

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Vayikra

Approaching Korbanos

INTRODUCTION

Much of Chumash Vayikra is devoted to the subject of korbanos (offerings). Beginning with the earliest commentators, we encounter lengthy discussions as to how to understand the purpose of korbanos within the Divine program of Torah living. The matter is compounded when we consider that alongside the Torah's many and detailed mitzvos involving korbanos, there are words of numerous Neviim which appear to specifically "tone down" the significance of animal offerings.¹ How are we meant to relate to all of this?

CLASSICAL APPROACHES

Let us begin our discussion with a survey of approaches to korbanos as found in the early commentators:

Rambam: As is well known, the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim² writes that animal offerings were provided by the Torah as a concession for the Jewish people who were unable to relate to Divine service without korbanos, as were offered at that time by all the other nations of the world. He adds that at the same time as the Torah included korbanos, it also restricted their parameters in order to moderate their role within Judaism. These restrictions can be seen in terms of the specific location they are offered (the Mishkan) as well as the specific people who can offer them (Kohanim).³

1 See e.g. Yirmiyahu 7:22 and Tehillim 40:7.

2 Sec 3 Chap. 32.

3 In Chapter 46, the Rambam states further that the korbanos do not only entail a concession to the religious attitude of that time, but many of their parameters also contain a repudiation thereof; for example, the species of animals which are slaughtered and offered as korbanos are specifically those which were worshipped as deities themselves by other peoples.

The Ramban, in his commentary to Vayikra (1:9), strongly rejects the approach of the Rambam as expressed in Moreh Nevuchim. In addition to questioning whether incorporating korbanos within Torah is actually effective in distancing people from idolatrous notions, he notes that the first korbanos offered by Kayin, Hevel and later Noach, were offered before pagan societies even existed. Moreover, the Torah states in innumerable places that korbanos are a "ריח ניחוח" – pleasing aroma" before Hashem, implying that they have intrinsic positive value and are not merely a preventative or concessionary measure.

The Abarbanel, in his Introduction to Vayikra, defends the Rambam's position, citing support for it from the Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 22:8). However, later commentators question whether that Midrash is presenting a reason for the idea of korbanos themselves, or specifically for the requirement that they be offered only in the Mishkan, see Yefei Toar to Vayikra Rabbah ibid. and Introduction of R' Dovid Tzvi Hoffman to Chumash Vayikra p. 60-61.

However, it should be noted that the Moreh Nevuchim is not the only place where the Rambam discusses korbanos. In the Mishneh Torah,⁴ the Rambam writes that all korbanos are in the category known as chukim – mitzvos whose reasons we cannot comprehend. He also cites there the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos⁵ which states that the world stands on account of the service of korbanos. This would clearly seem to indicate an approach to korbanos as being something of immense intrinsic value. A full picture of the Rambam's view will thus emerge from taking both of the above discussions into account.⁶

Ibn Ezra: The Ibn Ezra explains that the procedure of korbanos is designed to help a person achieve atonement. Upon seeing the slaughter of the animal, he will reflect that this should be happening to him for transgressing Hashem's will, but Hashem extends mercy toward him and allows an animal to be brought in his stead. Hence, the person places the hands with which he sinned on the head of the animal and confesses his transgression. The blood of the korban – representing his blood – is sprinkled on the mizbeyach (altar), and the internal organs and limbs are offered on the mizbeyach, representing the inner thoughts and drives that led to sinful action.⁷

Al Derech Ha'emes: After critiquing the approach of the Rambam and endorsing that of the Ibn Ezra, the Ramban⁸ proceeds to state that, "Al Derech Ha'emes" – in terms of the true mystical workings of the world (i.e. kabbalah) – korbanos entail a hidden secret. Later commentators explicate this concept to mean that korbanos enlist all levels of physical existence: Inanimate matter (salt), animate matter (meal offerings and wine libations) animal life (the korban) and human life (the Kohen performing the avodah), thereby aligning them with the higher spiritual realms and allowing blessing to flow down from there in to the world. The specific pathways through which this Divine influence flows is reflected in the numerous details that are particular to each category of korban.⁹

4 Hilchos Me'ilah 8:8.

5 1:2.

