

Speakers of Yiddish know the phrase, “*ist shver zu zein a Yid*” – it’s hard to be a Jew. This phrase is commonly associated with the difficulties of Jewish life in historic periods filled with poverty and anti-Semitism. There are some who have used this expression to kvetch about the laws and practices of Jewish tradition. The Torah cautions us against this:

Surely this Instruction that I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor beyond your reach. It is not in the heavens.... It is not beyond the sea.... It is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.<sup>1</sup>

The rabbis of the Midrash, for this week’s parashat *Emor*, tease out sources of encouragement in opposition to the notion that “*ist shver zu zein a Yid*” with respect to Jewish practice. I’ll focus on just two verses.

Consider Leviticus 22:27<sup>2</sup>: “When an ox/bullock or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall stay seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as a gift to the Lord.” In *Midrash Rabbah*, Rabbi Judah the son of Rabbi Simon cites Deuteronomy 14:4-5<sup>3</sup>, in which ten kosher animals are listed; the first three, as in *Emor*, are the ox, sheep, and goat – all domesticated animals; the last seven are wild beasts. Few, if any, of us raise livestock, so try to imagine yourself as doing so. Rabbi Judah imagines God saying:

... I did not bid you weary yourselves among the mountains in order to bring a sacrifice to me from those not in your domain, but I asked only from those that are in your domain, from that which was reared upon your own crib.<sup>4</sup>

Another Midrashic interpretation of Leviticus 22:27 is that the animals mentioned as eligible for sacrifice remind God of the merits of our patriarchs.

- The bullock alludes to Gen. 18:7: “Abraham ran to the herd”<sup>5</sup> for a calf to slaughter and feed to his guests.
- The sheep alludes to the merit of Isaac at the *Akeydah*, when a ram<sup>6</sup> was substituted for Isaac as the object of slaughter.
- The goat alludes to the merit of Jacob, whose mother, Rebekah, in order to deceive Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing intended for Esau, bid Jacob to bring her “two **good** kids”<sup>7</sup>. Rabbi Berekiah in the name of Rabbi Helbo explained “**good**” as:

They are good for you because through them you will receive various blessings, and they are good for your children because through them atonement will be granted to them on the Day of Atonement [a reference to the scapegoat of the ancient Yom Kippur ritual].<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 30:11-14; *Etz Hayim*, pp. 1170 - 1171

<sup>2</sup> *Etz Hayim*, p. 723

<sup>3</sup> *Etz Hayim*, p. 1072 - 1073

<sup>4</sup> *Midrash Vayikra* 27:6

<sup>5</sup> *Etz Hayim*, p. 100

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 22:13 - *Etz Hayim*, p. 120

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 27:9 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 155

<sup>8</sup> *Midrash Vayikra* 27:9

Chapter 23 of our parashah instructs us concerning our major holidays. At verse 24, pp. 727 - 728 of the *Etz Hayim*, we read: "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts." The Midrash imagines that on Rosh Hashanah, God created Adam. The Midrash gives an hourly sequence, which reads in part:

... in the eighth [hour] He brought him into the Garden of Eden, in the ninth he was commanded against eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, in the tenth he transgressed, in the eleventh he was judged, in the twelfth he was pardoned. "This," said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Adam, "will be a sign to your children. As you stood in judgment before Me this day and came out with a free pardon, so will your children in the future stand before Me on this day and will come out from My presence with a free pardon."<sup>9</sup>

At the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, our *machzor* quotes the following verse (Psalm 139:16): "Happy is the people that know the sound of the blast; they walk, oh Lord, in the light of your presence."<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Josiah teaches:

But do not the nations of the world know how to sound the blast? ... Yet you say, 'Happy is the people that know the sound of the blast'! It can only mean that they know how to win over their Creator with the blast, so that He rises from the Throne of Judgment and goes to the Throne of Mercy. He is filled with compassion towards them and changes for them the Attribute of Justice to the Attribute of Mercy. When? [As our verse says] In the seventh month.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Midrash Vayikra* 29:1

<sup>10</sup> *Machzor Lev Shalem*, p. 120

<sup>11</sup> *Midrash Vayikra* 29:4