

Parsha Q's – Mishpatim

In haste – please double-check citations before engraving on hearts and minds

Exodus 22:19

“zoveiach loelohim yochorom; bilti laHashem (the tetragrammaton) levado”

Much of our discussion this week will revolve around the translation of this verse, but a brief and highly approximate starting point would be “One who sacrifices to a divinity will be executed (yochorom), other than to Hashem alone.”

One obvious redundancy is the word “levado”, “alone” – if one who sacrifices to any divinity other than Hashem is executed, then obviously Hashem is alone in this regard.

Seforno takes this to exclude sacrifices to G-d and other divinities simultaneously. In fact, without “levado” we might have read the verse as suggesting that the problem was merely one of sacrificing to other divinities while excluding Hashem!

Ramban at one point suggests that “levado” excludes angels – one must sacrifice to Hashem alone, not even to His servants. Ramban suggests that the word *elohim* refers to angels in all the problematic verses that seem to recognize multiple *elohim*s, eg. “for G-d is greater than all *elohim*”.

Ramban then suggests that a deep secret involving sacrifice is involved here, and hinted at in Onkelos. So far as I can tell the only significant point in Onkelos is that he translates “except to the name of Hashem alone”. Perhaps Ramban believes that the verse really means to imply that one must always sacrifice to the attribute of mercy, represented by the tetragrammaton, rather than to the attribute of justice, *elohim*”. This would involve a radical rereading of the word *elohim* in the first half of the verse.

The standard translation of “*elohim*” refers to idols, false divinities. The problem with this translation is that the word is *loelohim*, implying a specific set of divinities, rather than *l'elohim*, implying any (except, as we soon find out, Hashem). Ibn Ezra avoids this problem by suggesting that it refers to the (false) divinities referred to in the “Second Commandment”, but while that provides a grammatical antecedent, it's not clear why the reference is necessary.

Ibn Ezra also claims that this verse is aimed at the resident alien, as with regard to Jews it is redundant. While the next verse prohibits harassing resident aliens, the connection seems forced. Ramban suggests that, in standard halakhic form, a second verse is necessary to spell out the punishment.

Which brings us to another peculiarity of the verse, the use of “yochorom” to mean “will be executed”. “Yonatan” takes this to mean that execution is accompanied by forfeiture of assets, the more usual meaning of *cherem*. Ramban suggests that idols themselves are described by the torah as *cherem*, and Deut. 7:26 says “and you shall become *cherem* like them”.

The halakhic implication of the verse is that not only sacrifice, but all standard forms of worship, are capital crimes with regard to other “divinities”, while nonstandard forms of worship are capital only if they accord with the official rites of the “divinity” thus worshiped.

The underlying problem/irony of this verse is that its goal seems to be the differentiation of Hashem from all other objects of worship, but that it does so in a way that emphasizes that they can only be described in the same terms. Indeed, without constant quotes and/or adjectives (e.g. “false”) putting Hashem in the same sentence as others cannot help but seem to grant them legitimacy. The Torah could perhaps have avoided this by using “*elilim*”, “idols”, rather than “*elohim*”, but that would have run the risk of excluding non-tangible but inappropriate objects of worship.

Tamar Ross, in a meditation on Hindusim, writes that it seems that most religions – polytheistic and monotheistic – believe the same things superficially (idol-worshippers generally see their idols as mere symbols of abstractions) and very deeply (divinity provides meaning, order in the universe, a basis for ethics, etc.). Nonetheless the Torah seems to care terribly deeply about the intermediate level at which we differ. Meiri tries to evade the problem by distinguishing between civilized and barbaric paganism, but doesn't (in my opinion) go so far as to eliminate the torah's focus on the form of idol-worship.

Perhaps this verse's playing with this irony is intended to show that Hashem recognizes the problem. Shabbat Shalom!