



Parashat Vayikra

In Parashat Vayikra we come upon the prohibition against offering any leavened goods or honey upon the altar: "Any meal offering that you offer to the Lord shall not be baked as leaven, for all leaven and honey – you shall not offer from it on the fire to the Lord" (Vayikra 2:11). Although the Torah allows the option of bringing a flour-offering to God in the Temple, this offering must be prepared without yeast.

Maimonides explains this law as follows: "The idolaters did not offer any other bread but leavened, and chose sweet things for their sacrifices, which they seasoned with honey, as is fully described in the books which I named before... Our Law therefore forbade us to offer leaven or honey..." (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:46). Like many of the Torah's laws concerning sacrifices, which Maimonides understands as intended to lead *Benei Yisrael* away from the prevalent pagan practices, this prohibition serves as a direct contrast to the mores of idolatrous worship. Since the pagans would make a point of offering only leavened and sweetened goods to their gods, the Torah enjoined *Benei Yisrael* to keep leaven and honey away from the altar in the Temple.

Support for Maimonides' theory may be drawn from the Talmud Yerushalmi (Avoda Zara 1:1), which tells about the efforts of Yerovam, founding king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, to lure his subjects into idol worship. The Yerushalmi makes this comment in the context of a verse from the Book of Amos, where the prophet denounces the people's affinity for paganism: "And offer thanksgiving offerings from leaven...for this is what you have loved, O Children of Israel!" (Amos 4:5). According to the Yerushalmi, the prophet here refers to Yerovam's call to the people to embrace idolatry because it, unlike the Torah, mandates leaven offerings: "Let us worship idolatry; idolatry is more permissive... The Torah said, 'Do not offer the blood of My sacrifice with leaven' (Shemot 23:18), and idolatry says, 'Offer thanksgiving offerings from leaven!'" Yerovam's call to the people appears to indicate that in idolatrous circles, the practice was to specifically offer leavened bread items, as opposed to the "bland" and "austere" codes of Torah law, which demanded specifically unleavened and unsweetened offerings.

Rabbi Menachem Kasher, in his *Torah Sheleima* (vol. 19, addendum 20), suggests that Maimonides' theory can perhaps resolve a question that troubled several Medieval writers concerning the prohibition of *chametz* (leaven) on Pesach. In the Pesach *Haggadah* we declare that we eat specifically *matza*, unleavened bread, on this festival to commemorate the haste with which our ancestors fled from Egypt, which did not allow time for their dough to ferment. While this *mitzva* is readily understandable, it does not explain why the Torah so strictly forbade the consumption – and even the possession of – *chametz*. It is one thing to partake of the bread eaten by our ancestors upon their realization of freedom to commemorate this miraculous event. But why would this also require that we eradicate all traces of leaven from our homes during this festival?

According to Maimonides' theory, the answer becomes clear. In that same chapter in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides explains – as do many others – the reason behind the paschal offering on the basis of *Benei Yisrael's* exposure to Egyptian idolatry. The Egyptians worshipped sheep, and so *Benei Yisrael* were enjoined to publicly and demonstratively renounce their allegiance to this belief system by sacrificing the Egyptian deity. The Exodus marked not only the nation's attainment of freedom, but also their spiritual extrication from the pagan culture in which they had been submerged for so long. The Torah therefore had them – and us, their descendants – reaffirm our outright rejection of foreign beliefs by bringing the paschal offering and ridding our homes of *chametz*, the primary article of pagan worship.

The prohibition of *chametz*, then, represents one of the central themes of the festival of Pesach: our nation's renunciation of any foreign allegiances, and unconditional and exclusive acceptance of the yoke of Heaven.