

Parashat Vayikra 5774, 2014:

Maimonides, Korbanot (Sacrifices), and Rav Soloveitchik

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

In the main, *Sefer Vayikra* discusses the Laws of the Kohanim and *avodat Hashem* (the service of Hashem) as expressed by the *korbanot*. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) discussed the rationale inherent in the *korbanot* in two different sections of his *Guide of the Perplexed*. The first passage appears in III:32:

... at that time the way of life generally accepted and customary in the whole world and the universal service upon which we were brought up consisted in offering various species of living beings in the temples in which images were set up, in worshipping the latter, and in burning incense before them – the pious ones and the ascetics being at that time, as we have explained, the people who were devoted to the service of the temples consecrated to the stars - : His wisdom, may He be exalted, and His gracious ruse, which is manifest in regard to all His creatures, did not require that He give us a Law prescribing the rejection, abandonment, and abolition of all these kinds of worship. For one could not conceive the acceptance of [such a Law], considering the nature of man, which always likes that to which it is accustomed. At that time this would have been similar to the appearance of a prophet in these times who, calling upon the people to worship G-d, would say: “G-d has given you a Law forbidding you pray to Him for help in misfortune, to fast, to call upon Him for help in misfortune. Your worship should consist solely in meditation without any works at all.” Therefore He, may He be exalted, **suffered** the above-mentioned kinds of worship to remain, but transferred them from created or imaginary and unreal things to His own name, may He be exalted, commanding us to practice them with regard to Him, may He be exalted. (*The Guide of the Perplexed*, translation and notes, Dr. Shlomo Pines, vol. II, page 526, underlining and bolding my own)

In sum, the Rambam maintained that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) commanded the offering of *korbanot* as a concession to the normative behaviors known to our forebears. In his view, the historical precedent set by the surrounding nations in the Middle East regarding animal sacrifices was simply too powerful to

overcome or ignore. Therefore, G-d simultaneously “suffered” and commanded our ancestors to continue this form of worship as a testimony to His honor and glory, and thereby serve as an educative device.

Maimonides’ second explicit section in the *Guide for the Perplexed* discussing *korbanot* appears in III:46. In this passage, he maintains that the entire sacrificial service is, in reality, a negative response driven by the desire to delegitimize the practices of the surrounding idol-worshipping nations who forbade the offering of sheep (Egyptians), goats (Sabians), and oxen (all nations of the time):

Thus it was in order to efface the traces of these incorrect opinions [i.e. forbidding the offering of sheep, goats, and oxen] that we have been ordered by the Law to offer in sacrifices only these three species of quadrupeds: “When a man from [among] you brings a sacrifice to the L-rd; from animals, from cattle or from the flock you shall bring your sacrifice.” (Sefer Vayikra 1:2) In this way an action considered by them as an extreme act of disobedience was the one through which one came near to G-d and sought forgiveness for one’s sins. Thus wrong opinions, which are diseases of the human soul, are cured by their contrary found at the other extreme. (Ibid. , pages 581-582, underlining my own)

Thus, the Rambam maintained that the inherent rationale of the *korbanot* is comprised of two complementary historical parts:

- A concession to the normative behaviors known to our forebears and as an educative device
- The desire to delegitimize the practices of the surrounding idol-worshipping nations, and as a demonstration of that which is fitting and proper

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, strongly rejected the Rambam’s approach to the rationalization of the *mitzvot* as presented in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. As we have seen in the case of *korbanot*, the Rambam focused upon the causalistic approach or the “how” question, (i.e. “How did sacrifices come to be?”) when analyzing this class of

commandments. The Rav vigorously repudiated this entire methodology:

Judging Maimonides' undertaking retrospectively, one must admit that the master whose thought shaped Jewish ideology for centuries to come did not succeed in making his interpretation of the commandments prevalent in our world perspective. While we recognize his opinions on more complicated problems such as prophecy, teleology and creation, we completely ignore most of his rational notions regarding the commandments. The reluctance on the part of the Jewish *homo religiosus* [religious person] to accept Maimonidean rationalistic ideas is not ascribable to any agnostic tendencies, but to the incontrovertible fact that such explanations neither edify nor inspire the religious consciousness. They are essentially, if not entirely, valueless for the religious interests we have most at heart. ... If rationalization is guided by the "how" question and by the principle of objectification then it is detrimental to religious thought. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind: An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought*, pages 92 and 98, brackets and underlining my own)

In Rabbi Soloveitchik's view, both in regard to the *korbanot* and other aspects of Jewish practice, it must ever be our goal to search for explanations of the Torah and *mitzvot* that "edify and inspire the religious consciousness," so that we can grow closer to our Creator. This idea closely corresponds to the Rav's emphasis on the ultimate importance of *devekut Hashem* (cleaving and dedication to Hashem) that is so prominently displayed in his favorite work, "*U'Bikashtem Misham*" ("And From There He Will Search for You"). Clearly, for the Rav, only a spiritually-inspired being will be able to extend his hand to his Creator with the expectation that his gesture will be returned in kind.

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:
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