

Parshat Vayikra 5778

In Parashat Vayikra, we are introduced for the first time to Torat HaKorbanot. The meaning of the Korbanot has been a topic of debate throughout the ages.

The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim attracted notoriety by explaining that the Korbanot were merely a means to pry the Israelites from their previous idolatrous ways, as it would have been unrealistic for them to give up the ritual of physical sacrifice altogether – let them rather offer up the same to Hashem. The Rambam also points out that the Torah itself attempts to limit the importance of Korbanot since once the Beit Mikdash is built, korbanot would no longer be permitted outside Jerusalem despite any spontaneous urges of religious devotion that may arise, whereas other rituals such as Tzitzit, Mezuzah & Tefillin would be obligated in every place. Finally the Rambam quotes some famous supporting passages from the Neviim, e.g. Samuel I 1:11 “ההפץ לה' בעולות וזבחים כשמע בקול ה'” and Isaiah 1:11 “למה לי רוב זבחים? – יאמר ה'”.

The Ramban argued vigorously against the Rambam in his Torah commentary. The Ramban observes that Noach brought sacrifices long before the Israelites became steeped in idolatry, and that the recurring description ריה ניהוה necessitates that the Korbanot have inherent positive value. The Ramban brings a psychological explanation for the value of the Korbanot, in that a religious person would see a sacrifice as a powerful metaphor for sublimating himself to Hashem, especially in the case of a Korban Chatat. Note that this reason is prefaced with the words “and it is more appropriate to hear the reason that...”, implying that though the Ramban believes it is a better reason than the Rambam offered, it does not quite get to the heart of the matter. For the Ramban, the real reason for the Korbanot can only be explained via Kabbalah. However, Kabbalah (תורת הסוד) has never been fully normative as the source of accepted explanations for mitzvot.

Nechama Leibowitz brings the Ritva's Sefer HaZikaron where he takes the Ramban to task for his tenor of criticism against the Rambam, and defends the Rambam on the grounds that he is merely providing apologetic arguments for those struggling with their belief in the Torah. (Indeed the Rambam makes clear in many places that the whole business of Taamei HaMitzvot – ascribing reasons to the mitzvot – is a fraught affair best dealt with caution!) The Ritva argues contra the Ramban that it is beyond doubt that our forefathers leaving Egypt required some help in leaving their

idolatorous past. However, the Ritva argues that while this pretext for the Korbanot

is sufficient to explain the choice of some of the specifics and details of the Korbanot, it surely is not the overall reason for them.

Shada"l (R' Shmuel David Luzato – Italy 1800-1865) argues that the fact that the korbanot have parallels with earlier idolatrous rites is not significant, since sacrifices are not inherently negative or immoral. Moreover, if Am Yisrael had been instructed that Hashem forbids korbanot, they would have felt a spiritually dangerous distancing from Hashem. Whereas the Rambam views the prohibition on bringing korbanot outside the Mikdash as the Torah limiting the reach of sacrificial rites, R' Luzato emphasises the positive aspect of national unity that is thereby created, as well as preserving the unique sense of closeness to Hashem achievable only in the Mikdash.

R' David Tzvi Hoffman (1843-1921) complements R' Luzato's nuanced position by contrasting the offerings of Kayin & Hevel. In pagan rites, sacrifices are brought self-interestedly to appease or bribe an imperfect supernatural power of limited justice, whereas a korban is brought out of selfless devotion and reverence to Hashem.

The countless examples of both early and late Neviim expressing revulsion for the sacrificial rite could surely be understood similarly – it is not the Korbanot per se that are problematic, but the manner and intention with which they are brought. The Meshech Chochma differentiated between korbanot brought in Bamot and korbanot brought in the Beit Mikdash i.e. korbanot brought on private altars outside Jerusalem when there was no Beit HaMikdash standing only had the value of drawing people away from temptations of idol worship, whereas korbanot brought in the Beit Mikdash would have greater spiritual worth.

At the highest level, as beautifully described by Rav Hirsch, “the purpose of a קרבן is to seek God's nearness” – the meaning of קרב is “to draw closer”. Consequently the act of bringing a קרבן (poorly described by the English word sacrifice) is to bring the מקריב inter closer communion with God, and certainly not to serve “the needs of the One to Whom the קרבן is brought near”. This goal of bringing ourselves closer to God through Torah and Mitzvot is an ethic which we can learn from Torat haKorbanot and instil into our religious lives to this day.