

Parshat Vayikra – Sweet Thanks

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In Parshat Vayikra, the Torah tells us that “any Mincha that you bring to God may not be made of Chametz because all Se’or (leaven) and all Dvash (honey) you may not burn from them a fire-offering to God.”¹ The Gemara learns from the latter part of the Pasuk that any item that is not ordained for the Mizbeach is prohibited from being placed on the Mizbeach.² Given the broader restriction, what is unique about Se’or and Dvash that the Torah specifically singles them out as being restricted from being brought as offerings to God? The problem is only compounded by the subsequent Pasuk which enjoins us “you shall bring them as a first offering to God, but they may not be placed as a sweet savour upon the altar.”³ It is as if the Torah is suggesting that absent the injunction, they would be appropriate or even desirable to be brought as offerings.⁴

The Rambam in the Moreh Nevuchim⁵ suggests that it was the practice of the idol worshippers to offer leavened and sweet items while avoiding salty ones to their gods. Therefore the Torah in order to distinguish the worship of God from those idolatrous practices insists that the polar opposite be practiced with the sacrifices to God – they must be devoid of any leaven and sweet items and always be salted. Uncharacteristically,⁶ the Ramban entertains the Rambam’s interpretation as being a tenable explanation for these restrictions and then adds that possibly the requirement for salt is so that nothing presented to God be inappropriately bland. He then ends with a cryptic statement that maybe all of these restrictions are a hidden secret from us (סוד נעלם ממנו). Rav Chaim Paltiel (1240) indicates that the restriction is a precautionary measure to prevent the sacrifices from becoming inedible. If they were leavened too much or too sweet, the Kohanim would no longer have any interest in eating those items that were sanctified to God and that would be a deficit in the Korban.⁷ The Baalei Tosafot suggest that the need for all Korbanot to be salted makes them savory and incompatible with sweet and leavened items. The common denominator with all these explanation is that there is nothing inherently wrong with utilizing Se’or and Davash as a sacrifice, but they are restricted for technical reasons.

The Rabbeinu Bachaye introduces a more fundamental reason for the restrictions by suggesting that Se’or and Davash represent the Yetzer Harah⁸, the cause of all sin, and therefore they are inconsistent with the purpose of the Mizbeach which is to provide atonement. In a similar vein, the Toldot Yitzhak notes that Al Derech HaKabbalah (על דרך הקבלה) that Se’or and Dvash symbolize Midat HaDin which would be in dissonance with the Mizbeach which represents Midat HaRachamim.⁹ These explanations see the Se’or and Dvash as unsuited for the Mizbeach since they are incompatible with the purpose and intent of the Mizbeach.

The Kli Yakar shifts the focus for the disqualification from the Mizbeach to the individual. Se’or and Dvash represent the building blocks of man. Dvash is the symbol of man’s desire to enjoy the pleasures of the world while Se’or symbolizes the base drives and inclinations of man. Like in animals, both of these are instinctive and necessary for the sustenance and flourishing of the individual. In order to thrive, one needs to eat and care for themselves physically. Similarly, one needs base desires to compel them to build a family and to be driven to accomplish, create and develop. While these are essential to human vitality, these are still only stepping stones and facilitators (ראשית) of the individual’s ability to accomplish in the more profound realms of Torah and Mitzvot. Given that they represent a means to end, not something complete, they are inappropriate to be placed on the Mizbeach. On a similar note, the Sefer HaChinuch sees the restrictions as a way to emphasize and impart important character traits. The Torah wants us to act with alacrity (זריזות) and therefore bans Chametz which is a lingering process and the antithesis of zeal and avidity. Dvash represents gluttonous and indulgent behavior and therefore it is proscribed in order to convey the Torah’s preference that one choose a life of moderation, balance and health.

It is interesting to note that the Pasuk restricts the offering of Dvash (honey) on the Mizbeach. Our natural inclination is to associate honey with that which is produced by bees. In truth, the word Dvash is generally the first component in a construct state or noun phrase.¹⁰ Dvash generically means “sweet” and requires a second noun to identify the source of the sweetness. Absent an identifier as to the origin of the sweetness, one has to either assume that Dvash refers to all sweet items or it needs be determined by the context in which the word

¹ כִּלְהִמְנַחֶה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרִיבוּ לִיקְוֹק לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה חֲמֵץ כִּי כָל־שֹׂאֵר וְכָל־דָּבָשׁ לֹא־תִקְטְרוּ מִמֶּנּוּ אֲשֶׁר לִיקְוֹק (ויקרא ב, יא)

² ...ת"ל: כי כל שאור וכל דבש לא תקטירו ממנו אשה לה', כל שהוא ממנו לאישים הרי הוא בבל תקטירו (מנחות נז:).

³ קָרְבַּן רִאשִׁית תִּקְרִיבוּ אֹתָם לִיקְוֹק וְאֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא־יֵעָלוּ לְרִיחַ (ויקרא ב, יב)

⁴ תני בר קפרא הפטמין שברושלים היו אומרים אילו היה נותן לתוכה מעט דבש לא היה כל העולם כולו יכול לעמוד בריחה (ירושלמי יומא ד, ה)

⁵ מורה נבוכים חלק ג פרק מו

⁶ עיין רמב"ן ויקרא א, ט שהוא חולק עקרונית על שיטת הרמב"ם לגבי טעם הקרבנות

⁷ שהכוהנים אוכלים והבעלים מתכפרים פסחים נט: ע"פ שמות כט, לג ואכלו אתם אשר כפר בהם

⁸ וגם עיין ברכות יז.

