YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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THE MO'ADIM OF PARASHAT EMOR PART 1

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Sometime in midsummer, as our plans for Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot begin to crystallize, we inevitably inquire "When are the holidays this year?" Given our presence in a society which, for the most part, follows the secular calendar, the answer we often receive, or even offer ourselves, to this query is that the holidays will be either "late" or "early" (are they ever on time?), leading to decisions about work, school, or even the feasibility of going away for yom tov. The point of these remarks is that we naturally tend to view these three holidays, which are clustered together in the short span of three and a half weeks, as a single unit - "the holidays."

Temporal proximity is not, however, the only means of classifying the holidays in Halakha. Were we living in the times of the Beit ha-Mikdash, we might very well see Sukkot as grouped more naturally with the other regalim - Pesach and Shavu'ot - which all require 'aliya le-regel, a pilgrimage to Yerushalayim, as well as a variety of sacrifices and other obligations, be they korban pesach with matza and marror (bitter herbs), bikurim (firstfruits) on Shavu'ot, or the arba'a minim (four species) on Sukkot. No such demands are made of the individual Jew on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur; everything he or she must do can be done at home, whether it is hearing a shofar-blast or fasting for twenty-five hours. From this perspective, Sukkot shares almost nothing with its two predecessors in Tishrei; its more logical comrades are Pesach and Shavu'ot, as the Torah itself classifies them (Devarim 16:16):

Three times a year - on the Feast of Matzot, on the Feast of Weeks, and on the Feast of Tabernacles - all your males must appear before Hashem your God in the place that He will choose, and [they] should not appear before Hashem empty-handed.

Given this more natural grouping, why do we continue to refer to the Tishrei holidays as one unit? I think that it is not merely a calendrical convenience which underlies this designation, but a fundamental understanding of the nature of Sukkot, or, more aptly, the dual nature of the Feast of Tabernacles, partaking of both triads - the shalosh regalim (the three pilgrimages) as well as the yamim nora'im (the Days of Awe). To explain this more fully, we must explore how the holidays unfold in the Torah, primarily in the books of Shemot and Vayikra.

**The Three Pilgrimages: Pesach, Shavu'ot, and Sukkot**

The first holiday to appear in the Chumash is, of course, Pesach. Evenwhile still in Egypt (Shemot ch. 12), Hashem commanded the people to offer the paschal sacrifice, eaten with matza and marror, on the fourteenth of Nissan. Moshe is informed that a seven-day festival commemorating the exodus from Egypt will always be observed on this date, requiring the people to dispose of all leaven from their homes and to eat only matzot, or unleavened bread. As they leave, Hashem provides Moshe with further details on how to properly prepare and offer the korban pesach and who may partake of it in future generations (12:43-49). This feast is to have the added dimension of every father relating the story of the miraculous salvation of the people from their bondage in Egypt. Pesach is thus an historical holiday, in the sense that it was instituted ab initio to commemorate an historical event.

This is not how we meet the other two pilgrimages, at least initially. The following passages are taken from chapter 23 of Shemot, which Moshe receives while up on the mountain immediately after the revelation of the Decalogue:

14 Offer a sacrifice to Me three times each year.15 Keep the Festival of Matzot. Eat matzot for seven days, as I commanded you, during the prescribed time in the month of standing grain, since this is when you left Egypt. Do not appear before Me empty-handed. 16 [Also keep] the Reaping Festival, [through] the firstfruits of your produce which you planted in the field, and the Harvest Festival at the end of the year, when you gather your produce from the field.17 Three times each year, every male among you must appear before God, the Master.

In this relatively brief treatment of the three festivals, Shavu'ot and Sukkot are designated by their generic names: chag ha-katzir - the Reaping Festival - and chag ha-asif - the Harvest or Ingathering Festival. In other words, in contrast to Pesach's historical origins, these two holidays represent traditional agricultural holidays, of the sort we find in most agrarian societies. At the two endpoints of the summer season - the earliest reaping in late spring and the preservation and storing away for the winter in the fall - God's providence must be acknowledged. Notice, also, the absence of any mitzvot for these two pilgrimages; one would naturally bring choice seasonal offerings from the harvest to thank God for the bounty, an act already intuited by Cain and Abel (see Bereishit 4:3-4). In contrast, Pesach, as the holiday of God's miraculous redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt, requires special laws.

Thus, the three pilgrimages are, in reality, divided into two groups: the historical one (Pesach), which is treated in verse 15, and the agricultural ones (chag ha-katzir and chag ha-asif), which are mentioned together in verse 16. All three, however, require appearing before God, for all three are human recognition of divine providence, whether naturally in the realm of agriculture, or supernaturally in the domain of history.

This relatively brief treatment of the holidays is repeated almost verbatim in the renewed covenant shortly after the sin of the golden calf. After God reveals the thirteen attributes by which He will conduct his relationship with the people (Shemot 34:6-7), the three festivals are mentioned again.

