

Leviticus 1:2

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them:

When a person (*adam*) brings a sacrifice (*yakriv*) from among you (*mikem*) a sacrifice (korban) to G-d – from the domestic animals, the cattle and the sheep, you shall sacrifice your sacrifice (*korbanchem*).

Our focus this week is on the seeming anomalies in the identification of the sacrifice-bringer. First, why is it necessary to begin with the word *adam*? Second, why does *mikem* follow the verb, thus creating ambiguity as to whether it refers to the bringer or the sacrifice, rather than following *adam*? I assume that on the simplest level Ibn Ezra et al are correct in asserting that the meaning of the verse is “When a person from among you brings a sacrifice”.

The presumption of the legal midrash is that *adam* is intended as a term of inclusion. Candidates for inclusion include converts and non-Jews. The problem with using it to include converts is that there seems no reason to have thought them excluded, as “Children of Israel” is generally understood as including them. Including non-Jews, however, seems problematic in that the verse is explicitly directed to the Children of Israel (although perhaps it is directing the Children of Israel to accept sacrifices from Gentiles) and “from among you” identifies the sacrifice-bringer as one of them. Note incidentally that Bekhor Shor suggests that we accept sacrifices from non-Jews so as to “bring them near to the wings of Immanence”, i.e we accept them from potential converts.)

Here the placement of *mikem* is utilized. “From among you” is interpreted as meaning that not all of you are eligible to sacrifice, i.e. as excluding someone. However, the separation of *adam* and *mikem* is understood as implying that the latter does not come to qualify the former, i.e. that *mikem* does not come to exclude some of those tentatively included under *adam*. Indeed, if *adam* included Gentiles, it clearly is unrelated to *mikem*. The consensus candidate for exclusion is the Jewish apostate and/or rebel, possibly on the grounds that they would not bring a sacrifice “to G-d”.

None of these interpretations is objectively compelling. The same word *adam*, used in a very similar structure in Leviticus 13:2, is used to exclude minors rather than to include Gentiles. The Talmud also uses the placement of *mikem* to have it exclude stolen goods rather than any class of people, translating it as “from that which belongs to you”. (Others derive this from *adam*, arguing that just as the first Adam brought his sacrifice definitionally from his own property, so too should we. This may be circular, as the first Adam is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah as having sacrificed; the tradition that he did may stem at least in part from our verse. Yet others derive it from *korbanchem*).

Seforno, moves from law to homiletics, suggesting that all true sacrifice must be in some sense self-sacrifice. Thus he translates *mikem* as “from yourself”.

Ohr Hachayyim has two homiletic suggestions. The first, drawn from the Tanchuma, is that *adam* is intended to remind us that G-d does not necessarily need to accept a sacrifice as atonement for sin – the first Adam did not get off so easily (The theological assumptions and implications of this parallelism, he acknowledges, need development). The second is that we should translate the words *yakriv* and *korban* etymologically as closeness rather than as sacrifice, and that the verse teaches that all closeness to G-d achieved by individuals is rooted in the spiritual force of the community (“When a person draws near – it is from you”).

Frankly, the homiletic interpretations seem to me better explanations of the textual anomalies than the legal midrash. There are instances in which the Talmud, at least by implication, seems to consider this problematic – if the verse can be explained otherwise, what justifies the legal use? In other instances it seems that legal and non-legal midrash exist in parallel exegetical universes that do not impinge on one another.

I am also generally interested in the degree to which the mechanics of legal midrash determine its legal results. How (or why) did the rabbis decide that *adam* here included Gentiles rather than excluding minors?

Shabbat Shalom!

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