

PARASHAT VAYIKRA



על מהות הקרבנות On the Essence of Sacrifices

The vital significance of sacrificial offerings as an integral part of Israel's spiritual life is well known. The abundant Torah chapters that discuss the various aspects of the sacrifices are adequate evidence of their great importance.

Whenever G-d appeared to our national Patriarchs Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, they each built an altar and offered sacrifices. Similarly, when Hashem revealed Himself at the dedication of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), He did so in the form of a heavenly fire upon the altar that consumed the people's sacrifices. This fire signified that the sacrifices were a *ריח ניחוח*, a pleasant fragrance approved and desired by Hashem.

Furthermore, the various sacrifices are classified in Jewish Law as either "holy" or "holy of holies" – both requiring total purity on the part of all those who have any part in the process of offering the sacrifices.

This introduction leads us to the following question: Why is there such an incongruity between the Torah's reverent approach to sacrifices, and the critical attitude of the Prophets? Why did the sacrifices drop from their exalted position of holiness and importance to a drastic low during the period of the Prophets?

The first hint of this extreme transition was given by the Prophet Shmuel during his strong reproof of King Sha'ul:

הַחֶפֶץ לֵה' בְּעֹלוֹת וּזְבָחִים בְּשִׁמְעַ בְּקוֹל ה' הֲנֵה שְׁמַע,
מִזְבַּח טוֹב; לְהִקְשִׁיב, מִחֶלֶב אֵילִים.

*Does G-d want burnt-offerings and sacrifices as
He wants [us] to hearken to His voice?
Behold, obedience is better than sacrifices,
and attentiveness is better than rams' fat.* (Shmuel I 15,22)

The Prophet Yeshayahu rebukes the People of Israel along the same lines:

לְמָה לִי רַב זְבָחֵיכֶם יֵאמֶר ה', שְׁבַעֲתִי עֹלוֹת אֵילִים
וְחֶלֶב מְרִיאִים וְדָם פְּרִים וּכְבָשִׂים וְעִתּוּדִים לֹא הִפְצֵתִי.

*"Of what use are your many sacrifices to Me?" says G-d.
"I am sated with the burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of
fattened cattle; and the blood of bulls
and sheep and goats I do not want."* (Yeshayahu 1,11)

The Prophet Yirmiyahu, in the same vein, seems to place a question mark on the entire foundation of the concept of sacrifices:

כִּי לֹא דִבַּרְתִּי אֶת אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם... עַל דְּבָרֵי עוֹלָה וּזְבַח.
כִּי אִם... שָׁמַעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְהִיִּיתִי לְכֶם לֹא-לֵהִים וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי לְעָם...

*I did not speak with your fathers... about sacrifices;
I commanded them only, "Hearken to My voice,
and I will be your G-d and you will be My nation."* (Yirmiyahu 7,22-23)

And finally, we have the words of the Prophet Micha, who presents a totally "new" scale of ethical values in response to this question by the nation:

בְּמָה אֶקְדֶּם ה', אִכְפֹּף לֹא-לֵהִי מְרוֹם?
הֲאֶקְדַּמְנוּ בְּעוֹלוֹת? בְּעֶגְלִים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה? הֲיִרְצֶה ה' בְּאַלְפֵי אֵילִים?
בְּרַבְבוֹת נַחְלֵי שֶׁמֶן?...

*With what shall I come before G-d [and] bow before the Most
High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with
year-old calves? Will He be pleased with thousands of rams,
with myriads of streams of oil?* (Micha 6,6-7)

To this, G-d's direct answer surprisingly changes the frame of reference:

הֲגִיד לְךָ אָדָם, מָה טוֹב וּמָה ה' דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ.
כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצָּנֵעַ לְכַת עִם אֱ-לֹהֵיהָ.

*He has told you, O man, what is good,
and what G-d demands of you - merely to do justice,
to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d.* (verse 8)

Not thousands of rams, not pure olive oil, and not sacrifices altogether are as valuable to G-d as are justice, kindness and humility. Let us take note that Micha uses the same word - *man* - to emphasize the “demotion” of sacrifices, as the Torah used when it first introduced the concept of sacrifices:

אָדָם בִּי יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קִרְבָּן לַה'...

