

Parashat Vayikra 5778, 2018:

Korbanot and Spiritual Devotion

Rabbi David Etengoff

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 Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha and Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The laws regarding the *korbanot* (sacrifices) are one of the major themes of *Sefer Vayikra*. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) discusses their underlying reasoning in two well-known passages found in his philosophic *magnum opus*, *The Guide of the Perplexed*:

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 [practiced by the surrounding nations] ... 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... (*The Guide of the Perplexed*, III:32, vol. II, p. 526, translation and notes, Dr. Shlomo Pines, underlining and bolding my own)

The second section in this work that discusses *korbanot* appears in III:46. In this passage, Maimonides maintains that the entire sacrificial service is, in reality, a negative response 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) ... Thus wrong opinions, which are diseases of the human soul, are cured by their contrary found at the other extreme. (Ibid. , pp. 581-582, brackets and underlining my own)

In sum, the Rambam maintained that the *korbanot* were included in the Torah as a concession to normative behaviors known to our forebears, and to negate the erroneous opinions of the

Egyptians, Sabians and other nations of the Middle East. In essence, this is a causally- and historically-based analysis of this class of *mitzvot*. Little wonder, then, that nearly every classic *meforash* (Torah analyst) roundly rejects this approach.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) is one of the most celebrated Torah thinkers to repudiate Maimonides' position. In his *Commentary on the Torah* (*Sefer Vayikra* 1:9), he states that the Rambam's words concerning this matter are nothing other than patent nonsense (*divrei havai*). Even more significantly, on the substantive level, Nachmanides turns the Rambam's historically-based position on its head:

Behold when Noah and his three sons went out of the Ark, there were no Chaldeans and Egyptians in existence. Nevertheless, he offered *korbanot* that were pleasing to Hashem, concerning which it is stated: "And the L-rd smelled the pleasant aroma, and the L-rd said to Himself, 'I will no longer curse the earth because of man...'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 8:21) Able, [who preceded Noah,] also brought a sacrifice from the first born and best of his flock. [Once again, Hashem's response was completely positive]: "And the L-rd turned to Abel and to his offering." (*Sefer Bereishit* 4:4) And, it must be noted, there was not even the remotest thought of idol worship in the world at that time! (*Commentary on the Torah*, translations, brackets and underlining my own; Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining and brackets my own).

The Ramban concludes this part of his argument with the powerful words: "And G-d forbid that one would even think that the sole purpose and ultimate value of the *korbanot* is to negate the notion of idol worship in the minds of the foolish!"

Like the Ramban, 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 of the Perplexed*. As we have seen in the case of *korbanot*, the Rambam focused upon 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*, pp. 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, the Rambam's suggestion of historical bases for the *mitzvot* detracts from the holiness and uniqueness of the Torah's revelation at Mount Sinai. In the Rav's estimation, only interpretations of the Torah and *mitzvot* that "edify and inspire the religious consciousness" will enable us to grow closer to our Creator. This idea corresponds to Rav Soloveitchik's emphasis on the ultimate importance of *devekut Hashem* (cleaving to Hashem) that is so prominently presented in his favorite work, "*U'vikashtem Misham*" (*And From There He Will Search for You*). Clearly, for the Rav, only spiritually-inspired individuals will seek to extend their hands to their Creator with the expectation this gesture will be returned in kind.

May the *Beit Hamikdash* be rebuilt soon and in our days, and may we once again offer the *korbanot* with our entire beings, in love and spiritual devotion to the Almighty. *V'chane yih ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
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*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.