



BeHa'lotcha

By Ben Alter

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Upcoming Events:

June 20
Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Elman at the JCC in NYC on "**Modern Orthodoxy—the Fourth Century**"
 7:00-8:15 pm

June 18
Edah mini-conference at the JCC NYC

The term 'qorban pesach' is a misnomer. Nowhere in the Chumash does the *miqrah* refer to the *pesach* offering as a *qorban pesach*. The *miqrah* refers to the *pesach* either as a 'pesach' or a 'zevach pesach' or as a 'qorban haShem.' This term, *qorban haShem*, is rare. Usually, when the *miqrah* refers to a *qorban* it calls it a *qorban laShem*¹. With respect to only two events does the *miqrah* refer to an offering as a *qorban haShem*: the *pesach* offering in this week's *parsha*: when those who found themselves impure and could thus not prepare the *pesach* on the 14th day of the first month of the second year out of Egypt petitioned to bring it on the corresponding day a month later²; and with respect to the offering of 600,750 shekel of gold the generals of the Israeli army, in the episode toward the end of *Sefer Bamidbar*, donated through Moshe and Elazar *haCohen* to the *Ohel Moed* after their vengeful defeat of the Midianites³.

Both instances portray the use of the term *qorban haShem* in the mouths of those who would bring it voluntarily. They almost insist, in each case, on bringing this *qorban*. Why? What is the meaning of this rare ritual of a *qorban haShem*? What do these two *qorbanei haShem* have in common?

For starters, both instances relate to situations where the Children of Israel were witness to the destruction of their foe: in the case of the *pesach* it was the first born (male and female) of Egypt; in the second case it was the entire male populations of the five Midianite kingdoms. More curious (and this is the point) in both cases not one member of the Children of Israel lost their lives. These were two events of massive mayhem and death among the enemies of Israel without so much as a single casualty among the Israelites themselves. Not one. We know this was true of the night of the exodus by virtue of the *miqrah* calling it *leil shimurim*⁴: by definition, if one designated oneself as a member of *Adas Yisroel*, their household suffered no casualties on the night in question; in the case of Midian, we know this because the army generals took a census of the troops and reported "*velo nifqad mimenu ish*,"⁵ "and not a single man has been lost.

¹Space restrictions prohibit us from addressing the meaning of the frequent use of the term *pesach laShem*.

²*Bamidbar* 9:7

³and killing every Midianite male including the five Midianite kings as well as Balaam ben Beor. *Bamidbar* 31:50

⁴*Shemot* 12:42

⁵*Bamidbar* 31:49

Bamidbar 9:13

God chose to belong to Him not only *Adas Yisroel*, the nation of Israel as a whole; He chose each and every household member of that *Edah*; and He chose the households not for the sake of their serving Him, not for them to bring a *qorban laShem*, but for Him to be a part of them, for them to bring a *qorban haShem*. The sole criterion for being part of the chosen household was that they had painted their doorposts in blood as a sign that they acknowledged God's wish to be part of them – the blood was the blood of the *qorban haShem*. At the moment of the founding of the nation God was killing the first born of every man and woman and animal and god of those who had not prepared the *qorban haShem*. Every single household untouched by that plague was a household to which *haShem* was *maqriv* and did not strike; it was a household that was chosen. This was the quintessential moment of what today we would call 'Who is a Jew?' God's answer to that question was to bring Himself close to every member of His nation and to spare their households. And what was the sole basis of the sparing of the household? Was it what the household members believed or prayed or their good or bad behavior? No. It was simply to prepare the *qorban haShem* properly.

Thus in our *parsha*, the members of *Adas Yisroel* who were unable to bring the *pesach* on the appointed day insist on bringing the *qorban haShem* the following month to acknowledge God's most precise application of *hashgacha pratit*, of His taking care of each and every member of the Israelite nation. They insist on participating in this ritual because this is the ritual that commemorated the designation of each and every member of Israel as a *bona fide* member. To bring a *qorban haShem* is to demand to be part of the people who were designated by God, household by household, to be members of His nation. Each year the descendants of those designees bring the *pesach*, and if they miss the first window, they opt for the second window to claim and proclaim their national membership; if they are pure and yet fail to bring the *qorban haShem*, in the same way as if they are male and choose not to have a *brit milah*, then their souls are cut off from the people for failing to perform this pro-active ritual of membership.

