

Our focus this week is on Bamidbar 5:5-10. This short section generates via midrash several broad halakhic principles, and its enigmatic style may offer a window into Biblical style and technique. The sheet this week will be structured as a running commentary.

Hashem spoke to Mosheh:

“A man or a woman – should they perform any of the sins of humanity (mikol chatot ha’adam), to thereby betray (lim’ol ma’al) Hashem, that soul is guilty (ashmah).

They must acknowledge (v’hitvadu) the sin they committed; he should return the object-regarding – which-they-are-guilty (ashamo); he should add a fifth of the object’s value; he should give it to the person-to-whom-he-is guilty (la’asher asham lo).

If the man has no redeemer (go’el) to whom to return the object-of-guilt (ha’asham), the returned object-of-guilt belongs to Hashem, to the priest (aside from the atonement-ram, through which he gains atonement for it).

All offerings (terumah) – all sanctified things of the Children of Israel – which they bring-near/sacrifice (yakrivu) to the priest – it belongs to him.

A man’s sanctified things – they belong to him.

What a man gives to the priest – it belongs to him.”

“A man or a woman – should they perform any of the sins of humanity” – from here we derive that men and women are equally obligated in all negative commandments, and equally subject to the punishments for breaking them. (Note that the pronoun inconsistency throughout this section – regarding both number and gender – occurs in the original.)

“They must acknowledge the sin they committed” – from here we derive that atonement always requires confession.

“he should return the object . . . to the person . . . “ – here we have a sudden transition from sweeping generality to a discussion of property crimes. Note also that the narrow context here is a repetition of Vayikra 5:21.

“If the man has no redeemer” – Assuming that all relatives are redeemers, in hierarchical order, this verse can apply only to converts, who, if they die unmarried and childless, have no legal relatives.

Note that while the technical meaning of redeemer is relative, it is actually the sinner who needs redemption, and the syntax allows the translation “if he (the sinner) has no redeemer”..

“to Hashem, to the priest” – perhaps the Torah’s intention is to show that Hashem is considered the direct relative of converts.

“All offerings” – the relevance of this section is unclear. The verb “yakrivu”, which generally denotes sacrificial offerings, seems to emphasize the intimate connection between Hashem and priest established by apposition in the preceding verse.

“it belongs to him” – three consecutive verses end with a variant of this phrase, and in at least the last two the phrase is ambiguous – to whom do the things under discussion belong?

Question: Why does the Torah choose this narrow and seemingly redundant context to convey the broad principles of egalitarian liability and the need for viduy/confession?

Question: Why does the Torah here deliberately blur the lines of ownership between Hashem, the priests, and the people?

Note here that the shift from generality to specificity in the opening section is also a shift from a focus on G-d-betrayal to one on interpersonal failure.

My tentative proposal is that the treatment of converts is presented here as a paradigmatic issue, but I have as yet no clear understanding of how or why. Your suggestions are welcome.

Shabbat Shalom!

RK