YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL

WEEKLY PARASHA

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Does God need our Sacrifices?

The building of the Mishkan which took up the second half of the Book of Shemot, focused on creating a Sanctuary as a place for God's Presence to dwell, for God Godself to dwell among the Children of Israel. In contrast, the book of *Vayikra* focuses on what is done in that Sanctuary - which is, 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, were God's presence dwells.

But how are we to understand how animal (and grain) sacrifices serve as a means to connect to God, let alone as the primary means? As modern people, it seems to us 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 a religious elevated 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 (as well as allowing 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, in the *Guide to the Perplexed* (section III, chapters 31 and 46), coming from a strong rationalist perspective, says otherwise. Rambam states that worshiping 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 worshiping God with prayer or worshiping 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 and brought in a way that did not lead to idolatry.

[This approach, which resonates with most modern people, still raises some questions. First, how could Rambam, as a traditional Jew who believed in the eternal bindingness of the mitzvot, 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 this latter question, and says that God does not change the nature of people, and a perfect Torah is one that is perfectly suited for the reality of where people are at. Sometimes, says Rambam, we have to look where the mitzvot are pointing us, and not see them as describing an ideal final state.This idea is quite provocative, one that we have discussed 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 on the specifics and bringing prooftexts to contradict Rambam - argues in principle with the idea that sacrifices, which are so central to worship in the Torah, and which already existed with Adam and Noach, should not have intrinsic value. He states that the significance of the sacrifices could be understood to be symbolic and psychological. He sees the sin-offering as the primary sacrifice. Given this, he states that when a person sees the animal being slaughtered, the blood being thrown on the altar, and the entrails burned up, he reflects and takes to heart the greatness of his sin, how he deserves to die, and how he has sinned both in thought and in deed. He also gives a kabbalistic explanation, which seems 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 it is the *olah* that is the twice-daily communal sacrifice and that is 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 to the symbolism to 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 to in the Chinukh. The religious value of sacrifices would seem, at its core, to be what is indicated in the first sacrifice of the Torah, that of Kayin and Hevel. The verse states: "… Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering to the Lord. And Abel 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 to take the fruit of one's labor - be it agricultural or livestock - take what one values highly and feels deeply connected to, and to recognize that this comes from God, and to give 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 is using this principle as a form of achieving 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 with the verbal confession done with the sin-offering, can achieve atonement.

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

A related point is the importance of using something physical in our worship. 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 in describing God, to give us a means to relate to God, so most of us need a form of worship that has a physical component as well. This was what sacrifices gave people. The reason that this physical mode took the form of sacrifices, specifically, is because of people's personal connection to this things, as discussed above. This framing helps us understand Rambam's point of saying sacrifices is to prayer what prayer is to intellectually connecting to God. The ultimate form of worship for Rambam is purely non-physical, pure intellectual connection. People, however, can't handle that. They need something more connected to human concerns and more involving human 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 that given that we are human, why describe what we need as not 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, how many of us have not felt when praying that we could connect more strongly if there was a more physical component? Wearing a tallit or *tefillin* can help, as can *shukeling* - it feels like we are connecting more if we are doing more.

So, in the end, I believe Rambam was right that *korbanot* were a concession to humans, but not because of our ancient pagan context, but because of our human nature, our physical nature. 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 sacrifices is not the way, we should still be honest with the deep human need to find a way to connect to God, and work at developing those paths in the absence of sacrifices.

Shabbat Shalom!

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