A man amongst you who offers a sacrifice to God... (Vayikra 1,2)

■ The Interim Goal

The dichotomy between the Torah’s attitude towards sacrifices and that of the Prophets can be explained via the classic dispute between two great giants of Israel – the Rambam (Maimonides) and the Ramban (Nachmanides) – regarding the value and significance of sacrifices.

The Rambam, in his *Guide to the Perplexed* (3,32), explains the purpose of the Torah’s commandments. It is to extricate the Nation of Israel from the degraded state of vile, false idol worship to which most of the world had descended, and raise them up to the true and uplifting service of G-d. To reach this exalted status in which we can pray to and speak with G-d, there must be an “interim station” along the way. Since the entire world was mired in the negative aspects of bringing sacrifices to their gods and temples, the Torah agreed to allow the Jews to continue to engage in similar activity only with certain improvements and conditions: The sacrifices must be 1) in G-d’s Name, 2) in the place that G-d chose, and 3) according to G-d’s precise instructions.

The Rambam compares this to when G-d brought Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt and into the Holy Land via an indirect desert route. Walking in the desert was not at all the objective; it was simply a stopgap measure given the weak state in which Israel was mired:

...וְלֹא נָחַם אֱלֹהִים דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים...

כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים פֶּן יִנְחַם הָעָם בְּרֹאֲתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִמָה.

וַיִּסַּב אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָעָם דֶּרֶךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יַם סוּף...

*God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines...
for God said: “Lest the people reconsider when they
see war and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by way
of the desert [to] the Red Sea...* (Sh’mot 13,17-18)

Returning to the sacrifices, Maimonides explains why the “interim solution” became ineffective during the times of the Prophets: The people brought sacrifices in the Beit HaMikdash according to the rules, but returned to idol-worship at the same time! This meant that they were missing the entire point for which G-d had agreed to allow them to bring sacrifices. The offerings thus became not only unnecessary, but also actually harmful, in that they fooled Israel into thinking that their sins were being cleansed by virtue of their sacrifices.

Nachmanides, however, does not accept that the sacrifices are inherently valueless, merely a tool by which to shift man’s religious inclinations to Hashem and away from idols. In his commentary to Vayikra, the Ramban is quite sharp in his criticism of the Rambam’s position. For one thing, he notes that G-d appreciated sacrifices well before they became popular around the world – such as when Noach brought a sacrifice after the Flood; Hashem “*smelled [its] pleasant aroma*” (B’reshit 8,21) and accepted it willingly! Even before that, Hashem accepted an offering from Adam’s son: “*G-d turned to Hevel and to his offering.*” (4,4)

The Ramban also mentions the Gemara that teaches us that the Divine name standing for compassion is always used in connection with the sacrifices, and not the name *Elokim*, which stands for His judgment.

He therefore explains that the sacrifices are very exalted in and of themselves. One who brings an offering must be aware that he himself could have been punished precisely as the slaughtered animal before him. He must know that G-d has done him a great kindness in allowing him to bring this animal as an atonement in his place, in order that he himself take heed and do *teshuvah*, repentance. In short, sacrificial offerings are a sublime expression of our close bonds with Hashem.

Why, then, did sacrifices seemingly lose their value during the period of the Prophets, according to the Ramban? It was because the people began to formulate a distorted view of the sacrifices, as a worthwhile price to pay for their sins, and as if G-d needed their offerings. This approach brought about Prophetic scorn, as we read in Psalms:

אם אֶרְעֵב לֹא אֶמַּר לָךְ כִּי לִי תִבֶּל וּמְלֵאָה.
הָאוֹכֵל בֶּשָׂר אֲבִירִים וְדָם עֲתוּדִים אֶשְׁתֶּה?

*If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world and its
fullness are Mine. Will I eat the flesh of bulls?
Do I drink the blood of goats?* (Tehillim 50,12-13)

■ In the Footsteps of the Creator

Let us take another step forward along the path set by the Ramban, leading to a middle road that will not contradict Maimonides' opinion.

Our Sages taught that there are three partners in the formation of a person: Two parents and Hashem. The parents grant him physical life, while G-d implants within him his soul. The parents provide him with the ways and means by which he can accomplish the ambitions that G-d imbued within him. Without the drive that G-d gives us, our bodies would remain stone-like and unmoving. The aspirations with which G-d equips us can be divided into three levels: Existential, Creative, and Spiritual.

