

Giving One's Seed to Molekh

Introduction

Undefined Prohibition

Molekh makes its first appearance in Vayikra 18:

(כא) ומזרעך לא תתן להעביר למלך ולא תחלל את שם אלהיך אני יי'.

(21) And from your offspring do not give for bringing across to the Molekh, and do not profane the name of your God, I am Hashem.

Vayikra 20 then follows up with the punishment meted out to those who engage in such conduct:

(ב) ואל בני ישראל תאמר איש איש מבני ישראל ומן הגר הגר בישׂראל אשר יתן מזרעו למלך מות יומת עם הארץ ורגמהו באבן. (ג) ואני אתן את פני באיש ההוא והכרתי אתו מקרב עמו כי מזרעו נתן למלך למען טמא את מקדשי ולחלל את שם קדשי.

(2) And to the Children of Israel you are to say: Any man, any man of the Children of Israel and of the sojourners that reside in Israel that gives of his offspring to the Molekh shall be put to death; the people of the land shall pelt him with stones. (3) And I will direct my face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he gave from his offspring to the Molekh to defile My sanctuary and profane My holy name.

But what does it mean to give one's seed to the Molekh, and how is this performed? Is it merely a single action, as per the single verb of "יתן" in Vayikra 20, or is it a multi-step process, as might be indicated by the longer "תתן להעביר" formulation of Vayikra 18? And why is specifically this act associated with the defiling of Hashem's sanctuary and desecration of His name?

Molekh and Passing Through Fire

Molekh appears in three other verses in Tanakh, and the context of all of these is some form of idolatry.¹ One of these, Melakhim II 23:10 reads:

וטמא את התפת אשר בגי [בן] (בני) הנם לבלתי להעביר איש את בנו ואת בתו באש למלך.

And he defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech.

The verse connects Molekh worship with passing children through fire, but does not elaborate further, leaving the exact nature of the rite ambiguous. Does it refer to child immolation or some other act involving fire? While other verses in Tanakh also attest to such a cult of child sacrifice,² they do not mention the Molekh.³ For example, Devarim 12:29-31 states:

(כט) כִּי יִכְרִית יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אֶתָּה בָּא שְׂמָה לְרִשְׁתָּ אוֹתָם מִפְּנֵיךָ וַיִּרְשָׁתָּ אֹתָם וַיִּשְׁבְּתָּ בְּאַרְצָם. (ל) הַשְּׂמֶר לְךָ פֶּן תִּנְקֹשׁ אַחֲרֵיהֶם אַחֲרֵי הַשְּׂמֶדֶם מִפְּנֵיךָ וּפֶן תִּדְרֹשׁ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר אֵיכָה יַעֲבֹדוּ הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה אֶת אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה כֵּן גַּם אֲנִי. (לא) לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כֵּן לַיְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָּל תּוֹעֵבֹת יְיָ אֲשֶׁר שָׁנֵא עָשׂוּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם כִּי גַם אֶת בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת בָּנֹתֵיהֶם יִשְׂרְפוּ בְּאֵשׁ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם.

(29) When Hashem your God shall cut off the nations from before you, where you go in to dispossess them, and you dispossess them, and dwell in their land; (30) take heed to yourself that you not be ensnared to follow them, after that they are destroyed from before you; and that you not inquire after their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? I will do likewise." (31) You shall not do so to Hashem your God: for every abomination to Hashem, which he hates, have they done to their gods; for even their sons and their daughters do they burn in the fire to their gods.

This verse uses the term "ישָׂרְפוּ", clarifying that the children were actually burned. The root "שרף", though, is absent from Vayikra 18 and 20 and the other verses which mention the Molekh. In these, only the verbs "לְהַעֲבִיר" and "נָתַן" appear. Are the verses in Vayikra speaking of the same cultic practice as Devarim and Melakhim II or a different one?

