

ויקרא

RATIONALE FOR *KARBANOS*

The Ramban (*Bereishis* 4:3) notes that in bringing “the fruit of the ground as an offering to the Eternal,” Kayin was aware of a very basic principle of creation: the great secret of the sacrifices. Kayin desired to express his love for and identification with Hashem in the form of a material gift-offering to Him. Working the soil was his life’s passion (*Midrash Tanchuma, Noach* 13) and he wanted to share with Hashem that which was most precious to him. Hevel emulated his brother, and he, too, sacrificed an offering (*Bereishis* 4:4) in a demonstration of unity with Hashem. Adam *Harishon* also sacrificed a bullock to Hashem (*Chulin* 60•; *Avodah Zarah* 8•), as did Noach after him (*Bereishis* 8:20).

They all understood that worship of Hashem was not merely a mental pursuit, but rather a physical act of worship combined with a devotional intent. Aligning oneself with Hashem means taking that which is most precious to us, and offering it outright as a gift to Him, demonstrating that Hashem is dearer to us than anything else. This understanding was corrupted by idolators throughout the generations, and they used sacrifices to placate their false personal deities.

Wise men among the gentiles considered that which was most dear to them, and proceeded to offer themselves and their own children as sacrifices to their gods. The Torah warns against this gentile practice in *Vayikra* (18:21) and *Devarim* (18:10). Examples of human sacrifice can be found in many ancient cultures. There was a Phoenician tradition practiced in Carthage, for instance, of sacrificing children to the deities. Mesha, king of Moav, even sacrificed his own son (*Melachim* II 3:27). In a particularly interesting example, the Juggernaut, a mobile Hindu temple and idol at Puri, in the state of Orissa, India, was wheeled through the streets of the city on festival days. In a fit of religious fervor, pilgrims would throw themselves under the heavy wheels of the wagon and would be crushed to death. This was applauded by the Hindus as a religious act of human self-sacrifice. There are many other instances, especially in Africa and among the Indians of South America, of human sacrifice. The common denominator in all this was the people’s desire to give their most precious possessions, their lives and the lives of their children, to their deities.

Although the Torah warns us to consider human sacrifice as an abomination, there is even an unfortunate instance of this practice in our own history. Yiftach vowed to sacrifice to Hashem whatever would come out of his house to meet him on his victorious return from war (*Shoftim* 11:31). To Yiftach’s immense grief, his only daughter was first out to greet him; nevertheless he felt obliged to fulfill his solemn vow. The story of Yiftach’s daughter was certainly the exception and cannot be taken as indicative of the norm of sacrifice in *Klal Yisrael*, but it underlies the basic concept of offering what is dear and precious as a sacrifice.

The nations did not limit themselves to human sacrifices; they offered animal sacrifices as well. *Klal Yisrael*, while in Egypt, and while among the nations, were nurtured on and exposed to

these types of practices and were influenced by them. The Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* III 32) suggests that the sole reason for *karbanos* in the Torah was to wean *Klal Yisrael* away from idolatry:

They were used to a form of worship which included fire, and they were raised (in an atmosphere which included) sacrificing animals on which they placed idols . . . It was for this reason that Hashem preserved these kinds of worship, but transferred them from (the worship of) creatures and imaginary things, and commanded us (to sacrifice) to Him, may He be praised

(see Rambam *Hilchos Me'ilah* 8:8; *Hilchos Temurah* 4:13).

The Rambam continues in *Moreh Nevuchim* (III 46) that the reason for the offerings is that the Egyptians and Chaldeans, in whose lands *Klal Yisrael* were exiled, used to worship cattle and sheep, and therefore the Egyptians forbade eating these animals. Hence, Hashem commanded *Klal Yisrael* to slaughter of these animals to the Revered Name so that the very act which the heathens considered blasphemous would now be presented as an offering to the Creator. The very act which they forbade in their misguided religious beliefs would now become the vehicle through which *Klal Yisrael's* sins would be forgiven. Since all human diseases are treated by medicines which are antithetical to them, so too the spiritual disease of *avodah zarah* is to be cured in an antithetical fashion. Since *Klal Yisrael* had been nurtured in an idolatrous environment, Hashem realized that they could not immediately altogether abandon sacrifice. Hashem's ultimate intention was to wean them from the debased religious rituals of their idolatrous neighbors.

The Ramban (*Vayikra* 1:9) goes to great lengths in severely criticizing the Rambam for this line of thinking. How could the Torah introduce a great *mitzvah*, central to the entire service of Hashem, merely for the purpose of removing "false beliefs from the hearts of the wicked and fools of the world"? Moreover, *mizbei'ach* sacrifice would not be an antidote to the disease of idol-worship; but, to the contrary, it would be a mark of respect and honor to these deviations. After all, what the gentiles consider to be holy, would now be offered as a sacrifice to Hashem; a greater honor could not be accorded to idolatry. In addition, the Rambam himself stated that the idol-worshippers used to sacrifice to the moon and to the sun, so it is obvious that while some heathens shunned eating of the flesh of these animals, others offered them as sacrifices.

The Ramban further argues that animal sacrifice was popular long before the Egyptians and Chaldeans. Hevel brought the first-born of his flock as an offering to Hashem (*Bereishis* 4:4). Noach and his three sons offered animal sacrifices upon their exit from the ark (*Bereishis* 8:20), and Bilaam, too, brought animal offerings in order to approach Hashem so that he would be reached by His communication. How then could the offerings specified in the Torah be a cure against all idols? The disease of idolatry would have been better cured, according to this logic, if *Klal Yisrael* had been commanded to eat the flesh of these animal-deities: an act forbidden and repugnant to these idolators.