Our existential ambitions include all our bodily, physical needs, and are known collectively as *nefesh*. The second group, our creative aspirations, comprises that which we want to accomplish, build and move with our physical bodies; this is *ruach*, spirit. Finally, our spiritual strivings are those that guide us to seek justice, kindness, compassion and giving; these are under the rubric of *neshamah*.

Above all, however, is the highest level of the aspirations that G-d implanted within us: to emulate Hashem and act like Him. He has implanted this within man by the very fact of naming him Adam, whose first and last letters, *aleph* and *mem*, are the same first and last letters of the Divine name Elokim – and the middle letter, *dalet*, stands for the word *d'mut*, image, as in בְּדִמוּת אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֹתוֹ, “*He made him in the image of Elokim.*” (B'reshit 5,1)

Thus, the name Adam that was given to humankind – to Adam and Eve together – expresses the purpose of their mission in the world: to be like G-d and represent Him and His Torah as best we can. As our Sages explain the verse, “*this is my G-d and I will beautify Him*” (Sh'mot 15,2): “Be like Him: Just like He is compassionate and merciful, you must also be compassionate and merciful.” (Shabbat 133b)

Along these lines, a critical aspect of our mission on earth is to strive to cause others to love Hashem. The cardinal commandment in the Shma Yisrael passage is this:

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ.
*You shall love Hashem your G-d with all your heart,
 all your soul, and all your being.* (D'varim 6,5)

We learn in the Talmud (Yoma 86a) what this means:

The Name of G-d must be beloved by others via one's actions. He must learn and study, and tend to Torah scholars, and carry out his business dealings faithfully, and speak pleasantly with others – and then what will people say about him? “How privileged and fortunate are his father and teacher for having taught him Torah.”

“Love of G-d” is thus not just a declaration of intentions, but rather deeds that will encourage and inspire all those around us to love G-d and His Torah and mitzvot.

■ Partnership and Mission

Hashem granted honor and glory to the mankind He created, and adorned us with the Divine image. These gifts are accompanied by G-d's expectation that man will be a loyal partner with Him in perpetuating and perfecting, materially and spiritually, the world He created. Every person is a unique creation; no one is like him, and no one has the distinctive mission he was assigned and that only he can fulfill. *Each person's particular mission is that which G-d determined would be the precise manner in which he can help perfect the world.*

The Nation of Israel, too, received a unique mission in the world, and the charter in which it is detailed was given just before the stand at Mount Sinai:

וַעֲתָה אִם שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְקוֹלִי וְשִׁמְרֶתֶם אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְהִיִּיתֶם לִי קֹגֶלֶת מִכָּל
הָעַמִּים... וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמֻלְכֵת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ...

And now, if you hearken to My voice and keep My covenant, you will be My treasure among the nations... and you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Sh'mot 19,5-6)

This is precisely Yirmiyahu's intention when he says the words we quoted above: *“For I did not command your forefathers... about sacrifices; only this did I command them: Hearken to My voice, and I will be your G-d and you will be My nation.”*

We now see that there are three levels to our relationship with Hashem: The first and most basic level is our willingness to obey G-d's instructions. This means being a loyal partner in maintaining, developing, and perfecting His world according to His will. On the second level, we aspire to uplift our bonds with Hashem by speaking with Him directly, via prayer and pleading.

And on the third and highest level, we bring sacrifices. When a man leans with all his force on a sheep or bull, as is required for all offerings, and then hands it over for a sacrifice, he is essentially saying to G-d, “I am hereby willing to go all the way *for the mission You assigned me*, even if the price will be my very life – just like this sacrifice.”

And when a communal sacrifice is offered, such as the twice-daily *Tamid* burnt-offering, it is as if the entire nation of Israel declares before G-d, “We are willing to sanctify Your name in the world, with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our beings, even at the expense of our lives.” As King David wrote:

בִּי עָלִידָה הַרְגָנוּ כָּל הַיּוֹם נִחְשָׁבְנוּ כְּצֹאן טְבָחָה.
*For we are killed all day long for You,
 we are like sheep to the slaughter.* (Psalms 44,23)

How appropriate here is the moving and uplifting poem *Bil’vavi Mishkan Evneh*, by Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner:

*In my heart I will build a sanctuary for the glory of His honor
 And an altar I will place in the sanctuary, for the rays of His splendor.
 And for a perpetual light, I will take the fire of the Binding of Isaac
 And for a sacrifice, I will offer Him My only soul.*

