

SICHA SUMMARY

PROJECT LIKKUTEI SICHOS | 5783 - YEAR OF HAKHEL



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Nasso, Sicha 1

The Context:

Following the Mishkan's eight-day inauguration ceremony, each leader (Nasi) of the twelve tribes offered a sacrifice on a different day to dedicate the altar. On Shabbos, the seventh day, the leader of the tribe of Ephraim offered his sacrifice. (Bamidbar 7:48)

The Midrash records several teachings on the permissibility of bringing this sacrifice on Shabbos.

Towards the beginning of chapter 13 of Midrash Rabbah we find the following:

"In three places the leaders acted inappropriately, yet G-d accepted it... the sacrifice of an individual never displaces the Shabbos prohibition, yet here an individual sacrifice did displace Shabbos. This teaches us how precious the leaders' sacrifices were to G-d." (13:2)

In chapter 14 the Midrash writes: "Lest you think how could they desecrate the Shabbos by offering an individual sacrifice? G-d says... "I told Moshe [to allow Ephraim's leader to bring his sacrifice on Shabbos]."

And later in the chapter: "G-d said, "Yosef, because you kept the Shabbos before it was given, by your life, I will pay it forward to your grandchildren by allowing them to bring their sacrifice on Shabbos [the tribe of Ephraim are Yosef's descendents]."

There is a marked difference in tone between chapters 13 and 14 of the Midrash. The Midrash of ch. 13 calls the actions of Ephraim "inappropriate." It was only because G-d cherished the leaders' sacrifices that He "accepted" their sacrifice despite its being offered on Shabbos. The Midrash in ch. 14, however, quotes G-d Himself as commanding the offering of the sacrifice on Shabbos, "I told Moshe."

Thus, according to ch. 13, the sacrifice was allowed begrudgingly, but according to ch. 14, it was encouraged from the outset.

The Question:

What is the underlying disagreement between these two opinions?

Hypothesis:

We can offer two resolutions:

1. Communal sacrifices are permitted on Shabbos, while sacrifices belonging to an individual are not. There is a dispute if a tribe is considered a "community" or an "individual." Perhaps the Midrash in ch. 13 maintains that a tribe is an individual and therefore the tribe of Ephraim was not permitted to offer its sacrifice on Shabbos. It was only accepted after the fact. The Midrash in ch. 14 maintains that a tribe is considered a "community," and therefore there is no obstacle to Ephraim offering their sacrifice on Shabbos.
2. Perhaps both opinions maintain that a tribe is considered a community, but this sacrifice differs from a typical tribal offering because it was paid for fully by the leader. On the one hand, he is representing his tribe, on the other hand, the tribe did not partake in the purchase of the sacrifice. The first Midrash considers the sacrifice to belong to the individual leader, not the tribe (and therefore it cannot be offered on Shabbos without special dispensation), and the second Midrash considers the sacrifice to belong to the tribe as a whole (and can be offered on Shabbos without any objection).

Refutation:

The language of the Midrash in ch. 14, however, does not easily allow this interpretation. G-d explicitly saying "I told Moshe" to allow the sacrifice implies that this sacrifice required an extra-legal dispensation from G-d Himself to proceed. If this Midrash merely maintained that the sacrifice was considered communal and therefore can be offered on Shabbos, we would need this extraordinary declaration by G-d Himself!

The Explanation:

Therefore, it is more reasonable to say that both opinions in the Midrash agree that the sacrifice was considered an individual offering, and its being offered on Shabbos was a temporary dispensation.

The subject of the dispute is the nature of this dispensation. The first Midrash maintains that the Shabbos prohibition against individual sacrifices was merely "displaced" in the face of the leader's sacrifices, due to their preciousness in the eyes of G-d. Meaning, the prohibition remains in its place, it is just temporarily moved aside to make room for the leader's sacrifices.

The second Midrash maintains, however, that the prohibition never applied to the leader's sacrifices. It is as if when the prohibition against individual sacrifices was introduced, it included within it a permit for these sacrifices. Thus the first Midrash regards the sacrifices as essentially

“inappropriate” because they do clash with the prohibition. Yet the second Midrash is more positive, G-d Himself allows them, because the prohibition was never applied to these specific individual sacrifices.

Yet even in the positive view of the sacrifice’s legality there are two degrees. The first Midrash of ch. 14, where G-d explicitly allows the sacrifice, sees the sacrifice as being inherently permitted according to the laws of Shabbos, as we have seen.

But the second Midrash of the chapter goes further: “G-d said, “Yosef, because you kept the Shabbos before it was given, by your life, I will pay it forward to your grandchildren by allowing them to bring their sacrifice on Shabbos.” In this formulation, the offering of the sacrifice on Shabbos is more than just permitted, it is a positive affirmation of Shabbos itself. Just as Yosef observed Shabbos before it was

commanded, so, too, this sacrifice somehow is a higher form of Shabbos observance.

The Deeper Dimension:

This is thematically related to Yosef and Ephraim. They both represent the power to invite the “outside other” into an intimate relationship with G-d, and to transform pain into flourishing. Thus, Yosef was able to observe Shabbos before it was given, alluding to his ability to bring holiness into a place where, seemingly, it does not belong (“before it was commanded”). Therefore, his reward was his son’s tribe offering a sacrifice on Shabbos that didn’t belong there. By offering it with G-d’s encouragement, it becomes an even greater fulfillment of Shabbos, transforming the “forbidden” into an affirmation of the holiness of Shabbos itself.