Context of Forbidden Relations

The twin prohibitions of Molekh in Vayikra 18 and 20 are framed by similar contexts. Vayikra 18 contains a list of the forbidden abominations of the Egyptians and Canaanites which is made up exclusively (except for, perhaps, the prohibition of Molekh) of offenses of a sexual nature. Similarly, the prohibition in Vayikra 20 immediately precedes the list of punishments for these offenses. However, in Vayikra 20, there is an additional sin placed between Molekh and the list of sexual offenses: the prohibition of turning to necromancers ("וְהִנָּפֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר תִּפְנֶה אֶל הָאֲבֹת וְאֶל הַיִּדְעֹנִים"). Interestingly, in Devarim 18:10-11 as well, the prohibition of passing one's children through fire is immediately followed by the prohibition on practitioners of black magic, including the same "אוֹב וַיִּדְעֹנִי". These parallels raise the following questions:

- Is there a connection between Molekh and sexual crimes, and in particular, the neighboring laws of adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality?
- Does Molekh relate to necromancy?

¹ Melakhim I 11:7 identifies Molekh as the God of Ammon, while Melakhim II 23:10 and Yirmeyahu 32:35 speak of the "passing of children" to the Molekh in the context of idolatrous worship.

² See also Melakhim II 17:31 which points to immolation as the way that the Sefarvim would worship their gods Adrammelekh and Anammelekh and Yirmeyahu 7:30-32 which attests to the practice in Israel itself.

³ The close relationships and parallels between some of these verses, though, makes a compelling case for assuming that Molekh worship involved actual sacrifice of children. See the sets of parallel verses in Yirmeyahu 7:31, Yirmeyahu 19:5, and Yirmeyahu 32:35.

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Exegetical Approaches

This topic is currently in progress

Idolatry

The Molekh prohibition involves idolatry. This position subdivides regarding whether the injunction bans the specific act of child sacrifice or the more general consecration of children to the service of foreign gods.

Sacrifice

The verse forbids immolating one's children, and this was how Molekh was worshiped.

SOURCES: Targum Yerushalmi (Neofiti), Mishna Sanhedrin, Sifra, 1st opinion in Sifre Devarim, Rabbis in Midrash Tannaim, Yerushalmi Sanhedrin, R. Saadia Gaon, Ibn Ezra, 2nd opinion in Ramban

"וּמִזְרֵקָה" – This opinion understands that "וּמִזְרֵקָה" refers to one's children.

"לְהַעֲבִיר"

- **To pass through** – According to most of these commentators, "לְהַעֲבִיר" means "to pass through (fire)". As evidence of such a custom of child immolation, Ramban points to the verses of Devarim 12:31, Melakhim II 17:31, Melakhim II 23:10,¹ Yirmeyahu 7:31, and Yirmeyahu 19:5.
- **To sacrifice** – R. Saadia suggests that "לְהַעֲבִיר" is simply synonymous with "to sacrifice".
- **To burn** – Alternatively, "לְהַעֲבִיר" may be a metathesis of the word "לְהַבְעִיר" (to burn).²

Doubling in "לֹא תִתֵּן לְהַעֲבִיר" – The Mishna, Sifra, and Yerushalmi suggest that each verb denotes a distinct action, and only one who does both is culpable. One must both give the child to the Molekh priest and have him burned.

"מִלֶּקֶח" – According to most of these commentators, "מִלֶּקֶח" is the name of a specific idol. Ibn Ezra identifies him with the god of Ammon who is so named in Melakhim I 11:7³ However, Targum Yerushalmi (Neofiti) translates "מִלֶּקֶח" as a name for idolatry in general.⁴

Context – Though most of Vayikra 18 deals with sexual offenses, it is prefaced by a general injunction against adopting the practices of the Egyptians and Canaanites.⁵ Thus, the unique prohibition against the Molekh is included as yet another example of the immoral actions of these nations.⁶ Nonetheless, its placement is still somewhat awkward, as one would have expected it to either precede or follow the sexual prohibitions rather than interrupt them in the middle. As such, one might suggest that the connection is the wasted seed;⁷ sacrificing a child is a loss of one's seed like the sexual prohibitions which follow.

