



On the Meaning of Korbanos and Everything Else

Rabbi Mayer Schiller

The beginning of *Sefer Vayikra* brings with it, for those given to reflection on ultimate matters, the usual questions concerning the meaning and purpose of the *sefer hakorbanos*. Much comment has been expended on the basic disagreement between the Rambam and the Ramban as to the goal of animal sacrifices. If we probe this *machlokes* it seems that at its root we find the very divergent Torah world views of these two *gedolei ha-rishonim*. In what follows we hope, *iy"H*, to present, in brief, these two approaches and offer some comments on their relevancy to contemporary concerns.

First, let us explore the Rambam's position. As stated in *Moreh Nevukhim*, (Section 3, Chapter 32) the purpose of many *mitzvos* is to move the people gradually from errant beliefs to correct ones. Since the common practice at the time of the giving of the Torah and "in which the Israelites were brought up," was to have temples with images, priestly cults and animal sacrifices it would have been impossible to have us abandon these practices abruptly. Therefore, "He did not command us to give up and discontinue all these manners of service for to obey

such a commandment would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that which he is used." The goal of this compromise with social reality was to rid the system of idolatrous elements and "firmly establish the truly great principle of our faith (alt. our nation) the existence and unity of G-d."

The Rambam's view of *korbanos* seems based on his overall understanding of *mitzvos* in general. They have three goals as concisely expressed in *Moreh* (Section 3, Chapter 31), "every commandment from among these six hundred and thirteen commandments exists either with a view to communicating a correct opinion, or to putting an end to an unhealthy opinion, or to communicating a rule of justice, or to warding off an injustice, or to endowing men with noble moral qualities, or to warning them against an evil moral quality. Thus, all [the commandments] are bound up with three things: opinions, moral qualities, and political civic actions."

Thus, for the Rambam, the assent to Jewish dogma is paramount, to the extent that in his formulation of the thirteen basic principles of Torah belief

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The Battle of Vayikra: Moshe vs. Bilaam

Yosef van Bemmelen

In this week's Parsha, Hashem tells Moshe about the *karbanos* that are to be offered in the mishkan. The first pasuk begins with "*vayikra el Moshe*", "and He called to Moshe." The word "Vayikra" is written with a small aleph. Although commentators don't usually comment on smaller letters in the Torah, here

we find an exception.

Rashi explains that the word "Vayikra" is a word of affection that suggests Hashem's close relationship with Moshe. Moshe, in his unparalleled humility, wanted Hashem to write the word "Vayikar" (literally "and He happened"), which connotes a more distant relationship and is therefore used to describe Hashem's communication with Bilaam.

Hashem, however told Moshe to write "Vayikra" with an aleph, so Moshe wrote it with a smaller aleph to show his reluctance.

We find another connection between Bilaam and Moshe in the phrase "*lo kam b'yisrael k'Moshe od*", "None like Moshe ever arose in Israel." The Ge-

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(found in his *peirush haMishnayos* at the end of *Sanhedrin*) he states that a person lacking proper belief is “not *b’klal Yisroel*.” (He does grant in the opening *halachos* of the third *perek* of *Hilchos Mamrim* in *Mishneh Torah* that a negative environment may mitigate the subjective culpability of one possessing heretical views. We refer here only to the Rambam’s objective formulation of the status of Jewish heretics as a window to the paramount role of orthodoxy in his formulation of Judaism.) Secondary to correct opinions there are moral qualities and the right ordering of society. This articulation forces the Rambam to understand all ritual *mitzvos* as simply teaching or socializing means to the above mentioned three ends. A recent work by Professor Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides Confrontation With Mysticism* (Littman:2007), painstakingly documents the Rambam’s consistency in this position. He demonstrates what, in his terminology, is the Rambam’s “functionalist view” of ritual *mitzvos*. They are not based on a pre-existing metaphysical or supernatural order. Of

themselves, the ritually commanded and prohibited objects or rites are not inherently different than the rest of the physical world. The laws are solely to get us, somehow, towards one or more of the above mentioned three goals.

Many have cited the Rambam as a powerful representative of the contrasting view of *korbanos*, in particular, and *mitzvos*, in general. This may be seen throughout his commentary on *Chumash* where mystical explanations relating to the inner essence of the soul and the cosmos are invariably presented as the “*sod*” of *mitzvos*. (See, for an example of this his kabbalistic explanation of sacrifices in the ninth *posuk* of this week’s *parsha*.) In fact, one could just as easily cite the Kuzari as among those who adopted what might be termed an essentialist view of ritual *mitzvos*. In this view, the positive and negative ritual laws are based upon the inherent spiritual fabric of existence, seen and non seen, conscious and sub-conscious, in this world and in other, higher realms. We are called upon by *Hashem* to participate in the process of achieving a *tikkun* for our *neshamos* and of all of exis-

tence, by performing rituals that have objective impact upon the inner and, hence, most important elements of being.