Now that we have understood the exalted value of sacrifices – symbolizing our complete willingness to fulfill our Divinely-assigned mission – it appears utterly preposterous and even childish to propose to G-d that we might offer sacrifices *in place of* obeying His words! This is why, as we saw above, Shmuel so strongly rebukes King Sha’ul for thinking that, as compensation for not having heeded G-d’s word, the nation should bring sacrifices: “*Does G-d want burnt-offerings and sacrifices as He wants [us] to hearken to His voice?*”

Shmuel is telling Sha’ul: “This is a totally wrong and ludicrous picture of sacrifices. Do you really think G-d needs your sacrifices? Do you think He would accept your ‘bribing’ Him like this, as if sacrifices compensate for disobeying Him!? The absolute opposite is true! Our sacrifices are the pinnacle of our willingness to obey G-d and to follow His commands, even if it means giving our lives! *That* is the true sacrifice!”

We can now also understand in this light the Prophet Yeshayahu’s rebuke (Yeshayahu 1,11-17), part of which we cited above. His harsh words parallel the above three levels:

1. *“Of what use are your many sacrifices to Me?” says G-d.*
2. *“Even if you recite many prayers, I will not hear...”*
3. *“Learn to do good, seek justice, relieve the oppressed... plead for the widow.”*

From the Prophet's words, we learn that if the entire first floor and foundation – namely, the pursuit of justice, goodness, and obedience to Hashem – stands in ruins, there is no purpose in speaking of a second floor, that of prayer to G-d, for He will not listen. And we most certainly cannot conceive of the third floor: sacrifices to G-d.

The same message emanates from the above-quoted words of the Prophet Micha:

*With what shall I come before G-d?
...With burnt offerings? ...With thousands of rams? ...
He has told you, O man, what is good, and what G-d demands of you:
just to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d.*

Micha is saying that if we fulfill the basic, fundamental mitzvot, then sacrifices are accepted, sublimely expressing our desire to come close to Hashem even at the ultimate cost. But without justice, compassion or modesty, the value of the sacrifice is zero – and even less, because it causes pointless suffering to the animal; it would be better to simply slaughter it for eating! As Yirmiyahu mocked them:

... עלוֹתֵיכֶם סָפוּ עַל זְבָחֵיכֶם וְאָכְלוּ בֶּשֶׂר.
*Add to your sacrifices [which are eaten] that which you would
bring as burnt-offerings [which are not eaten], and eat meat. (7,21)*

■ Give and Take

Most unfortunately, the idol-worshippers' warped perceptions regarding sacrifices trickled down even to the Children of Israel. The pagans truly believed that their idols ate, drank, got angry, and fought amongst themselves for honor, as written in books of Greek mythology and in the lore of other idol-worshipping peoples. Sacrifices were offered to the gods in these cultures to appease them and assuage their anger, so that they would not punish human beings. This is precisely the point in the following mocking words of Psalms:

לֹא אָקַח מִבֵּיתֶךָ פֶּר מִמִּכְלֵאֲתֶיךָ עֲתוּדִים. כִּי לִי כָל חֵיתוֹ יַעַר בְּהֵמוֹת בְּהַרְרֵי
אֱלֹהִים. יָדַעְתִּי כָּל עוֹף הָרִים וְזִיז שְׂדֵי עַמּוּדֵי.

I will not take from your home a bull, nor goats from your pens - for every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, and that which moves in the field is Mine... Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? (Psalms 50,9-13)

It is clear that Hashem has no need to have man satiate His “hunger,” for the entire world, including its animals, is His! At some point, this irrational approach was “upgraded,” giving rise to the following equally distorted attitude: “Of course He doesn’t eat or drink, but He still likes my sacrifices! I can therefore bribe G-d by bringing them, at a relatively low cost. Then, even if I sin, He will appreciate my gifts, let me off the hook, and I will be free of Divine wrath!”