⁹ עיין רמב"ן ויקרא א, ט ורמב"ן ויקרא כג, יז

¹⁰ In modern colloquial Hebrew, when the word דבש is used alone it is assumed to mean bee honey

is found. In our case, the Torah prohibits Dvash from being placed on the Mizbeach, but permits it to be brought as a first-offering (קרבת ראשית) which is a reference to the Bikurim (first fruits)¹¹ that are brought to the Mikdash beginning on Shavuot.¹² Chazal tell us that the Bikurim must be sourced from the Shivat HaMinim (שבעת המינים) which would mean that the honey we are discussing here is sourced from fruits and that is why Rashi translates the word Dvash as any sweetness from fruit (כל מתיקות פרי). Others narrow the definition of Dvash to the sweetness of dates (date honey or Silan) and figs (fig honey or syrup) which are amongst the Shivat Haminim. Many, including the Ibn Ezra on the Pasuk we are discussing, extend this meaning of Dvash (date honey) to the Torah's description of Eretz Yisrael as a "land flowing with milk and honey."¹³ What is so striking is that the sole utilization of the word Dvash in the Torah is as a descriptor for the Land of Israel and in our Pasuk restricting it from being placed on the Mizbeach.¹⁴ In addition, the words Chametz and Se'or also only appear in our Pasuk and with regards to Yetziyat Mitzrayim and Pesach. The limited usage of these words should shed some light on the restriction to offer these items on the Mizbeach.

Yetziyat Mitzrayim is the realization of Klal Yisrael's aspiration for national freedom that culminates in God's revelation and giving of the Torah on Har Sinai. Living and flourishing in Eretz Yisrael is the consummation of Bnei Yisrael's mission to create a sovereign nation of God in the Land of Israel.¹⁵ Both represent long awaited outcomes that underwent protracted processes of maturation. They mark significant milestones in Bnei Yisrael's journey to carry out God's will and be his representative nation. Upon finally reaching these seminal moments, the only appropriate response, which we do on Shavuot, is reflection and thanksgiving (הלל והודאה).

Se'or and Dvash both represent processes of aging and maturation. They require careful management and development to produce a product that is enjoyable, satisfying and satiating. As the Sefer HaChinuch and Ibn Ezra note, Se'or causes leavening (its end product is Chametz) and similarly Dvash ferments which symbolize the aggrandizement and the haughtiness of the individual as a result of their success (מדת הגאווה). The Mizbeach is a medium to draw closer to God and in most instances it is a vehicle for atonement. Bringing a Korban, as the Ramban explains,⁹ requires complete submission before God. It is a recognition that our maturation and development has gone awry. We have lost our way, missed the mark as the result of a deficit within us which requires us to reassess our thoughts, speech and actions. In that context, it would be inappropriate to offer on the Mizbeach items that have the heavy hand of man involved in their transformation and evolution since it is that misguided and imprudent fermentation which has resulted in the current undesirable predicament. Man's ability to utilize Korbanot and the Mizbeach is predicated on their shedding all sense of self. There is an obvious dissonance between that self-effacement and the nature of Se'or and Dvash. That is why they are prohibited from being offered on the Mizbeach.

It would be disingenuous to say that the Torah shuns Se'or and Dvash completely because they do play a central role in three items that are presented in the Mikdash: The Korban Todah (ten of the forty breads are Chametz), the Shte Halechem (that are brought with the Shalmei Tzibbur on Shavuot) and the Bikurim (first fruits that are brought to the Mikdash on Shavuot). None of these items are placed on the Mizbeach, but they all share a common theme of being presentations out of thanks and indebtedness for that which God has provided. Se'or and Dvash represent man's accomplishments, that which one has invested their strengths in and worked and toiled for. Those successes can fuel an egocentric self-congratulatory perspective within the individual (כחי ועוצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה). The only antidote for such illusions is to say thank you and assign the credit to God. It is akin to the Torah's requirement in Parshat Ekev that one eat, be satisfied and then bless God (ואכלת ושבעת וברכת). The Se'or and Dvash are not sacrificed to God because that would only serve to reinforce the sense of self-aggrandizement by suggesting that the creation of man, rather than submission, is what God desires. Instead, they are bought as a wave-offering and then given to the Kohanim to eat in order to emphasize that success is only measured by its value in the service of God. Similar to the seminal events in Bnei Yisrael's history, Se'or and Dvash, man's accomplishments, require thanksgiving for that which God has provided and reflection as to whether they are in consonance with that which God wants.

Just to conclude with some food for thought given that Pesach is rapidly approaching. In Mitzrayim, the home was the Mizbeach¹⁶ and that might explain why Chametz was and is restricted on Pesach and with the Korban Pesach. There is much more to say about this topic but we will leave it, בעזרת ה', for a future Shiur on Pesach.

Shabbat Shalom

¹¹ ראשית בכורי אדמתך תביא בית יקוק אלהיך לא תבשל גדי בחלב אמו (שמות כג, ט)

¹² ולקחת מראשיתו כל פרי האדמה אשר תביא מארצך אשר יקוק אלהיך נתן לך ושמת בטנא והלכת אל המקום אשר יבחר יקוק אלהיך לשכן שמו שם (דברים כג, ט)

¹³ הוא מביא סעד מהפסוק בנחמיה י, לו אבל נראה שיש ראייה יותר חזקה מהפסוק בדברי הימים ב לא, ה

¹⁴ There are 2 exceptions both of which likely reference to Eretz Yisrael: the gifts sent with the brothers to the ruler of Egypt that likely came from the produce of Eretz Yisrael and לא, טז in describing the Man which in Sefer Devarim has striking parallels to the rain and produce of the Land of Israel.

¹⁵ עיין הקדמת הרמב"ן לפירושו לספר שמות

¹⁶ הא תנא רב יוסף: שלשה מזבחות היו שם, על המשקוף ועל שתי המזוזות (פסחים צו).