

# TORAH MIETZION

*New Readings in Tanach*

VAYIKRA

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# Parashat Vayikra

# *The Structure of the Book of Leviticus*

Rav Tamir Granot

## **I. A PROPOSED STRUCTURE**

Leviticus differs from the other books in the Torah in that it contains little narrative or moral exhortation, but rather pure halakha. Only twice do narratives appear, breaking the continuity of the laws. The multiplicity of details sometimes leads us to a feeling of not being able to see the wood for the trees, and it is therefore instructive to pause for an overview of the book, divided into clearly defined units, so as to reveal its structure and division, and thereby its substance and purpose as well.

How are we to go about dividing up the book and determining its structure? We may divide it by subject – for example: sacrifices, inauguration, the eighth day, etc. This option, however, is inherently subjective, since each reader may offer his own definition of subject. Hence, I shall attempt here to propose a division and structure based on purely internal factors.

I propose that, in defining the structure and parts of the book, we take into consideration the following criteria:

1. Every introductory reference to the speech of God, i.e., “God spoke to Moses saying,” shall be regarded as marking an independent unit or item. Altogether there are thirty-seven such



utterances in Leviticus; hence, we start with thirty-seven units (to which we must add the narratives, which do not begin with this opening formula). The assumption is that when God speaks to Moses or Aaron, His speech is not interrupted. Two separate subjects will be treated in two separate utterances. Note that some of the utterances are very long, while others are very short; hence, it is not the length of the speech that matters, but rather the content.

2. General introductions or general conclusions will define larger units.
3. A transition from one genre to another will indicate the end or beginning of a large unit. Therefore, when a story ends, it must be assumed that a subject is now closed. The reason for this criterion is that God's utterances in Leviticus are not presented in any chronological framework (there are no dates provided); hence, there is no reason to assume that the narrative appears in its chronological place, merely on the basis of the fact that it appears after the preceding command. It is more sensible to adopt the literary assumption that the narratives are ordered based on structural considerations.
4. Units within the book which are not part of the continuum of commands (i.e., a divine utterance which is not a natural continuation of the one that preceded it, but which seems to better fit elsewhere) will also represent a criterion for defining the larger units in the book. Thus, we shall distinguish chapters which, we are told, were commanded to Moses at Mount Sinai, rather than in the Tent of Meeting.
5. We shall take note of the recipient or object of each command, distinguishing between the predominant commands, those given to Moses alone, and the less frequent ones, namely those given to Moses and Aaron, or to Aaron alone. Sometimes there is an "utterance" (*vayomer*) instead of a "speech" (*vayedabber*), and we shall address this distinction as well. While awareness of the objects of the speech is not significant for dividing every book, it is generally helpful to frame the discussion with an awareness of to whom it is addressed.

## II. DIVIDING THE BOOK

Let us now list the utterances that introduce subject units in the book and their contents, and define larger units on the basis of their beginnings and endings.

1. Leviticus chapters 1–3 – Opening speech from the Tent of Meeting: burnt offering, meal offering, peace offering;
2. 4:1–5:13 – List of sin offerings, including (in chapter 5) an *oleh veyored* offering;
3. 5:14–5:19 – Guilt offering for sin involving holy things (*me'ila*), and a guilt offering in the case of doubt;
4. 5:20–5:26 – Guilt offering for something stolen;
5. 6:1–6:11 – New introduction, “Command Aaron”; subject of first unit: the ashes and the fire, laws of meal offering, pertaining to the *kohanim*;
6. 6:12–6:16 – Meal offering of the *kohanim*;
7. 6:17–7:21 – Laws of the sin offering, guilt offering, peace offering, and thanksgiving offering, as pertaining to the *kohanim*;
8. 7:22–7:27 – Prohibition of fats and blood;
9. 7:28–7:38 – Gifts to the *kohanim* from the sacrifices, conclusion of chapters 6–7 “which God commanded Moses at Mount Sinai”;
10. 8:1–10:7 – Command concerning the days of consecration, and narrative concerning the days of consecration and the eighth day, with the death of Nadav and Avihu;
11. 10:8–10:11 – Utterance to Aaron: warning concerning drinking wine, defining the role of the *kohanim*;
12. 10:12–10:19 (no utterance) – Completion of the ritual of the eighth day following the death of Nadav and Avihu;
13. Chapter 11 – Utterance to Moses and Aaron: laws of unclean animals and the prohibition against eating them, followed by a general summary dealing with ritual impurity, obligation of sanctity, and separation of Israel from the nations;
14. Chapter 12 – Ritual impurity of the birthing mother and the accompanying laws;
15. Chapter 13 – Utterance to Moses and Aaron: details of the laws of leprosy manifest on a person and on a garment;
16. 14:1–14:32 – Laws of purification of the leper after he is healed;