18 Keep the Festival of Matzot. Eat matzot for seven days, as I commanded you, during the prescribed time in the month of standing grain, since this is when you left Egypt.19 The firstborn initiating every womb is Mine. Among all your livestock, you must separate out all the males of the firstborn cattle and sheep.20 The firstborn of a donkey must be redeemed with a sheep, and if it is not redeemed, you must decapitate it. You must [also] redeem every firstborn among your sons. Do not appear before Me empty-handed.21 You may work during the six weekdays, but on Saturday, you must stop working, ceasing from all plowing and reaping.22 Keep the Festival of Shavu'ot [through] the firstfruits of your wheat harvest. Also keep the Harvest Festival soon after the year changes.23 Three times each year, every male among you must appear before God the Master, Lord of Israel.

We notice several important differences from the original version in chapter 23:

a) there is no introductory ("Three festivals a year will you celebrate for Me");

b) verses 19-20 regarding firstborn offerings are now linked to Pesach, whereas previously they stood independently and considerably prior (22:28-29);

c) the prohibition against work on Shabbat, referred to in 23:12 before the portion of the festivals, is mentioned now between the historical and the agricultural holidays (verse 21);

d) Chag ha-katzir is now referred to as chag shavu'ot - "the festival of weeks" (verse 22), and it is more precisely defined as the wheat harvest;

e) the closing verse - "three times a year..." (verse 23) - parallels the closing verse of 23:17, yet adds the last two words "elokei yisrael," "the Lord of Israel."

These few differences, which are primarily additions to the earlier version (b, c, and e), should not mask the fact that for the most part, the two accounts are quite similar.

Obviously, this modified version is deliberate; but the reason for the changes is not so obvious. While the Torah does not explicate the cause for this revision, the chronology of events recorded in Sefer Shemot suggests one. The major episode, of course, which separates the two accounts is the sin of the golden calf. Less than seven weeks after hearing the second commandment received at Mount Sinai, the people, led by Aharon, fashioned an idol and worshipped it, violating the second commandment. Moshe secured their forgiveness through lengthy negotiations, re-establishing the covenant on the assumption that while the people are admittedly "stiff-necked" (33:3; 34:9), God will nevertheless be more patient and slow to anger (34:6-7). The earlier presentation of the festivals stood as a unit in its affirmation of God's sovereignty; the males of the people would have to pay homage to ha-Adon Hashem, "God the Master." God could therefore insist on the three pilgrimages which would be celebrated "for Me."

However, after the sin, that unity was shattered. Essentially, we have not here three integrated holidays, but merely three occasions on which Jewish men will appear before God. No verse introduces the festivals for they simply do not constitute a cohesive unit. Rather, we have the historical holiday of Pesach, to which is now attached the commandment to offer one's firstborn to God. This is not an unreasonable link; the very basis for the law is the plague of killing the firstborn of Egypt on the night before the great exodus. Nevertheless, in ch. 23, the holiday and the laws regarding the firstborn were separated; now they are joined by their common origin.

The agricultural holidays are introduced by the sabbath; on the seventh day, one acknowledges God's kingship by abstaining from work in the fields, even during the critical seasons of plowing and reaping, when every day's labor counts. An extension of this admission of our dependence on God is the two festivals of harvest and ingathering. In a post-golden calf world, where the people showed their readiness to worship their own handiwork, these agricultural holidays are more appropriately linked to Shabbat than to Pesach, since the people must re-affirm and deepen their commitment to the one God.

Although this new account of the festivals disrupts their previous unity, the three holidays are preserved within a new framework: the renewed berit - covenant - of ch. 34. The first covenant was predicated on those aspects of God which reflected His middat ha-din - the rule of judgment, whereby God exacted swift and appropriate accountability from the Jewish people.(1) Now, however, given the nation's stiff-necked nature, God is forced to base His relationship with the Jewish people on His middat ha-rahamim, the divine attributes of patience, mercy, and slowness to anger. In the covenant of the Second Tablets, God commits Himself to an ongoing relationship with the Jewish people, whether or not the people actually behave as God insists. This is the nature of the second berit, underscored in the God the males must visit three times a year: not merely ha-Adon Hashem, the Master and Sovereign of the universe (23:17), but ha-Adon Hashem Elokei Yisrael, the Master who is also the Lord of Israel, no matter how they act (34:23). The kingship element is no longer exclusive; it is now tempered by a long-suffering quality, characteristic of a relationship of commitment.

It is precisely the nature of this new relationship which accounts for the different presentation of the holidays. For acknowledging God's providence is not an intuitive reaction for the people. They require assistance to come to this most basic awareness. Therefore, the offering of one's human and animal firstborn - a frequently profound expression of sacrifice - helps deepen the sense of indebtedness to God for saving us during the plague of the firstborn in Egypt. This law is linked to the observance of Pesach, when we collectively commemorate the miraculous exodus. The agricultural holidays, almost counter intuitive in their admission of our dependence on God even as we toil daily in the fields, are aided by the observance of Shabbat, when God's ultimate sovereignty over the universe is affirmed. These other mitzvot are interspersed among the holidays not to interrupt them; their internal unity has been shattered by the sin of idolatry. Rather, with the original kingship element of these pilgrimages now tempered by the covenantal relationship of the people with God, these three festivals, together with their respective "preparatory" laws, provide three occasions on which Jewish males may reflect on their genuine reliance - historically and agriculturally - on God.

