



## WEEKLY PARASHA

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Parashat Vayikra | March 19, 2016 / 9 Adar II 5776

**Sacrifices? What Sense Does that Make?**

The second half of the book of Shemot focused on creating the Mishkan as a Sanctuary in which God Godself could dwell among the Children of Israel. In contrast, the book of Vayikra focuses on what is done in that Sanctuary: first and foremost, the bringing of sacrifices. What is the connection between sacrifices and the Temple? The Torah seems to be telling us that sacrifices are the primary means to serve and connect to God, and that this connecting is best done in the Temple, where God's presence dwells. But how are we to understand animal and grain sacrifices as a means of connecting to God, let alone as the primary means?

As modern people, it seems to us like a very bizarre way to worship an infinite God. What does God need with our sacrifices? Isn't such a messy and bloody act, one that takes an animal's life no less, the furthest thing possible from an elevated religious act of worship? At the same time, we must acknowledge that it was the primary form of worship in the ancient world. Did it answer a universal human need, something relevant even for us today, or was it part of a primitive, less intellectually and spiritually developed society.

Given that the Torah commands obligatory communal and individual sacrifices (and allows for non-obligatory, free will sacrifices), it stands to reason that a traditional Jewish approach would seek to find intrinsic value in these animal sacrifices. Rambam (Maimonides), however, coming from a strong rationalist perspective, says otherwise in his *Guide to the Perplexed* (section III, chapters 31 and 46). He states that worshipping God through animal sacrifices is not ideal, but the people at the time of the Giving of the Torah could not conceive of any other form of worship. If they would have been forced to choose between worshipping God with prayer and worshipping pagan gods with sacrifices, they would have chosen the latter. Thus God conceded to them their need to use sacrifices but demanded that they be brought to God in a way that did not lead to idolatry.

This approach, which resonates with most modern people, still raises some questions. First, as a traditional Jew who believed in the eternal bindingness of the *mitzvot*, how could Rambam suggest that sacrifices had outlived their purpose? If he did not believe that they would continue to be binding in the future, why did he write all the laws of sacrifices in his *Yad Hachazaka*? And doesn't this take away from the concept of the perfection of the Torah? Rambam himself answers the latter question, saying that God does not change the nature of people, and a perfect Torah is one that is perfectly suited for the realities of where people are. Sometimes, says Rambam, we have to consider where the *mitzvot* are pointing us rather than seeing them as describing an ideal, final state. This is quite provocative, and we have discussed it at greater length elsewhere.

Ramban (Nahmanides), in his Commentary to the Torah (Vayikra, 1:9) takes great issue with Rambam's approach and, besides arguing the specifics and bringing proof texts to contradict Rambam, argues against the idea that sacrifices, so central to worship in the Torah and already practiced by Adam and Noach, should *not* have intrinsic value. He states that the significance of the sacrifices can be understood as symbolic and psychological, and he sees the sin-offering as the primary sacrifice. Accordingly, he states that when a person sees the animal slaughtered, the blood thrown on the altar, and the entrails burned up, he reflects and takes to heart the greatness of his sin, how he has sinned both in thought and deed, and how he deserves to die. Ramban also gives a kabbalistic explanation, seeming to indicate that the sacrifices have a theurgic and metaphysical impact on God's relationship to the world.

It should be noted that Ramban's emphasis on the sin-offering seems misplaced, given that the *olah*, the burnt offering, seems to be the primary form of worship. It was the sacrifice of Kayin and Hevel and of Noach, and in the

Temple the olah is the twice-daily communal sacrifice and the core of the *musaf* sacrifices brought on Shabbat and Yom Tov. The Chinukh (Mitzvah 95) addresses this problem, and extends Ramban's symbolic and psychological approach to non-sin offering sacrifices and other details and rituals of the sacrifices.

There seems to be one thing missing from all these explanations, a point implicit in Rambam and hinted at in the Chinukh. The religious value of sacrifices would seem, at its core, to be that indicated in the first sacrifice of the Torah, that of Kayin and Hevel. The verse states: "Kayin brought of the fruit of the ground an offering to the Lord. And Hevel also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat of it" (Breishit, 4:3–4). That is, the primary sacrifice is the olah, the burnt offering, the giving of something fully to God. It is taking the fruit of one's labor, what one values highly and feels deeply connected to, recognizing that this comes from God and giving it back to God to demonstrate and internalize this mindset. This is why the idea of sacrificing one's children—or the command of *akeidat Yitzchak*—fits into this model. It is taking the "giving of what is most dear" to the ultimate extreme.

Understood this way, the sin offering uses this principle to achieve forgiveness and expiation. We say in the u'Netaneh Tokef prayer that "*u'teshuva u'tefillah u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'ah ha'gezeirah,*" that repentance, prayer, and charity eliminate the stern decree. In the same way, a *korban*—which is an intense and personal form of charity, of giving of oneself, of giving what is most dear—accompanied by the verbal confession of the sin-offering can achieve atonement.

It may be that this is most hard for us to relate not because of the concept of giving things that we treasure to God, but because 1) we don't relate this way to animals. Ethical issues aside, given how little most of us have to do with livestock and slaughtering, we are aesthetically repulsed by the idea of slaughtering animals. And 2) we would like our donations to religious causes to be used more practically, not in a merely symbolic way. While both of these are true and reflect different sensibilities from those of the past, we can still understand the core human need that sacrifices addressed in the time of the Temple.

The importance of using something physical in our worship is a

related point. As physical beings, it is often hard for us to connect to an infinite, non-physical God. Just as Rambam explains that we need to use anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms as a means of describing or relating to God, most of us need a form of worship that has a physical component. Sacrifices gave this to people. The reason this physical mode took the form of sacrifice was discussed above, but this framing helps us understand Rambam's point of saying that sacrifice is to prayer what prayer is to intellectually connecting to God. The ultimate form of worship for Rambam is a purely non-physical, intellectual connection. Most people, however, can't handle that. They need something more connected to human concerns and actions: petitionary prayer, fasting, and the very act of praying. While necessary for most, says Rambam, this is not the ideal.

The question that persists, though, is, given that we are human, why describe what we need as less than ideal? We are not angels or pure intellects, so for us, as physical beings, prayer might be the best way to connect to God. And when praying, how many of us have not felt that we could connect more strongly if there was a more physical component? Wearing a *tallit* or *tefillin* can help, as can *shokeling*; it feels like we are connecting more if we are doing more.

The need to find meaningful ways to connect and the importance of the physical remain as true today as they did in the time of the Temple. If for us, animal sacrifice is not the way, we should still be honest about our deep human need to find a way to connect to God, and we should work at developing those paths in the absence of sacrifices.

## Shabbat Shalom!

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