

The Pesach Offering in the Desert

Classic Questions

Why is this passage, which was said “on the *first* month” (9:1), recorded after Parshas Bamidbar, which was said “on the first day of the *second* month” (1:1)?

Rashi: The passage at the beginning of this book was not said until Iyar [the second month]. From this you learn that the Torah does not follow a sequence of chronological order.*

Why did [the Book of Bamidbar] not open with this [passage]? Because it is a disgrace to Israel that throughout the forty years the children of Israel were in the desert, they only brought this one Pesach sacrifice.

Tosfos: The Jewish people were not obligated to bring the Pesach offering in the desert, for it is a mitzvah which only applied after entering the Land of Israel, as the verse states, “You will [only] have to keep this ritual service...when you enter the Land that G-d is going to give you” (Shemos 12:25; see Rashi *ibid.*). The fact that they did so here was only because G-d made an exception to the above rule and instructed them to bring the Pesach sacrifice that year. But what, then, was the “disgrace” for Israel in not offering the Pesach sacrifice, when they were not obligated in any case? Their disgrace was in the fact that they were unable to offer the Pesach sacrifice until forty years later, due to the sin of the spies which caused them to be delayed in the desert rather than entering the Land of Israel immediately (Tosfos, Kidushin 37b, s.v. ho’il).

Bartenura: The disgrace for the Jewish people was that they were unable to offer the Pesach sacrifice in the desert because they were uncircumcised, and the law states that an uncircumcised person may not bring the Pesach offering (Shemos 12:48). The reason why they were uncircumcised was, as the Talmud states, due to difficult climatic conditions in the desert which prevailed as a punishment for their sins. Thus, the Jewish people were unable to circumcise their children, due to the risk to life involved (Yevamos 72a).

The Rebbe's Teachings

The Pesach Offering in the Desert (9:1-5)

Verse 1, which introduces the account of the Pesach offering in the desert, states that this event occurred “in the second year of their exodus from the land of Egypt, in the first month.”

Rashi clarifies that the book of Bamidbar did not open with this passage (even though it occurred chronologically before the events of Parshas Bamidbar): “Because it is a disgrace to Israel that throughout the forty years that the children of Israel were in the desert, they only brought this one Pesach sacrifice.”

Tosfos asks: Why was it considered a disgrace that the Jewish people did not bring the Pesach offering in the desert for 40 years, when they were in fact *not obligated* to do so? Tosfos answers that the disgrace was the Jewish people's delay in entering the Land for 40 years, due to the sin of the spies, which prevented them from offering the Pesach sacrifice.

However, it is difficult to accept that this was Rashi's understanding of the matter, because:

- a.) It turns out that the disgrace was *not* primarily the failure to offer the Pesach sacrifice, but rather, the sin of the spies itself.
- b.) In being delayed in the desert, the Jewish people were unable to perform *numerous* precepts and laws which could only be performed in the Land of Israel. So why would Rashi stress the disgrace in reference to the Pesach sacrifice *alone*?
- c.) In any case, at this time, the sin of the spies had not yet occurred and Rashi makes no reference to the matter here.

Bartenura argues, based on the Talmud, that the “disgrace” of the Jewish people was that they did not perform circumcision in the desert, and were thus unable to offer the Pesach sacrifice.

However, this does not appear to be Rashi's logic, since:

- a.) Rashi makes no reference to the issue of circumcision.
- b.) Rashi states explicitly that the Jewish people were not obligated to bring the Pesach sacrifice until they reached the Land of Israel (Shemos 12:25).
- c.) Even according to Bartenura's logic, it is difficult to accept that just *one year later* there was a majority of uncircumcised males which would prevent the Pesach sacrifice from being offered. For even if many male children had been born since the last Pesach sacrifice (and we accept that an uncircumcised son bars his father from eating the Pesach sacrifice—see Mechilta, Shemos 12:48), nevertheless:
 - i.) Perhaps the prohibition would not apply in this case, since the failure to circumcise was due to climatic conditions beyond the people's control.
 - ii.) In any case, it is extremely unlikely that the majority of men would have fathered a son in that period, especially when one considers that many were too old to have children, and many were too young (such as those who had just reached the age of Bar Mitzvah).

A final question: The Torah is not a history book which records *every* event that occurred to the Jewish people. So, if the Torah does not wish to stress something that is “a disgrace for Israel,” why even *allude* to the disgrace (by a change in chronological order)?