The Ramban's arguments against the Rambam are based on the assumption that the Rambam holds that *mizbei'ach* sacrifice is an antidote to the practice of the heathens. In actuality, the *Moreh Nevuchim* (III 46) is only justifying the use of the three particular animals: the cow, the sheep and the goat, which were specifically revered by the heathens. What the Ramban omits is

that the broader issue of the purpose of *karbanos* is, in fact, discussed by the Rambam in an earlier chapter (32). The Rambam clearly states that animal sacrifice was designed to eliminate thoughts of idolatry from among *Klal Yisrael*, and not necessarily from among the gentiles. Idolatry had so permeated certain elements of *Klal Yisrael*, that even after we had achieved the status of “Kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (*Shemos* 19:6), we could not entirely rid ourselves of this disease. The thrust of the Rambam’s thesis is directed at *Klal Yisrael*, and not at the gentiles. It is only in the specific choice of the particular offerings that the gentile practices are given any consideration.

The Abarbanel (*ibid.*) suggests that the Rambam bases his thesis on a statement in *Vayikra Rabbah* (22:5). The example is given of a prince who develops a fetish for a certain repulsive food. The king, in order to break the prince’s mania, orders that the particularly repulsive food constantly be kept on display at the king’s table. Hence, the prince, of his own volition, will ultimately break the offending compulsion. Likewise, *Klal Yisrael*, who developed a fetish for the idols of *Mitzraim*, were commanded by Hashem to offer animal-sacrifices on the *mizbei’ach*, so that they would constantly see these animals being offered, and would ultimately reverse this repugnant obsession. The Rambam very clearly states in *Hilchos Temurah* (4:13) that the majority of the laws of the Torah were only designed to distance *Klal Yisrael* from evil practices and to orient their mind-sets onto the path of righteousness. What better way to eliminate idolatry from *Klal Yisrael* than to attack it at its source?

Interestingly, the *Gemara* states in *Sanhedrin* (107:) that the *yeitzer hara* should be repulsed with the left hand, but encouraged with the right hand. Rashi (*ibid.*) comments that it is impossible for one not to give in a little bit to his desires. For total indulgence would lead to sin; and if one were to totally suppress his desires, life could not continue. This concept can be applied to the aforementioned *Midrash*. Idolatry is unacceptable and must be rejected; however, the Torah did make a very minor allowance in order to break the enticement of the *yeitzer hara* — and ultimately deflect the evil inclination.

As a counter-proposal, the Ramban suggests that the purpose of animal sacrifice is to provide a substitute for the person guilty of transgressing. In order to attain atonement for his sins, man would have had to offer his life as expiation. However, Hashem, in His infinite kindness, allowed the sinner to substitute an animal’s blood in place of his own blood, an animal’s life in place of his own life, and an animal’s chief limbs in place of his own limbs. Man would now be forgiven his iniquities merely by offering an animal sacrifice coupled with *teshuvah*.

The *Meshech Chachmah* (introduction to *Vayikra*) seeks to reconcile the Rambam’s view with that of the Ramban. He explains that the Rambam’s contention that the *karbanos* were introduced to distance *Klal Yisrael* from idolatry refers to those sacrifices which were brought on *bamos*, which were acceptable in the period preceding the *Beis Hamikdash*. Although these altars did not have the sanctity of the *mizbei’ach* of the *Beis Hamikdash*, they nevertheless served as an interim step in removing idolatry from the people’s hearts. Once the *Beis Hamikdash* was established, the *Meshech Chachmah* continues, then the view of the Ramban comes into play. The offering of *karbanos* in the *Beis Hamikdash* was purely a spiritual action, binding this world with the Upper World.

The Rambam's and Ramban's views are not at all contradictory. The Rambam presents a general overview of the concepts of *karbanos*, while the Ramban explores the spiritual meaning of the act of bringing a *karban*.

The ultimate *karban* recorded in the Torah is the *Akeidas Yitzchak*. Hashem commanded Avraham Avinu to take his "only son, Yitzchak, whom you love . . . and offer him there for a burnt offering." (*Bereishis 22:2*). *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* (31) reveals that Yitzchak Avinu actually died and underwent *Techias Hameisim*—Resurrection of the Dead. The enormous self-sacrifice demonstrated by Avraham in offering his son as a sacrifice, and by Yitzchak in allowing himself to be sacrificed, is brought to Hashem's attention on its anniversary every *Rosh Hashanah* (*Rosh Hashanah 16*•). In fact, the merit of this act is so great that each individual in each generation is considered as if he had personally offered himself as a sacrifice to Hashem. The fact that sacrifices were later offered on the *mizbei'ach* indicates that animal sacrifices are by Hashem's command only a substitute for man.

The process of sacrifices unites the *Kohein*, the individual Jew, and *Klal Yisrael* with the Divine world. The term for sacrifice, "*karban*," is derived from the root "*kareiv*," to bring together or unite. This process brings about the dynamic union of the Divine powers, the *Sefiros*, and thereby restores the soul of man and other created entities to their original state prior to sin. The material nature of sacrifice and the use of animals is a symbolic atonement for material sins. Since the evil powers of man are embedded in his flesh and blood, flesh and blood have to be sacrificed. Hence, the act of sacrifice frees the spirit of the animal *karban*, enabling it to rise to its Divine root. The sacrificial animals are symbolically connected to the animals described by Yechezkel Hanavi in the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* — the vision of the Holy Chariot. Hence, the sacrificial act removes the stain of sin from man and restores the holy union between Hashem and *Klal Yisrael* (*Sefer Habahir*).

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