

D'var Torah for Parshat Emor

By Rabbi Gewirtz

“Location, location, location!” Just as location matters with real estate, context is important in the Torah. A Midrash, quoted by Rashi, offers a powerful but puzzling comment based on context. This week’s parsha, Emor, contains an entire verse that is merely a repetition of a verse in last week’s parsha, Kedoshim. The topic is the agricultural gifts to the poor. The Midrash comments both on the repetition and on the context of that repetition, “smack” in the middle of the laws of the holidays and their sacrificial offerings. Here is the part of the Midrash that discusses the context of the repetition.

אמר רבי אבדימס ברבי יוסף מה ראה הכתוב ליתנה באמצע הרגלים, פסח ועצרת מכאן וראש השנה ויום הכפורים והחג מכאן, ללמדך שכל הנותן לקט שכחה ופאה לעני כראוי, מעלין עליו כאילו בנה בית המקדש והקריב קרבנותיו בתוכו:

*Rabbi Avdimi the son of Rabbi Joseph says: Why does Scripture place this [passage] in the very middle of [the laws regarding] the Festivals-with Passover and Atzereth (Shavuoth) on one side and Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the Festival [of Succoth] on the other? To teach you that whoever gives לקט, gleanings, שְׂכָחָה, forgotten sheaves, and פְּאֵה, the corners, to the poor **in the appropriate manner**, is deemed as if he had built the Holy Temple and offered up his sacrifices within it. — [Torath Kohanim 23:175]*

WOW! The Talmudic sages often use hyperbole to emphasize a point. But what connection do they see between the agricultural gifts and offering sacrifices in the Temple? And why add that it’s like “building the Holy Temple”? Also, why do they add “in the appropriate manner”? What does that refer to?

A clue to a solution to the last problem is a comment that Rashi makes here in Emor, which he could have made in last week’s parsha, Kedoshim, but didn’t. The Torah says in both places the phrase

“לְעֵנִי וְלְגֵר תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָם”

“you shall leave these for the poor person and for the stranger”

Rashi delays his quote of the Midrash for the 2nd time it appears, in this week’s parsha, Emor:

"הנח לפניהם והם ילקטו, ואין לך לסייע לאחד מהם"

“Leave it before them and let them gather it up. And you shall not help one of them.” — [Torath Kohanim 19:22]

Would it not be preferable to give the allotment to the poor and save them the trip to the field? Why does the Torah insist that the produce be left in the field for the poor? Perhaps the work that the poor do to harvest the crop left for them is what makes this type of tzedaka so special. They do not receive a handout. They work as hard as the field’s owner does. The poor retain dignity and self respect when the produce is left in the field and the mitzva is done **in the appropriate manner**. Rashi saves his comment for the second verse because that is where the repetition of the agricultural tzedakah among the holiday laws and offerings carries the message of its uniqueness. But one question remains. How can the field owner’s leaving the produce in the field be compared to “building” the Holy Temple and “offering” up his sacrifices within it.

Here is a possible answer. If a regular Jew, a non-Kohen, participates in building the Temple, it is probably difficult for him when he completes his task. After all his effort and emotional investment he is not qualified to do the service and must “hand things over” to the Kohanim. The Torah gives great credit to Moshe for directing the Tabernacle’s construction and then accepting that he could not bring the offerings.

Perhaps the owner of the field is called upon to make a similar sacrifice. After all the toil, and a successful crop, the field owner looks forward to the food and to the income it will provide. But, he also looks forward to sharing his bounty with the less fortunate and would love to see the joy on the face of his chosen beneficiary. It would be so enjoyable to actually participate in the culmination of his philanthropic act. However, the Torah says, “No! It’s time to ‘sit on the sideline’. Leave your gift in the field so that the recipient can work for his income and self-respect.

This approach to understanding a “challenging” Midrash yields the notion that although Mitzvot should be joyful experiences, they will be performed most successfully by focusing on their purpose rather than on their enjoyment.