17. 14:32–14:57 – Utterance to Moses and Aaron: laws of leprosy manifest on a house and the order of its purification, followed by a general summary of the laws of leprosy;
18. Chapter 15 – Utterance to Moses and Aaron: impurity of the body, followed by a general summary concerning impurity of the body;
19. Chapter 16 – Ritual of the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) entering the Holy of Holies, following the death of Aaron’s sons, on Yom Kippur;
20. Chapter 17 – Laws of blood, including warning concerning animals slaughtered outside of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle);
21. Chapter 18 – List of forbidden sexual relations;
22. Chapter 19 – *Parashat Kedoshim*, centered around laws between man and his fellow man;
23. Chapter 20 – Punishment for forbidden sexual relations;
24. 21:1–21:16 – “God said to Moses”: impurity of *kohanim*;
25. 21:16–21:23 – Blemishes among *kohanim*; conclusion: Moses conveys it all to the *kohanim* and to the Children of Israel;
26. 22:1–22:16 – Laws of eating sacrificial meat, and gifts (*teruma*) to the *kohanim*;
27. 22:17–22:25 – Laws of blemishes in sacrifices;
28. 22:26–22:33 – Limitations on animal sacrifices: first eight days of life, slaughtering mother animal and its young, requirement that sacrifice be offered willingly; general conclusion regarding mitzva observance and preventing desecration of God’s name;
29. 23:1–23:8 – Shabbat and Pesah;
30. 23:9–23:22 – “When you come to the land”: *omer* and offering of the first fruits, Shavuot; appendix: gifts of the field to the poor;
31. 23:23–23:25 – Day of remembrance of sounding the shofar (Rosh HaShana);
32. 23:26–23:32 – Yom Kippur;
33. 23:33–23:44 – Sukkot and general conclusion concerning the festivals;
34. 24:1–24:12 – Menora and showbread;
35. 24:13–24:23 – Episode of the blasphemer; following this, utterance and command concerning damages to man and animals, and punishment carried out for blasphemer;

36. Chapters 25–26 – God commands Moses at Mount Sinai: *Shemitta*, Jubilee, and their accompanying laws; the covenant with its blessings and curses; general conclusion: “This is what God commanded at Mount Sinai, through Moses”;
37. Chapter 27 – Estimated values and dedications; general conclusion: “These are the laws from Mount Sinai.”

### III. THE MEANINGS OF THE DIVISIONS

It is easy to see that this division is preferable to both the traditional division into *parashot* or into chapters, since it gives no weight to the length of the unit, focusing instead only on content. In some cases there are large units which, in the traditional division, are divided into several *parashot* or chapters. Now, when they are treated as a single unit, it is easy to perceive their integrity of subject. Conversely, the section on the festivals is divided here into several units, so as to highlight the differences between the festivals when they are not treated as a single unit.

If we focus on the break in the continuity of halakhic commands given to Moses from the Tent of Meeting, and ignore for the moment the chapters of laws whose source is Sinai and which for some reason were inserted into Leviticus, we end up with a simple scheme of the structure of Leviticus:

Section 1 – laws of sacrifices (1–5)

Section 2 – days of inauguration, and the eighth day (8–10)

Section 3 – chapters of laws, statutes, and judgments (11–24)

Appendix – the blasphemer and the laws applicable to him (end of 24).

Perhaps section 3 should be divided into two subsections, based on the same principle, since chapter 16 explicitly relates itself to the death of Aaron’s sons – “After the death of the two sons of Aaron.” This is true both in terms of content (“that he die not”) and in terms of the laws (i.e., the similarity between the ritual of the eighth day and Yom Kippur). We may assert that all of the chapters from 11 to 16 belong to one closed unit. These chapters deal with the details of the laws of the various types of impurity, and the connection between them is clear.