Parallel Verses – According to this approach, Vayikra 18:21 is dealing with the same prohibition as Devarim 12:31 and 18:10.⁸ This is supported by Melakhim II 23:10, "לְהַעֲבִיר אִישׁ אֶת בְּנוֹ וְאֶת בִּתּוֹ בְּאֵשׁ לְמִלֶּקֶח", which combined the passing through fire and Molekh in the same action.⁹

Desecration of God's name – The desecration emanates from the rejection of God in favor of idolatrous practices.



Consecration

The verse forbids consecrating one's children to the service of Molekh.

SOURCES: Septuagint, R. Yehuda in Sifre Devarim and Midrash Tannaim, Samaritan Pentateuch, Vulgate, Rashi,¹⁰ 1st opinion in Ramban, others in Ibn Ezra

"**וּמִזְרָקָךְ**" – The word refers to one's children.

"**לֹא תִתֵּן**" – This approach would understand the term to refer to giving over one's children to the practice of another religion.

"**לְהַעֲבִיר**"

- **Serve** – The Septuagint and Samaritan Pentateuch read "להעביד", meaning "to serve", instead of "להעביר".
- **Transfer** – The opinion cited by Ibn Ezra asserts that since the verse does not mention fire, the verb has nothing to do with burning. Rather, it simply means to "transfer" (to switch one's child from Judaism to the Molekh religion). According to this read, the verbs "תִּתֵּן" and "לְהַעֲבִיר" would be synonymous.
- **Pass through** – The other commentators understand the word to mean to pass through and suggest that, as part of the consecration, the child is passed between two fires¹¹ (but not burned by them). R. Yehuda asserts that such an action symbolizes the making of a covenant (in this case with idolatry) and compares it to Yirmeyahu 34:18. According to this reading, the term "תִּתֵּן" refers to the general prohibition of consecrating one's child to idolatry while "לְהַעֲבִיר" explains the process through which one would do that.

"**מֶלֶךְ**" – Rashi and Ramban maintain that this is the name of a specific foreign god.¹² However, the Septuagint seems to understand this to be a generic name for any divine "ruler".

Context – As above, this position might assert that the prohibition is included here both as an example of the Egyptian and Canaanite abominations that needs to be avoided and of wasting seed.

Desecration of God's name – As above, the desecration stems from the rejection of God in favor of foreign gods.



Sexual Misconduct

The verse, like those around it, refers to sexual offenses. Commentators disagree regarding the exact nature of the prohibition and upon who it devolves:

Sexual Relations with a Non-Jewess

The verse prohibits carnal relations with a non-Jewish female.

SOURCES: Rejected translation in Mishna Megillah, possibility in Sifre Devarim, R. Yishmael in various sources, Peshitta, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan)

Who is intermarrying? These commentators (in contrast to the position below) understand that the prohibition is upon the person himself.¹³

Why is there a prohibition?

- Sifre Devarim and R. Yishmael emphasize that the children that are born from a union between a Jew and non-Jew will become "אויבים למקום" (enemies of God). It seems that the problematic issue for them is not so much the actual intermarriage as that the product of the union might turn to idolatry.
- The others might suggest that the act of relations with a non believer is itself problematic.

"**וּמִזְרָעָךְ לֹא תִתֵּן**" – These commentators¹⁴ might understand "וּמִזְרָעָךְ" to be referring to one's semen,¹⁵ in which case the verse is explicitly speaking of having intercourse.¹⁶

"**לְהַעֲבִיר**" – The Peshitta translates "לְהַעֲבִיר" as "למבטנו" ("לעבר", to impregnate).¹⁷ According to this understanding, the double formulation "תִּתֵּן לְהַעֲבִיר" speaks of two stages – intercourse that leads to conception.

"**מִלֶּךָ**" – Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) seems to understand "מִלֶּךָ" to be a general term, referring to all idolatry,¹⁸ while the rejected possibility in the Mishna and the Peshitta appear to understand it to refer to an idolatrous woman.

Context – According to this approach, it is readily apparent why this verse is found in the middle of the list of sexual offenses in Vayikra 18. It immediately precedes the offenses of bestiality and homosexuality and is likely connected to the problem of wasting one's seed.¹⁹

Parallel verses – The Sifre Devarim and R. Yishmael in Midrash Tannaim seem to understand "מִעֲבִיר בְּנוֹ" in Devarim 18:10 to also refer to intermarriage, although it is unclear what "בְּאֵשׁ" would mean.

