpretation of our parashah by asking the critical question: *Who is a Jew?* The Rabbis seek to clearly define who can participate in Temple worship and who cannot because the sacrifices are a key piece of the covenantal relationship with God. That means that participation in the sacrificial cult is emblematic of full Jewish citizenship and demarcates the borderlines between Jews and others.

The rabbinic definition of Jewish status is one of many voices in the highly contested debate over Jewish identity that erupts at the end of the Second Temple period. This issue is perhaps most famously articulated in the Books of Acts in the Christian Bible. The followers of Jesus deliberate at the Council of Jerusalem over the requirement of circumcision for converts. Ultimately, the group privileges faith over the performance of commandments in what proves to be a critical step in the creation of Christianity as we know it today. We also find competing definitions in the writings of first-century historian Josephus Flavius, and in the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Qumran.

The Rabbis use the second verse from our parashah in order to explore two possible paradigms for defining Jewish identity. The verse serves as an introduction to the sacrificial laws that are to follow: “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: When any of you presents an offering of cattle to the LORD, he shall choose his offering from the herd or from the flock.” The verse makes it clear that God’s laws of the sacrificial rite are intended exclusively for the Israelite people. This directive provides the Rabbis with the opportunity to ask: *Who is considered an Israelite?*

The Rabbis’ exegesis of the verse is based, as it often is, on an apparent redundancy in the text. The verse begins with a declaration to the children of

Israel that would seem to include the entire Israelite population. Why then must God again clarify and state, “any of you?” Are these not the same group of people? Let us examine a large selection of the midrash from the Sifra:

[1] “Any” (Lev 1:2)—this incorporates the proselytes.

[2] “Of you” (Lev 1:2)—this excludes the apostates...

[3] What characterizes “Israel” is that they accept the yoke of the Covenant, this includes the proselytes, who accept the yoke of the Covenant, and excludes the apostates, for they do not accept the yoke of the Covenant.

[4] Perhaps [you should say]: What characterizes “Israel” is that they are the descendants of those who accepted the yoke of the Covenant, and this includes the apostates, for they are the descendants of those who accepted the yoke of the Covenant, but excludes the proselytes, for they are not the descendants of those who accepted the yoke of the Covenant?

[5] Scripture teaches: “Of you.” Therefore do not conclude so, but [as we said first]: What characterizes “Israel” is that they accept the yoke of the Covenant, this includes the proselytes, who accept the yoke of the Covenant, and excludes the apostates, for they do not accept the yoke of the Covenant.

[6] And so does Scripture say: “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination, how much more when he brings it with evil intent” (Prov. 21:27).

The midrash begins (section 1) by asserting that the redundancy is necessary in order to clarify that proselytes are included in the sacrificial rite even though they are not according to the strict literal definition, “Children of Israel.” The midrash continues (section 2) explaining that the words “of you” are intended to limit who may bring a sacrifice and come to exclude apostates—those who are born from Israelite parents but reject God and the Covenant. Section 3 explains the rationale behind the inclusion of proselytes and exclusion of apostates: Simply put, acceptance of the yoke

of the Covenant is the essential identity marker of belonging in Israel. Section 4 pushes back on the assertion and suggests that the true marker of identity is biology: An Israelite born from an Israelite remains so regardless of belief. This, in turn, would exclude proselytes from the community of Israel. Section 5 rejects this suggestion and emphatically maintains that acceptance of the yoke of the Covenant is the true character trait of “you,” the Israelite nation. The Rabbis support this conclusion with their reading of the verse from Proverbs which indicates that the sacrifice of the wicked (i.e., apostates) will not be accepted by God.

As Professor Adiel Schremer of Bar Ilan University explains in his article, “Thinking about Belonging” (*JSJ* 43, 249-275), the two choices in the midrash represent two competing answers to the question of belonging in the Jewish community. Is Jewish identity determined solely by birth or is there an essential component of acceptance of God’s covenant in order to be a member of the Jewish community? The Rabbis argue vehemently for the latter. All who accept the yoke of God’s commandments may be called Israel, not just those with the proper lineage.

The Rabbis’ definition of belonging sets an important example for us as we think about what makes each of us part of a larger community. This is true both for our local communities and our global responsibility as members of the Jewish people. The Rabbis demand that we ask ourselves: *Do our behaviors and commitments clearly identify us as part of Israel? Can we respond to the call directed at “any of you” found in the verse from our parashah?*

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