6 See, concerning this, Ritva in Sefer Zikaron to Vayikra loc. cit. At any rate, the notion propounded by some that in the Rambam's view, if the people would no longer find it difficult to relate to religious worship without korbanos then they would no longer be necessary, is plainly repudiated by the Rambam's explicit ruling (Hilchos Melachim 11:1) that korbanos will be reinstated in future times.

7 In a similar vein, the Sefer Hachinuch (mitzvah 95) explains that the slaughtering of an animal in the Beis Hamikdash reflects the lack of prospects for an enduring existence for one who leads his life without guidance from his intellect, thereby rendering himself essentially analogous to an animal. The Sefer Hachinuch notes that although this type of approach would seem to be appropriate specifically for korbanos that are brought to atone for sins, nevertheless, the overarching message of the importance a person being guided by their intellect is relevant for people in all situations and thus includes voluntary korbanos as well.

8 Vayikra 1:9.

9 See e.g. R' Chaim of Volozhin, Nefesh Hachaim 2:12, Ruach Chaim 1:2 and ibid. 3:2. See Sefer Hachinuch loc. cit. who writes that any rational explanation can only account for the general idea of korbanos; whereas when it comes to the details, "We cannot understand anything at all without the help of the Mekubalim; before them we bow and they illuminate our eyes." See further regarding reasons for korbanos, Kuzari sec. 2 chap. 26, Akeydas Yitzchak shaar 57 and Rama, Toras Ha'olah sec 2 chap. 1.

STANDING AND ENDURING

The Mishnah in the beginning of Pirkei Avos¹⁰ states that the world stands on three things: Torah, Avodah (the service of korbanos) and acts of kindness. Numerous commentators deal with the fact that the mishnah at the end of that chapter¹¹ discusses the very same question of things upon which the world stands, and presents three entirely different things: justice, truth and peace.

R' Yehoshua Heller¹² explains that the topic of the two mishnayos is not entirely identical. The first Mishneh states that "on three things the world stands (עומד)," while the second discusses the three things "for which the world endures (קיים)." The earlier Mishneh was said by Shimon Hatzaddik, who lived during the time of the Beis Hamikdash, when korbanos were yet brought. At that time, the world was capable of "standing," i.e. existing on its optimum level. After the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, with korbanos no longer in operation, the focus shifts from the world "standing" to it "enduring", i.e. holding on on some basic level, as the Jewish people are in exile. This is the topic of the second Mishnah, authored after the destruction by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who says that it is justice, truth peace that allow the world to endure until the final redemption and the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash when it will be able to "stand" once more in the full sense of the word.

MAHARAL: TRUE AND FALSE EXISTENCE

A most profound approach to the realm of korbanos is found in numerous places in the writings of the Maharal.¹³ It is the nature of the physical world that it allows a person to look at himself as an independent existence, detached from Hashem Who is the Source of all existence and thus the only True Existence. This detached self-image will naturally lead into a view of how a person should lead his life and what he should be striving to attain. In this regard, every important decision about a person's life flows from this key question. To this end, the offering up of a korban serves to express and embed the idea that all existence – including his own – is secondary to that of Hashem. This awareness, which allows a person to avoid leading a detached existence, instead attaching himself to his Creator, thereby coming closer to Him, is the purpose of a קרבן – korban, which derives from the word קרוב – close.

PRAYER AS AVODAH

In this light we can understand the idea that, in the absence of korbanos, the role of avodah is fulfilled through prayer.¹⁴ On the face of it, offering a korban and praying, while both important religious pursuits, do not seem similar at all. However, when we appreciate that the basis of korbanos is recognizing that our existence is totally dependent upon – and secondary to – that of Hashem, we will see that this profound truth is what permeates our prayers as we ask Hashem – the Ultimate Existence and Source of all blessing – to provide for our needs.

10 1:2.

11 Ibid. 18.

12 Commentary Toldos Yehoshua to Pirkei Avos.

13 See e.g. Gevuros Hashem chaps. 8 and 69, Derech Chaim 1:2 and Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Ha'anavah chap. 1.

