

Unit 5 – Hukim Section

Lesson 21 – Perek 12:1-19 - Centralized Sacrifice

Objective: To appreciate the need for and significance of this Perek’s legislation for centralized sacrifice. To see how this perek fits into the structure of the Hukim section.

Background:

Recall the structure set forth in lesson 16 and again compare 12:1 with 6:1 noticing that the word מצות is dropped since that section has come to a close. This is the opening of the Hukim section which includes the third, fourth, and fifth commandments.

Activity:

1. Give students a picture of what Bnei Yisrael are about to do. They are going to take over a country that is filled with polytheism, paganism, and child sacrifice. Moshe already warned them many times in the Mitzvah section not to worship other gods. Assuming that message has been properly received, the biggest threat Bnei Yisrael now faces is that they will borrow the practices of the pagans to worship Hashem. The most horrific example is that just like the Canaanites practice child sacrifice to their gods, Bnei Yisrael might think that is what Hashem wants and sacrifice their children to Hashem! Also, the pagans needed many worship sites for each of their gods. If Bnei Yisrael simply take over the pagan worship sites and use them all to worship Hashem, there is a danger that they too will revert to polytheism. This perek requires that Bnei Yisrael take drastic measures to make sure this doesn’t happen. If you were leading Bnei Yisrael at this time, what ideas would you have to make sure they don’t worship Hashem using pagan practices?

2. After discussing the historical problem and possible solutions begin reading the perek. The first measure (Pesukim 2-3) is to destroy all Canaanite altars. The reason for this is given in pasuk 4, “Do not worship Hashem your God in like manner.” This destruction is not only to make sure Bnei Yisrael not use altars for other gods. Hashem does not want Bnei Yisrael to worship Himself with these altars either.

3. The continuation of the chapter offers an alternative to the pagan system which is completely revolutionary. Imagine if all the Rabbis decided to close down every synagogue in the city except for one. How would that affect the Jewish community? (The leadership would be more centralized and more powerful, the community would have more unity...)

4. Read pesukim 4-19. Once Bnei Yisrael get settled in the land, all sacrifices must take place at only one place which will eventually be the Jerusalem Bet Mikdash. Since all pagan temples are to be destroyed and no temple except the one in Jerusalem may be built, there is no possibility of anyone performing idolatry or human sacrifice. This also gives the central leadership strong control over worship to make sure Bnei Yisrael does not revert to paganism. Since it could be difficult for people to come to the temple except

during holidays, they would have to use prayer and study, which were allowed anywhere, as forms of worship instead of sacrifices.

[Rambam emphasizes the last reason for centralized worship in the Guide of the Perplexed III:32. He explains that Hashem does not actually need animal sacrifices at all and would prefer a purer form of worship such as prayer/meditation. However, since Bnei Yisrael were so used to animal sacrifices, they could not conceive of worshipping Hashem without them. Hashem therefore allowed them to perform some sacrifices but greatly limited the number of them by banning all altars except for one.]

Now that we understand the contents of this chapter, let us step back and see how it fits into the structure. As the first chapter of the Hukim section, we expect to find here something to do with the third commandment, not to take Hashem's name in vain. In fact the Perek begins with a law to destroy all pagan altars that sounds like the second commandment.

What is the reason for the third commandment not to use Hashem's name in inappropriate contexts? The idea is one may not take something holy and use it in an unholy way. This same idea applies to centralized sacrifice. We are afraid that Bnei Yisrael would sacrifice animals, which are holy, but do it in a pagan way – thereby desecrating its holiness. Therefore, just as one should only use Hashem's name properly, such as in a true oath required by a court or in special prayers, so too this Perek requires that sacrifices only be performed under the supervision of the central Bet Mikdash which would insure that no polytheism or child sacrifice would be allowed. In sum, this entire chapter is an expanded application of the third commandment.