It is this approach that must be fought: There can be no “give and take” negotiations with G-d. This is why the sacrifices must be of our own genuine, sincere will:

וְכִי תִזְבְּחוּ זֶבַח שְׁלָמִים לַה', לְרִצְוֹנְכֶם תִּזְבְּחוּ.
*When you bring a shlamim offering,
 do so of your own free will.* (Vayikra 19,5)

In other words, the sacrifices are of our volition, not G-d’s; He doesn’t need them. Yes, He might accept them - if they are motivated by a pure desire to come close and obey Him, even at the expense of one’s life. In such a case, He will even provide a sign that the sacrifice has been accepted via a Heavenly fire to consume it. But if the sacrifices are triggered by external motives, they only kindle more Divine wrath.

Another indication of this point is the Gemara mentioned above and cited by the Ramban: Throughout the Torah, the Divine name of *Havayah*, which stands for compassion, is the one used in connection with the sacrifices, and not the name *Elokim*, which stands for Judgment and denotes a position of authority such as a judge, minister, or king. Those in such positions generally evoke the sense among their underlings that they can be “bought” or bribed with displays of honor and the like.

But *Havayah*, the Divine Name of compassion that we refer to as Hashem, means the opposite, namely, that G-d has created the world based on the concept of infinite giving, with no need for receiving in return at all. This is precisely the nature of our sacrifices that G-d loves: Total and endless giving on our part, with no thought of receiving something in exchange.

This point can be derived from the Torah's very first verses that deal with the laws of sacrifices:

אָדָם כִּי יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קֹרְבָן לֵה'... לְרִצְנוֹ לְפָנַי ה'.
וְסָמַךְ יָדוֹ עַל רֹאשׁ הָעֹלָה וְנִרְצָה לוֹ לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו.

*A man amongst you who offers a sacrifice to God...
it should be of his own free will.*

*And he shall lean with his hands on the head of the offering,
and it shall be accepted for him as an atonement.* (Vayikra 1,2-4)

We see, firstly, that this is referring to an *adam*, the “man” who, as we saw above, wishes to emulate Hashem. We see also that the Divine Name used is *Havayah*, meaning that he wishes to emulate Him in the qualities of compassion, mercy, and kindness. Thus, if his sacrifice is an expression of his pure desire to do everything for Hashem, demanding nothing in return, then his sacrifice will be *accepted for him*.

This is summed up in yet another verse:

זָבַח לְאֱלֹהִים יָחָרֵם בְּלִתֵּי לֵה' לְבָדוֹ.

*One who sacrifices to the gods will die;
only to Hashem must he sacrifice.* (Sh'mot 22,19)

The plain meaning is that one must never offer sacrifices to any deity other than G-d – but by using the word Elohim, which sometimes means “judges,” the allusion is clear: Our sacrifices are directed to the G-dly attributes of compassion and mercy, not those of strict judgment and authority.

The source of this understanding is the following Talmudic passage (Menachot 110a), quoted by the Ramban in his commentary to the Torah:

The Torah states that a burnt offering (*olah*), a bird offering, and a mincha flour offering are all רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ, a *pleasant fragrance*, approved and desired by Hashem. This teaches that it matters less whether one offers much or little, and more that his intentions are directed towards G-d.

It was taught in a Baraita: R. Shimon ben Azzai said, Come and see what is written in the chapter on sacrifices. It does not say the Divine Name *E-l*, or *Elokim*, but rather the Name *Adnut*...

And if you should claim that G-d requires the sacrifices for eating? No, for we read: “*Were I hungry, I would not tell you, for the whole world and its fullness is Mine*” (Psalms 50,9-13). G-d says: “My intention

in mandating sacrifices is not so that you should say that you shall do My will in order that I will do your will – for the sacrifices are not My desire, but rather *your* desire.”

It therefore results that even during the times of Hevel and Noach, before idol-worship was popular around the world and sacrifices were still “pure,” the human soul did not reach the level of pure giving via thought alone, but only via something concrete, such as a sacrificial offering.

This tells us that in the World to Come, when the soul attains the proper level, it will perhaps be possible to exchange concrete sacrifices for something abstract and spiritual, such as genuine uplifting of our soul during our prayers to G-d.

Our Sages of the Medrash added as follows:

R. Pinchas and R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Menachem: In the future world, all sacrifices will be voided – except for the Thanksgiving offering, which will never be abolished. (Vayikra Rabba 27,12)

And even the Thanksgiving offering will be uplifted, via the cleaving of our soul with G-d:

לְדָוִד אֵלֶיךָ ה' נִפְשִׁי אֶשָּׂא.

To David: To You, G-d, I will lift my soul. (Psalms 25,1)