Furthermore, a closer look at these chapters points to their uniqueness and unity, as only in these chapters – and in all of them – does Aaron receive a command together with Moses. This fact alone is enough to provide a common denominator for these chapters. Thus, we may amend our division as follows:

Unit 1 – Laws of sacrifices (1–5);

Unit 2 – Days of inauguration and the eighth day (8–10);

Unit 3 – Chapters addressing the types of impurity and chapters addressing the purification from these forms of impurity: “And atone for the holy place because of the impurity of the Children of Israel” (11–16);

Unit 4 – Laws, statutes, and judgments (18–24).

In rabbinic literature, Leviticus is also known as “*Torat Kohanim*” – the laws of the *kohanim*. The laws of the sacrifices at the beginning, the laws discussing the various types of impurity, the sacrificial meat and possible blemishes in chapters 21–22, all fit this description. Why then is Moses alone commanded concerning the first set of laws of sacrifices and the last set of laws pertaining to *kohanim*, while the laws of impurity and purification (chapters 11–15) are conveyed to Moses and Aaron together?

The answer is quite simple. When it comes to the sacrifices and the laws pertaining to the *kohanim* themselves, Aaron and the other *kohanim* are nothing but servants; they are the workers in the *Mishkan*, and they must carry out everything that they are commanded to do. From this perspective, there is no real difference between that which is incumbent upon them and that which is incumbent on any other Israelite, qua servant of God, and therefore it is Moses who commands them. When it comes to the laws of impurity, however, their status is different. Here, the *kohanim* are not merely “clerks” or servants. They are entrusted with determining the status of the impurity and giving instructions with regard to it. Here, Aaron and his sons are not there merely to carry out their tasks, but – like Moses – play a role in the molding and application of the actual laws. Since their role here is to be teachers and instructors, God commands Aaron directly.

It is for the same reason that two *parashot* within the laws of impurity are conveyed to Moses alone: the laws of the birthing woman, and the ritual of purification for the leper. The impurity of a birthing woman is a simple determination, with no doubt involved; therefore, there is no need for a *kohen* to issue a special ruling regarding her status. In the purification of the leper, the *kohanim* once again become servants who must perform a certain job – they must offer up the sacrifice, sprinkle, etc. Once again they are not partners in the command, but rather subjects, and so Moses conveys this to them, like the rest of the Torah.

It seems, then, that the section comprising the laws of impurities is placed where it is, not because of the story of Nadav and Avihu which precedes it (as many commentators maintain), but rather as a direct continuation of the chapters describing the seven days of consecration, during which time the *kohanim* were trained and prepared for their service. This training involved practice in offering sacrifices – i.e., the *kohanim* were trained as servants or workers. After the inauguration of the *Mishkan*, the *kohanim* were also commanded to be teachers and instructors, responsible for the impurities of the Children of Israel and guarding the *Mishkan* from such impurities: “To teach when it is impure and when it is pure” (14:57); “And you shall separate the Children of Israel from their impurity” (15:31).

Seemingly, the prohibition against inebriation, commanded to Aaron, likewise arises not from the death of Nadav and Avihu, but rather from the obligation of the *kohanim* to instruct, such that they cannot be drunk: “And to distinguish between the holy and the profane, and between the impure and the pure” (10:10).

The above analysis also leads to the conclusion that the unit discussing forbidden foods is, first and foremost, a unit describing the impurity of those who eat these things; the specifications of the forbidden foods themselves are only a secondary matter here, since the unit belongs to the section addressing the different forms of impurity. At this point there is a clear difference between the chapters of forbidden foods in Leviticus, and their parallels in Deuteronomy (a full treatment of this point is beyond the scope of this essay).

Chapter 16, dealing with the entry of the *Kohen Gadol* into the Holy of Holies, serves two functions. On the one hand, it concludes

the episode of the death of Nadav and Avihu and the fears which that event aroused. On the other hand, it concludes the laws of impurities, by means of the general act of atonement for them that is connected to the *Kohen Gadol's* entry: "And he shall atone for the holy place because of the impurities of the Children of Israel, and because of their transgressions in all of their sins." The essence of chapter 16 is not the details of Yom Kippur, but the atonement for impurities. The command concerning Yom Kippur appears only at the section's end, while the general atonement for sins is almost a fringe benefit, associated with the original context of Aaron's entry into the Holy of Holies, namely, atonement for impurities.