The Explanation

The previous books of Shemos and Vayikra, which discuss the Jewish people after they assumed a national identity, both begin by stressing how G-d cherishes the Jewish people. At the opening of the book of Shemos, Rashi explains: “Although G-d counted them by their names in their lifetime, He counted them again after they died, to teach us how precious they were to Him.” Likewise, at the beginning of the book of Vayikra, Rashi writes that the Torah uses the term “*vayikra*” because it is “an expression of affection.” And the book of Bamidbar also begins with the same emphasis, as Rashi writes: “Because they are precious to Him, He counts them all the time.”

Our passage, about the Pesach offering in the desert, also brings to light the affectionate relationship between the Jewish people and G-d, for we read how “they made the Pesach offering... in accordance with everything that G-d had commanded Moshe. The children of Israel did so [precisely]” (v. 5). Then, in an unprecedented display of dedication to G-d’s commands, those that missed the opportunity to perform this mitzvah became upset, and complained, “Why should we be the losers?” (v. 7), upon which the mitzvah of the Second Pesach offering was given.

In fact, our passage appears to bring to light the affectionate relationship between the Jewish people and G-d in a *superior* manner to the passage at the opening of the book of Bamidbar, for here we see the utter dedication of the Jewish people to G-d’s commands beyond the requirements which G-d Himself set. Furthermore, in contrast to the book of Vayikra, which contains mainly commands *from G-d* to the Jewish people, the book of Bamidbar is predominantly a description of the Jewish people’s attempts *to serve G-d*. So our passage, which expresses the affection of the Jewish people in observing G-d’s mitzvos, would seem to be a more fitting start to the book.*

So Rashi is troubled: “Why did [the book of Bamidbar] not open with this [passage]?”

Rashi answers: “Because it is a disgrace to Israel that throughout the forty years that the children of Israel were in the desert, they only brought this one Pesach sacrifice.”

In other words, while it is true that this passage highlights how the Jewish people cherished G-d’s mitzvos, it *also* highlights a disgrace on their part. For if the complaint of just a handful of Jews, that they did not wish to “lose out” on performing G-d’s mitzvah due to a technicality (that they were ritually impure), prompted G-d to offer them another way of observing the mitzvah (the Second Pesach)—then all the more so could the *entire Jewish people* have successfully pleaded to G-d throughout the forty years in the desert that they wished to observe the mitzvah of offering the Pesach sacrifice, and they did not wish to “lose out” due to the “technicality” that they had not yet entered the Land of Israel. (For, after all, offering the Pesach sacrifice was not *physically* dependent on being in the Land, and this stipulation could have been waived by G-d, if the Jewish people would only have requested it.) Thus the impressive dedication to G-d exhibited in our passage *simultaneously* highlights the disgrace of the Jewish people in later years, when they did not show the same degree of commitment. Therefore, this was not chosen as the opening passage of the book of Bamidbar.

Where Was the Leadership?

Having clarified Rashi's intention here, we appear to be left with a further question: If it is indeed a disgrace to the Jewish people that they did not beg G-d to allow them to offer the Pesach sacrifice in the desert every year, why did Moshe not beseech G-d on their behalf?

The answer is that by remaining silent, Moshe felt he was minimizing the disgrace. For, in the final analysis, requesting the Second Pesach did not put the Jewish people in such a bad light for failing to ask for the Pesach sacrifice in subsequent years, because the two cases are not entirely comparable. With the Second Pesach, the Jewish people were not asking G-d for a mitzvah in which they had no obligation *at all*, like the Pesach offerings of future years. Rather, it was a lesser request of *compensating* for the missed opportunity to observe a mitzvah in which they *were* obligated.

On the other hand, if Moshe *had* requested G-d to give them the mitzvah in future years, then his efforts to minimize the disgrace to the Jewish people would have been counterproductive. For, by demonstrating that G-d would indeed have given the mitzvah if only He had been asked, Moshe would have highlighted the shortcoming of the Jewish people in failing to ask.

So, being that the disgrace for the Jewish people in not asking G-d to bring the Pesach offering was not so serious in the first place, Moshe chose to remain silent, since, under the circumstances, this protected the integrity of the Jewish people to the greatest extent.

(Based on Likutei Sichos vol. 23, p. 62ff)

An excerpt from the *Gutnick Chumash* published by *Kol Menachem*, New York.

The Chumash incorporates a flowing English translation of the Torah which is loyal to the commentary of Rashi and includes 'Classic questions' that are drawn from a range of commentators and are then ingeniously brought together by the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of righteous memory.

[Click here to purchase the Chumash.](#)

© Copyright, all rights reserved. If you enjoyed this article, we encourage you to distribute it further, provided that you comply with Chabad.org's copyright policy.