Motivation – Biblical source for prohibiting intermarriage – Besides the contextual motivation, this position might be driven to read the verse in this manner in order to find an explicit prohibition against intermarriage (which is not limited to the seven nations).

Desecration of God's name – See Ezra 9:2 which similarly views relations with foreign women as a desecration of God's name,²⁰ as it causes an intermingling of God's holy seed with the other nations.



Intermarriage of Daughter

The verse forbids marrying off one's daughters (or sisters) to non-Jewish men.

SOURCES: Perhaps Jubilees,²¹ Yaakov Kirkisani the Karaite

Who is intermarrying? In contrast to the above approach, this position understands the sexual prohibition to be focused on the person's daughter.²² This would make the prohibition exceptional in the chapter, for all the other unions are prohibited on the individual himself.

Why is there a prohibition? Kirkisani emphasizes that the problem relates to the product of the union, who will be worshipers of idolatry. Jubilees likely agrees.²³

"ומזרעך" – This position understands the term to refer to one's daughters.²⁴

"לא תתן"

- **Marrying off** – According to this position, "תתן" refers to giving in marriage.
- **Giving** – Kirkisani also raises the possibility that the verse reads "do not [marry your daughters to idolators and thereby] give of your descendants to sacrifice to the Molekh". As the children born of the intermarriage will likely become idolatrous, by agreeing to the marriage a father is in effect giving over his descendants (מזרעך) to idolatry.

"להעביר" – According to Kirkisani the word means to sacrifice. The offspring of the union will sacrifice to the Molekh.²⁵

"מלך" – Jubilees seems to understand this to refer to a worshiper of idolatry, though Kirkisani views it as a general term for all idolatry.

Context – Kirkisani explicitly states that the advantage of this read is that it fits within the larger context of the chapter, as it simply speaks of another example of an illicit union.

Motivations – Besides the contextual motivation, this position might be driven to read the verse in this manner so as to find an explicit prohibition against general intermarriage (that is not limited to the seven nations). This is an extremely important issue for Jubilees and a theme that the book returns to repeatedly.

Desecration of God's name – Exogamy leads to the diminishing of the Jewish population and thus to a desecration of God's name.²⁶

¹ This is probably the strongest support for this understanding of the verse as it mentions both fire and the Molekh explicitly.

² See Divrei HaYamim II 28:3, which uses the word "ויבִּיעַר" but is otherwise similar to other verses which speak of "passing" children through fire.

³ Cf. the variant "לְמַלְכָם תּוֹעֵבֵת בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן" in Melakhim II 23:13. One might argue that Yirmeyahu 32:35 (and 19:5 similarly) seem to equate the burning of children to the Baal with Molekh worship. Ramban suggests that the Baal and Molekh are one and the same god. Both names are similar in meaning, referring to one who is master over another. Alternatively, they are distinct gods who were both worshiped in the valley via child immolation.

⁴ It is possible that Targum Yerushalmi (Neofiti) understands Molekh to be a form of sacrifice, instead of a name of a god. This would explain how Yirmeyahu 19:5 and 32:35 refer to the same action of child sacrifice at *גיא בן הנם* as both "עלוֹת לְבַעַל" and "לְהַעֲבִיר... לְמַלְךְ". Alternatively, if Molekh is just a general term for idolatry "עלוֹת לְבַעַל" is equivalent to "passing to... the Molekh".

See also the discussions in the Tosefta and Yerushalmi Sanhedrin, regarding whether the prohibition is limited to giving one's children to Molekh or also includes giving them to other gods.

⁵ See Vayikra 18:3: "כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲרָץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבְּתֶם בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וְכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲרָץ כְּנַעַן אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא". This approach would suggest that the verse refers to their abhorrent sexual practices as well as their

idolatry.

⁶ See B. Shwartz, "איסור העברת הזרע למלך" in "שנתון לחקר המקרא והמזרח הקדום", vol. 12, (2000): 65-81 who raises this possibility.

