

Parashat Vayikra 5781, 2021:

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What is a Korban?

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and 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 in *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, the Rambam maintains that the entire sacrificial service is a repudiation of the practices and opinions 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 [that is, 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 Lord; 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. (Pages 581-582, brackets and underlining my own)

In sum, the Rambam opines that the *korbanot* were included in the Torah as a concession

to our ancestors and in order to negate the erroneous opinions of the Egyptians, Sabians and other cultures of the Middle East. In essence, he asserts a causal-sociological analysis of this entire class of *mitzvot*.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) summarily rejects the Rambam's position. In his *Commentary on the Torah* (*Sefer Vayikra* 1:9), he states that the Rambam's approach is nothing other than *divrei havai* (patent nonsense). More substantively, he turns the Rambam's causal-sociological 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 said to Himself, 'I will no longer curse the earth because of man...'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 8:21) Hevel also brought a sacrifice from the first born and best of his flock: "And the L-rd turned to Hevel 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, and underlining my own; these and all Tanach 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!"

Nearly all *Rishonim* and *Acharonim* (early and later Torah authorities) join the Ramban in his repudiation of the Rambam's rationale for the *korbanot*. Closer to our own time, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), explains why this is the case:

While we recognize his [the Rambam's] opinions on more complicated problems such as prophecy, teleology and creation, we completely ignore most of his rational notions regarding the commandments... [This is due] 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. (Rabbi Joseph B.

Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind: An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought*, pp. 92 and 98, brackets my own)

As a result, the Rav conceptualizes the underlying meaning of the celebrated second verse of our *parasha*, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When a man from [among] you will bring a *korban* to the L-rd...’” in a very different manner than the Rambam:

What did man bring as an offering? What was man called upon to sacrifice? Judaism gave a straightforward answer to this basic theological and ethical question. Man must offer everything he possesses. Nothing is to be spared and nothing is to be saved for man. The logic of this answer is self-evident... Since there is nothing within the reach of man which he does not have in trust for and from God, there is nothing whose return to God [that] would not be considered a hallowed sacrificial service. Judaism has insisted upon a total sacrificial gesture on the part of man. When the latter is confronted with his Creator, man must return to the Master of the universe not only all he possesses in the form of physical goods but himself as well; his body, mind, spirit soul — the whole of his existence in all its boundless manifestation at all levels. (*Community, Covenant, and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications*, Nathaniel Helfgot, editor, page 298)

For the Rav, *korbanot* emerge as a symbolic expression of all that one owns. As such, a *korban*, which must be the property of the one who offers it, is the perfect representation of that which is “within the reach of man” that he has received “in trust for and from God,” rather than based solely upon his own efforts. Therefore, bringing a *korban* is considered to be a “hallowed sacrificial service” and an ideal example of that which “man must return to the Master of the universe.” In sum, *korbanot* demonstrate that our entire existence, “in all its boundless manifestation at all levels,” belongs to the Almighty.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) provides us with an etymologically based analysis of the word “*korban*” that underscores its spiritual meaning:

A *korban* is never used for a present or gift; it is used exclusively with reference to a person’s relation to God and can only be understood from the meaning that lies in its root *kry*. *Kry* means to approach, to come near, and to enter into a close relationship with someone... The *makriv* [the one bringing the *korban*] desires that something of himself should come into closer relationship to God, that is what his *korban* is, and the procedure

by which this greater nearness to God is to be achieved is called “*hakravah*. It is *kirvat Elokim*, nearness to God which is striven for by a *korban*.” (Commentary on the Torah, *Sefer Vayikra* 1:2, translation, Isaac Levy)

In Rav Hirsch’s view the ultimate goal of a *korban* is to achieve *kirvat Elokim* (nearness to God). This echoes King David’s phrase in *Sefer Tehillim*: “*kirvat Elokim li tov*” (“Closeness to God is what is truly good for me,” 73:28). This is a spiritual level that each of us can try to achieve when we do *mitzvot* and *gemilut chasadim* (deeds of lovingkindness), and thereby strive *l’takane ha’olam b’malchut Sha-dai* (“to perfect the world through Hashem’s kingship”). With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire may this be so. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

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 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* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* 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. Please click on the highlighted link.