On Confronting The Persistence Of Evil

By Rabbi Saul J. Berman

The reappearance of gargantuan evil in the world seems always to take us by surprise. The latest blizzard, hurricane and earthquake, shock us into realization of how untamed nature remains. The most recent forest fire, nuclear accident and fatal traffic collision, stun us into realization of how vulnerable we are to human error. Ethnic cleansing, suicide bombers and terrorists willing to take thousands of lives, shake to their roots our assumptions about the fundamental goodness of human beings.

After a short period of time, our most essential defense kicks in – denial. It works in many ways. We persuade ourselves that we don't really have to worry about natural upheavals, the last tornado was really an anomaly, it won't hit our town again. Or we tell each other that we can mute human evil intentions, all we need to do is to assure that the economic and political conditions under which people live are significantly improved.

Another form of defense is theological denial of the reality of evil. These events, some say, only appear to be evil, in reality they are caused directly by God in the execution of His will for good in the world. They are events in which justice is done in a form beyond our understanding. This particular form of Providential belief was rejected by most Jewish philosophers and dismissed out of hand by Maimonides as contrary to both revelation and reason. Nevertheless, there are some Jewish thinkers, and many individual Jews, who derive comfort from this denial of random evil.

It's time to be more accepting of the persistence of evil in the world. It's time to listen to Maimonides on the limits of Divine Providence. It's time to let down our defenses and accept the difficult challenges which confront us. There is real evil in the world, and sometimes it strikes at good people as well as at evil ones. Job already acknowledged this reality and God Himself confirmed its truth and told Job to stop complaining and to get on with his life

What are the sources of this unavoidable evil? First is the intersection of humanity and the rules of nature. Earthquakes produce evil results when humans decide to build their communities along a fault. Then there are the imperfections of the human organism itself. We don't know why God chose to create the human body with cells and organs subject to disease, failure and death. He has set nature in motion and desires to allow it, as much as possible, to sustain its own laws. Thirdly, humans having free will means that we are all vulnerable to the evil machinations of other persons.

Being Jewish demands that we respond to the presence of good and evil in the world from within the framework of a particular dialectic. On one hand, being human requires us to yield to imperfection, to acknowledge our creatureliness. It requires us to recognize our vulnerability to forces more powerful or more malignant than us, not simply to be resigned to them, but rather to combat all of those forms of evil. On the other hand, our dignity as bearers of the Image of God demands of us more than a war against evil. It is our responsibility also to promote the spread of good. Denial subverts both of those tasks. If there is no real evil, then it is not necessary to war against it. If the world is already good under Divine providence, then there is no urgent need to make our mission the spread of good.

Torah teaches us that Amalek, the embodiment of disdain for human life, the paradigm of national idealization of war and destruction, is to be remembered and fought in every generation in which he appears. Even forgetting, let alone denying, the reality of such evil in the world, is folly, is dangerous and is a crime.

Torah also teaches that it is our duty to imitate the thirteen Divine qualities of goodness embedded in God's thirteen Names. They are: productivity, interdependence, reciprocal love, responsibility, sharing joy and pleasure, patience, individualized mercy, honesty, gratitude (loyalty), forgiveness, humility, hopefulness, and justice (Exodus 34:6-7). The whole of the Torah is the system through which these qualities are to be maximized in the life of an individual and in the character of a society.

The Jewish challenge is to embody this dialectic in our response to the presence of evil in the world. On one hand we need to acknowledge the presence of evil and vigorously combat it. We must achieve the knowledge necessary to reduce disease, and must enhance the technology needed to limit the evil consequences of human error and malignant free choice. We must, even in the war against Amalek, preserve minimum standards of humane behavior, without reducing the intensity of the effort to prevent the evil-doers from achieving their hateful goals.

On the other hand we need to mourn the loss of innocent life and comfort the survivors whose lives have been tragically shattered. We need to promote harmony amongst diverse groups and act with increased integrity in our relationships with all people. We need to strengthen economic well being, encourage political liberty and assure education for love, not for hate. We need to demonstrate that the life of goodness can flourish even under adverse conditions, that God's qualities of mercy may not be lost in the tumult of resistance to evil.

Rabbi Saul J. Berman is the director of Edah.