14 See Berachos 26b and commentary of Rabbeinu Yonah to Avos 1:2.

BEYOND THE BEIS HAMIKDASH – REYACH NICHACH

As we have indicated, the full implications of the idea that is expressed and reinforced by bringing a korban should extend well beyond that particular experience. For a person's recognition of his life as deriving from the will of Hashem, the Primary Existence, will naturally have bearing his relationship to that will as expressed in the mitzvos of the Torah. Awareness of the nature of one's existence will dictate one's view of how that existence should be led. In this regard, offering a korban assumes full meaning within the broader picture of elevated Jewish living that it engenders. In this vein, the commentary *Maaseh Hashem*¹⁵ explains most beautifully a phrase which appears constantly within the context of korbanos: "רֵיחַ נִיחַח" – a pleasing aroma." Why is this aspect of the korban repeatedly emphasized? He explains that an aroma of something is not yet the thing itself, but it serves as an indication that it is coming. So, too, the offering of a korban should serve as an "aroma" of things to come – a more elevated spiritual and moral trajectory for the way one leads one's life.

A MESSAGE UNHEARD

On the other hand, should korbanos become the focus in and of themselves, with no regard whatsoever for their message beyond that experience, they stand to lose much of their value. Worse still, if a korban is knowingly brought in order to compensate for being remiss or corrupt in some other aspect of Jewish living, the korban will be viewed in a negative light, for it is effectively encouraging the person in the exact opposite direction to which a korban should be directing him. In this light, the Kli Yakar presents a fascinating insight into the Torah's disqualification of a stolen animal as a korban.¹⁶ This is in consideration, not only of what the korban has come from – a prohibited act of stealing – but also of what it can lead to. A person may steal or extort money and then exonerate himself by sectioning off some of it to purchase a korban. This program of inbuilt expiation means that instead of the korban signaling the end of his criminal activities, it actually condones and perpetuates them. A "korban" such as this is completely disqualified by the Torah.¹⁷

It is in situations such as these that we find the prophets criticizing the offering of korbanos. Thus, for example, while rebuking the people for the Godless and rampant corruption that had overtaken their society, the prophet Yeshayahu declares:

לָמָּה לִּי רַב זִבְחֵיכֶם יֹאמֵר ה' שָׂבַעֲתִי עֲלוֹת אֵילִים וְחֶלֶב מְרִיאִים וְדָם פְּרִים וּכְבָשִׂים
וְעֵתוּדִים לֹא חֶפְצֵתִי

*Why do I need your many offerings? Says Hashem, I am sated with burnt-offerings of rams and the fats of fatlings; the blood of bulls, sheep and goats I do not desire.*¹⁸

The combination of widespread oppression of the weak and helpless with the perversion of justice for personal gain clearly indicated that the additional korbanos were not serving any meaningful purpose and moreover were, as such, an object of abhorrence to Hashem. Indeed, in that same chapter, Hashem says He will likewise ignore the prayers of the people as long as they are steeped in evil and corruption. Prayer is a religious pursuit whose value is undisputed, yet it too is undesired and unwelcome when the poor and defenseless lie trampled under the boot of the one who is praying. The same can be true for donations given to worthy causes as an inbuilt penance for money attained in unworthy ways.

15 Parshas Noach chap. 27.

16 See Rashi to verse 2 s.v. *Adam*.

17 See similarly, Ramban to Devarim 23:19.

18 Yeshayahu 1:11.

It is in this vein the prophets railed against the misuse – and abuse – of korbanos offered by those completely oblivious to the dissonance between these offerings and their activities outside of the Beis Hamikdash.

A MESSAGE RECLAIMED

In light of all the above ,we will appreciate that when we pray daily for the restoration of the service of korbanos ,we are praying to return to a state when they will be faithful to their purpose – and we will be faithful to their message .It is concerning that future time that the prophet Yeshayahu ,who had so emphatically denounced the korbanos when offered as an empty and meaningless gesture ,prophesies about their restoration when they are fulfilling their purpose as originally intended:

וְהֵבִיאֹתִים אֶל הַר קְדְשִׁי וְשִׂמְחָתִים בְּבֵית תְּפִלָּתִי עֹלֹתֵיהֶם וְזִבְחֵיהֶם לְרָצוֹן עַל מִזְבְּחִי

I will bring them to My holy mountain and I will gladden them in My house of prayer, their burnt-offerings and their peace-offerings will find favor on My altar.¹⁹

19 56:7.