**Yom Kippur: Purifying the Mishkan and Ourselves**

Chapter 16 of Sefer Vayikra is certainly the main treatment of what both the High Priest and the people are to do on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. One of the most lasting effects of the sin of the calf , and of God's subsequent forgiveness,(2) is the need to set aside one day a year to repair our relationship with God - whether through ritual purification of God's Tabernacle or through personal fasting. The Torah institutes into the Jewish calendar a day on which the aggregate sins of the people and the impurity that sinfulness imparts on the mishkan may be expunged.

However, we rarely notice that the need to purify the mishkan once a year is already mentioned in the last verse of Parashat Tetzaveh, a full chapter before the people begin to react to Moshe's absence and set into motion the sequence of events which tragically leads to worshipping a golden idol. When the Torah describes the construction of the incense altar and its daily function at the very end of Parashat Tetzaveh (Shemot 30:1-10), the section ends with directions for an annual purification (v. 10):

Once each year Aharon shall make atonement on the horns [of this altar]. For all generations, he shall make atonement with the blood of the atonement sacrifice once each year. [This altar] shall be a holy of holies to God.

The expression "once each year" - ahat ba-shana - is repeated twice in the verse; apparently, there is an atonement sacrifice brought once a year, and its blood is used to make atonement on the golden incense altar as well. No date is given for this ceremony, other than it must be done annually. Nor is it described as part of a larger, more elaborate ceremony; only one sacrifice is mentioned, with its blood going on the altar's corners to "make atonement" on them.

After this extremely brief comment, two major events occur in the life of the people: the national transgression of the golden calf, and the individual sin of Nadav and Avihu, which resulted in their death (Vayikra 10:1-2). We discussed earlier the impact the collective sin had on the three festivals. Nadav and Avihu's sin, to be sure, is never stated precisely; when referring to it in retrospect, the Torah at times focuses on the uncommanded fire they brought,(3) and at other times, their coming near unto God without permission is portrayed as central.(4) In any event, the instructions regarding Yom Kippur are introduced with a verse whose focus is clearly the spatial trespassing of Aharon's sons (v. 1):

God spoke to Moshe right after the death of Aharon's two sons, who came near before God and died.

Coming near is not, in itself, a capital crime; it is the fact that it was not preceded by the proper sacrifices, offered in the proper way (vv. 2-3):

God said to Moshe: Speak to your brother Aharon, and let him not enter the sanctuary that is beyond the partition concealing the Ark, so that he may not die, since I appear over the Ark cover in a cloud. With the following [ceremony] may Aharon enter the sanctuary, with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering....

This is not the place to enter into all the elaborate details of the day's ceremony; each element, from the incense cloud brought into the inner sanctuary to the sprinkling of the bloods in various spots around the mishkan, is quite literally dripping with significance. Nevertheless, we may make some general observations. From the end of the chapter, it is clear that two separate functions have merged: the atonement of the Tabernacle from the impurities which may have attached themselves over the year, and the atonement of the kohanim and the people from their sins (16:33):

[The High Priest] shall be the one to make atonement in the holy [inner] sanctuary, in the Communion Tent, and on the altar; he shall also make atonement for the priests and for the entire people of the community.

The aim of purifying the altar is not new; as noted earlier, we encountered it first at the end of Parashat Tetzaveh. However, it is now united with a new, post-golden calf purpose: to purify the people from their sins. The chapter closes with reference to this novel aspect of the day, introduced only after the people's experience proved that there was indeed atonement after transgression (v. 34):

[All this] shall be for you as a law for all time, so that the Israelites will gain atonement for their sins once each year.

The expression "once each year" (ahat ba-shana) explicitly links this function with the more narrow one of atoning for the altar mentioned in Shemot ch. 30, which employed the expression twice.

Returning to our original context of holidays, Yom Kippur is truly of a different sort. It is certainly not agricultural, as are the Festivals of Harvest and Ingathering. Nor is it strictly historical, in the way Pesach is: no particular event is explicitly commemorated on the tenth of Tishrei, although as we mentioned, Chazal and many subsequent commentators saw this date as the day Moshe received the second set of tablets, indicating that full atonement had been achieved. It is a unique holiday, literally offering the Jewish people the annual opportunity to cleanse themselves of their sins in the way our forefathers had done that first year in the wilderness. Rather than celebrating a particular historical event, it focuses on the nature of our relationship with God, on the renewed covenant based on patience and forgiveness. Our ability to stand, year after year, before God and assert that we are His people is possible only because God had agreed to give priority to His middat ha-rahamim over His middat ha-din. To take advantage of the opportunity is the challenge of the day, but Yom Kippur's essence, undiminished if even every Jew fails to truly repent, is the offer of forgiveness, extended only because we are His nation.