We can now comment on the units that we have skipped, which appear to have been dislodged from their proper place (item numbers refer to the numbering in the scheme above).

Items 5–9 (chapters 6–7): This section contains the laws of the sacrifices, from the point of view of the *kohen's* role. This section originated at Mount Sinai, and was conveyed – as testified at the end of the section – together with the command concerning the days of consecration. The reason for this is clear – the purpose of the days of consecration is to prepare the *kohanim*, through training and practice, to perform the sacrificial service; therefore, they need to be commanded in advance concerning the details of their service. From this perspective, the command precedes the building of the *Mishkan*, like all the commands that anticipate the *Mishkan* and its service, which belong in Exodus. These chapters are inserted here because Exodus does not deal with the offering of sacrifices at all. The Torah chooses to forego their proper chronological place, preferring to include this list of laws of sacrifices, meant for the *kohanim*, along with a parallel list that discusses the same sacrifices from the perspective of the Israelite who offers them (chapters 1–5), so as to treat all the laws of sacrifices together.

In item 11 (chapter 10), Aaron is commanded concerning the prohibition of wine. This command is inserted in the middle of the narrative about the eighth day, since it is followed – in item 12 – by certain elements that complete the eighth day. Why does the Torah not first finish the narrative, and only then present the prohibition against wine for the *kohanim*? We have already noted that the wine prohibition serves as a

sort of introduction to all the chapters addressing the special role of the *kohanim* in the sphere of ritual impurity. If the Torah chooses to place this command to Aaron in the middle of the eighth day, apparently it seeks to relate the prohibition to the event that takes place on that day and to the suspicion that entering the holy place while drunk brings death. It is this juxtaposition that leads *Hazal* to conclude that Nadav and Avihu were punished for entering the *Mishkan* while drunk, since otherwise there would be no need for the Torah to create this break in the middle of the narrative.

Item 20 (chapter 17), dealing with the prohibition against blood, is not part of the preceding units, nor is it part of those that follow. It addresses prohibitions and obligations related to sacrifices and the Tent of Meeting, but also other obligations – such as covering the blood and the prohibition against eating blood – which apply outside of the *Mishkan* too. From the introduction at the beginning of chapter 18, it would appear that the main body of laws begins only after this unit. What, then, is the role of this unit here? It would appear to serve as a sort of bridge between the first three sections of the book, all of which involve – in some sense or other – the *Mishkan* (sacrifices, the days of consecration, impurities) and the rest of the book, which covers statutes and laws that apply throughout the land. The prohibition against sacrificing meat slaughtered outside of the *Mishkan* defines the obligation of serving God through sacrifice only within the *Mishkan*. However, it also connects to more general prohibitions that are not related to the *Mishkan*, but rather to other values – “For the blood is the soul.” Since these prohibitions straddle the *Mishkan* precincts and what lies outside of it, the Torah places them in between the first part of the book (the first three sections), dealing with the *Mishkan*, and the second part, dealing with the rest of the territory of Israel.

What is item 36 (chapters 25–26, the section on the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, and the covenant) doing here? The Torah wants the covenant with the blessings and curses, forged at Mount Sinai, to be included along with the lists of laws in Leviticus, even though chronologically those laws were conveyed later on. Therefore, the conclusion of the covenant appears at the end of Leviticus, rather than in Exodus.

Finally, unit 37 (chapter 27), which deals with items dedicated to the *Mishkan*, was also commanded at Mount Sinai. Why is it located



here? It would seem that since the subject of this unit is gifts given voluntarily, it is not part of the covenant, all of which is obligatory. Its connection with the subject of *Shemitta* arises from internal halakhic reasons. The calculation of the value of a field that is to be dedicated is dependent on the time remaining until the Jubilee year. Hence, this unit in fact belongs to the laws of Jubilee, which were listed in the preceding unit (chapter 25). However, as mentioned, since the issue here is not an obligation, these laws are separated from the other laws of the Jubilee year (which are included within the covenant), and are appended afterwards.