⁷ See the immediately following prohibitions of homosexuality and bestiality, other examples of wasting seed.

⁸ Note that the prohibition of Molekh in Vayikra 20 is immediately followed (verse 6) by the prohibition of אוב and ידעוני, just like in Devarim 18:10-11.

⁹ See also the three parallel verses in Yirmeyahu 7:31, 19:5, and 32:35. Taken together, these three verses imply that "לְהַעֲבִיר אֶת בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת בְּנוֹתֵיהֶם לְמַלְךָ" is equivalent to "לְשַׂרְף אֶת בְּנֵיהֶם בְּאֵשׁ עֵלְוֹת לְבַעַל" and "לְשַׂרְף אֶת בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת בְּנוֹתֵיהֶם בְּאֵשׁ".

¹⁰ Rashi appears to view the act as one of actual worship.

¹¹ Rashi suggests that he is passed between two bonfires while Ramban proposes that he is passed through flames.

¹² Ramban agrees with Ibn Ezra that it likely refers to the Ammonite god mentioned in Melakhim I 11:7.

¹³ This fits the pattern of the surrounding prohibitions, which similarly are prohibitions on the individual and not on the giving of someone else to an illicit union.

¹⁴ It is possible that R. Yishmael reads the verse differently. Though he too understands the prohibition to refer to having sexual relations, he might nonetheless be understanding the verse to say "do not give of your children to worship the Molekh", since this is the feared consequence of such relations.

¹⁵ Compare the previous verse, Vayikra 18:20, "וְאֵל אִשְׁתּוֹ עִמִּיתָךְ לֹא תִתֵּן שִׁכְבְּתָךְ לְזָרַע".

¹⁶ "לֹא תִתֵּן" would then refer to the act of insemination.

¹⁷ Note that while this meaning of the root עבר is common in rabbinic (and modern) Hebrew, it is only found in one other verse in Tanakh: "שׁוּרוֹ עֵבֶר וְלֹא יִגְעַל תְּפִלֵּט פְּרִתּוֹ וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּל" (Iyyov 21:10). For more information, see Dictionary:עבר.

¹⁸ Compare Targum Yerushalmi (Neofiti), Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) Vayikra 20:2-5, and Targum Yerushalmi (Fragmentary), who also translate "מַלְךָ" as "פּוֹלְחָנָא נּוֹכְרָאָה", although they understand "זָרַעְךָ" and "לְהַעֲבִיר" differently.

¹⁹ Anan the Karaite (brought by Yaakov Kirkisani) goes a step further to suggest that the entire prohibition of the Molekh refers to not wasting one's seed.

²⁰ It refers to the action as a "מעילה", a profaning of the holy.

²¹ Jubilees does not explicitly comment on the verses in Vayikra. However, in its interpretation of the story of Shekhem, it forbids intermarriage and refers the reader to the injunction against giving of one's seed to Molekh.

²² The man is not warned here about his own sexual act but merely about marrying off his daughter. While Jubilees also prohibits taking a non-Jewish wife, it does not state that one is stoned for such an offense. Thus, Shimon and Yehuda are not punished for their marrying of non-Jews. Jubilees appears to assume that patrilineal descent and that a woman marrying someone of another faith would accept her husband's religion. Thus, it is much more dangerous for a woman to marry out than for a man.

Karaites similarly adhere to a doctrine of patrilineal descent, and thus it is understandable that both of these sources read the verse as a prohibition against marrying off one's daughter. It is only in such a case that there exists a definite problem of turning to idolatry. In contrast, the Rabbinic sources cited above which assume matrilineal descent, are more concerned about a male having relations with an idolatress.

- ²³ See above that since both these sources might have held of patrilineal descent, they saw great danger in a woman's marrying into an idolator's family.
- ²⁴ See below that Kirkisani also allows for the possibility that the word's meaning is broader and refers to one's descendants.
- ²⁵ Since Jubilees does not comment on the verse itself it is difficult to know how it would read this verb and whether it adds anything to the verb "תתן".
- ²⁶ See note above regarding Jubilees and patrilineal descent.