

ספר ויקרא, begins with the details of the laws of sacrifices. It moves on to discuss the role of the Priests and their responsibilities, both in and out of the Temple. For example the Priests are indispensable for the sacrificial process, but they also are central to the purity of the people, טומאה וטהרה, as noted for example in their roles regarding lepers and for a child-bearing woman. ספר ויקרא transitions to commandments regarding animals acceptable and unacceptable for consumption and illicit sexual relationships. The Torah details the various festivals, including the Sabbath, followed by the commandment to observe the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. The Book concludes with the section of blessings and curses, ברכות וקללות or תוכחה, that establishes the code of conduct the Jewish People must observe in order to maintain our relationship with Gd and retain possession of the Promised Land. What is the connection between the various sections that comprise the latter half of ספר ויקרא?

Between the sections about the festivals and the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, there is a small segue to discuss the blasphemer, מקלל, and the punishment he received. Along with the episode of the blasphemer, the Torah includes additional seemingly unrelated verses to the story of the blasphemer. Why was the section of the blasphemer introduced specifically at this point?

The Jews entered into a covenant with Gd at Sinai when they obligated themselves to observe the Torah and become Gd's inalienable chosen people. ואתם תהיו לי. ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש. In order to enter into the covenant, the Jews had to be made aware of to what they were about to obligate themselves. They were presented with the 10 Commandments, עשרת הדברות, and the Commandments in פרשת משפטים. That section includes מצוות בין אדם לחברו, laws between man and his fellow man, such as how to treat a slave, torts, charity, as well as some Commandments between Gd and man, בין אדם למקום, such as observance of the Sabbath and the festivals, including the obligation to keep the Sabbatical year. This section is followed by Gd informing Moses that He will be sending His representative to lead them into the Promised Land and to be careful to heed his words, for ignoring his words will lead to disaster and exile. This section is a mini-version of the תוכחה, as it details the requirement to follow Gd's commandments and the potential negative consequences of failing to comply. The next section describes the process through which the people entered into the covenant, with Moses offering sacrifices and

sprinkling the people with water and the blood of the sacrifices, fulfilling all the obligations of conversion: circumcision, immersion in a Mikvah and offering a sacrifice combined with being informed of some of the commandments, מודיעים אותם מקצת מצוות.

Unfortunately, the Jews quickly abrogated the covenant they accepted. When they mistakenly thought that Moses was lost to them, they were influenced by the multitudes that accompanied them from Egypt and fashioned a golden calf. In the short space of forty days they violated the prime directive and prohibition against idolatry. Their sin was great and calamitous. When Moses descended the mountain he observed their celebration and understood the gravity of their sin, he was no longer able to hold the Tablets of the covenant, לוחות הברית.

Our Rabbis disagree as to whether Moses dropped the Tablets accidentally because they were too heavy, or if he dropped them on purpose. Carrying heavy stones is not easy, and with the retraction of the divine assistance that escorted him down the mountain and assisted him to hold the לוחות, it would seem only natural that he would drop them. Apparently, there was some doubt as to Moses' motivation at the time the Tablets fell from his hands. According to the latter opinion, Moses realized that the people's actions were indefensible in light of their entering into a covenant that explicitly forbade their very actions, under penalty of death. If the covenant remained in place, the people would be guilty and the entire community would face the death penalty. Moses compared their situation to a bride who has an affair immediately after her wedding. Her husband, who still loves her and believes in her, is faced with a quandary. If he insists that she is married, she is subject to the death penalty for adultery. If she were not married, her act would be sinful but the penalty would be less severe. He immediately cancels the engagement and marriage, returning her to her earlier unwed state so she would not face the penalties for adultery. Moses decided right then and there that it would be better to annul the covenant between Gd and the Jewish People and attempt to reestablish it again after a period of repentance and reflection. So he shattered the לוחות on purpose in order to dissolve the covenant.

By shattering the לוחות, Moses was able to argue before Gd that the people should not be destroyed, as they were no longer bound by the covenant. However, while Gd agreed to his request not to destroy the people, Moses now had another problem: how to convince Gd to grant the people a second chance and restore His covenant with the Jewish Nation. Gd agreed to spare their lives, but there was no obligation on His part to grant them a second chance. Moses prayed for 40 days and nights to convince Gd, כביכול, to renew His covenant with them.

When Gd agreed to reestablish His covenant with the Jewish People, the question arose as to how would that renewal take place. Since the original covenant was null and void, the people required an entirely new conversion process to consummate the new covenant. This time around, Moses acted as the emissary of the people who was authorized to accept the covenant on their behalf. As part of the acceptance of the covenant, they again needed to be apprised of the laws that would bind them.

According to many commentators on the Torah, פרשת קדושים reprises the עשרת הדברות. As several commandments were given to the people in conjunction with the עשרת הדברות at the first covenant, a sample of Commandments had to accompany this reprise of the עשרת הדברות. Which laws should be included? The Torah copied the blueprint used for the original covenant and essentially repeated the laws of פרשת משפטים. Like the first covenant, the Torah stresses the proper way to treat slaves and others who are in need. We reiterate the commandments of the Sabbath and the festivals and we include the laws of the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee. This time, many of these commandments are expanded upon, but they are all part of the blueprint for entering a covenant with Gd established at the receipt of the first set of לוחות at Sinai. As was the case with the original covenant, the contract or code of conduct that we are obligated to conform to, as well as the repercussions for failing to act appropriately, are spelled out, this time in far greater detail. Indeed, the same pattern is used by Moses at the end of his life, to obligate the Jews to observe the covenant in perpetuity. The sections of פרשת ואתחנן through פרשת כי תבוא reprise the עשרת הדברות and the laws of proper behavior towards the slave and the poor, and include the sections about the festivals followed by תוכחה that spells out the required code of conduct and repercussions for failure to abide by it.

In short, a specific pattern is laid out by the Torah as a pre-requisite to enter into a covenant with Gd. That pattern includes the 10 commandments, torts and laws relating to slaves, festivals and the sabbatical years and תוכחה. This pattern is followed in ספר ויקרא to reestablish the Sinaitic covenant between Gd and His Chosen People.

Why did the Torah interrupt this sequence with the story of the blasphemer? פרשת משפטים contains a section of laws related to one who hits or curses their parent or another Jew. Apparently the covenant blueprint includes these laws as well. The Torah can inform us about these laws by stating them, as was done in פרשת משפטים, or it can teach by example. In this case the Torah taught us the laws regarding cursing or injuring someone by introducing the laws with the story of the blasphemer. This was required to conform to the Sinai blueprint as originally implemented in פרשת משפטים.

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