The Ramban is quite vehement in his denunciation of the Rambam’s view, when he writes also on the ninth *posuk* of the first *perek*, “far be it that they (*korbanos*) should have no other purpose and intention except the elimination of idolatrous practices from the minds of fools. These words are a ‘healing which causes a severe wound and they make the table of the Eternal polluted.’ ” He argues further that the verse explicitly states that the sacrifices are “for a pleasing odor to *Hashem*.” Obviously there is still some element of metaphor in this phrase, even according to the Ramban, but he is clearing asserting that there is some form of positive effect in Higher Realms generated by *korbanos*. In addition, the Ramban suggests that, contrary to the Rambam’s sociological theory, the continuation of animal sacrifices, incense and like practices might very well maintain the people in their superstitious and idolatrous beliefs. Lastly, he points to history,

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marah makes a *diyuk* that only within Israel did anybody ever compare to Moshe, but Bilaam, a non-Jew, was similar. The Kli Yakar explains that both Moshe and Bilaam received their high level of *nevuah* as a result of the merit of others. Moshe received his high level of prophecy in the merit of Bnai Yisrael, and Bilaam received his prophecy to prevent the nations of the world from arguing that had they had a powerful prophet like

Moshe they would never have sinned.

We see a contrast between the *midos* of Bilaam and the *midos* of Moshe. Bilaam did not actually help his nation spiritually, but instead used his prophetic power to increase his personal honor and riches. Moshe, on the other hand, was known for his modesty. When Hashem first commanded him to lead the Jews out of Egypt, he was reluctant because he thought he was unworthy. Moshe, unlike Bilaam, understood that everything

comes from Hashem and could be taken away at any time.

Another hint to Moshe’s humility can be found in the small aleph itself. The letter aleph is the first letter of the word “Ani” (“I”), representing the will or ego. A person must shrink his ego before he can become a true *yarei shamayim*. We should all try to emulate the high level of Moshe Rabbeinu who, unlike Bilaam, humbled himself despite the enormous *kavod* of getting a high level of *nevuah*.

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where the world's first inhabitants, the children of Adam, Noach and the *Ovos* brought *korbanos* long before idol worship had become part of the human condition.

It is interesting to reflect on the fact, just noted, that even essentialists shy away from the full force of an absolutely mechanistic, ritualized, view of *mitzvos*. They will assert that there is spiritual potency to the *mitzvos* but will often refer, for example, to the *kapporah* qualities of *korbanos*, the *sair l'azoz*, *itzumo shel yom* and the *tzitz* as being dependant on our participation in the process with a mental mindset of repentance. Indeed, even if *mitzvos* have essentialist value we still *posken* that they are in need of *kavonah* to be fulfilled thus thrusting back, it seems, to some sort of functionalist demands.

It is in the minutiae of prohibited foods, the thousands of laws in *seder taharos* and *zeroim* where the essentialist view seems most compelling. If the hundreds of thousands of laws that govern these areas are reflective of nothing but a training towards correct philosophy, ethics or a just society, there does seem to be a tad too many of them.

One suspects that the functionalist view cannot escape the logic that an unfathomable G-d would seem to implant, of necessity, the unfathomable in His Torah and commandments. In fact, it is the very supra – rational nature of the Divine that many functionalists escape to when *mitzvos* seem to run contrary to current moral assumptions, as in the commandments to commit genocide, prohibit the freeing of Gentile slaves and many similar laws that seem beyond the grasp of the contemporary moral consensus of humanity.

It may be possible to suggest, following, the functionalist position that although ritual commands and prohibitions are not revealing a pre – existent supernatural reality, they do create it *ex post facto*. In other words, there is nothing inherently bad spiritually about, say, prohibited foods. However, after the Divine Lawgiver forbids them, they then acquire negative spiritual essence, beyond their theological, ethical or social symbolism.

Of course, the consistent Maimonidean would probably have to reject even this fall back position because the only possible purposes of *mitzvos* are the three functionalist ones outlined previously. Perhaps, the inaccessibility of Divine

Reason might allow this view to accept the possibility of other meanings to *mitzvos* that cannot be perceived by finite men.

At this point in our people's history the influence of the Zohar and the Ari, the Maharal, and the combined effect of the GRA and the Baal Shem's acceptance of the authenticity of *sod* has seemingly ended this debate for most believing Jews. In Modern Orthodox circles, the deep ties between almost strains of post - 1967 religious Zionism with the kabbalistically drenched thoughts of both Rav Kooks, has led most to accept the essentialist view of *mitzvos*.

I have not attempted here to score this bout. What might be worth remembering is that essentialists should not neglect the rationalist deciphering of Torah. They will certainly go beyond this deciphering but the simple this worldly implanting of proper beliefs and ethical conduct should form our ground floor of *ta-amei ha-mitzvos*. And, functionalists should not forget the Ineffable Mystery that must inhere in a legislation that we, believing Jews, doggedly insist is, when all is said and done, Divine.

Weekly Halacha

Reviewed by Rabbi Baruch Pesach Mendelson

Dovid Strauss

While wearing *tefillin* one should not think about anything other than *tefillin*, *davening*, or Torah (24). In addition, one may not sleep or doze off, joke around (and essentially speak idly), enter a bathroom or similar place (25),

or pass gas (26), while wearing *tefillin*. One may not carry *tefillin* that are not double-wrapped into such a place as well (27).

One with stomach problems should put on his *tefillin* before *Birchos Krias Shema* and remove them after *Shmoneh Esrei* (28).

One who cannot manage more than a few minutes without passing gas should put on his *tefillin*, say *Shema* if possible, and remove them (29). A healthy person should keep his *tefillin* on until *Kaddish* after *Aleinu*. They should be worn for three

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