YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**PARASHAT VAYIKRA**

**SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

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Dedicated to Rachel Roytberg z"l,
whose yahrzeit falls on the first of Nissan,
by Family Rueff.

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The World of Sacrifices

Adapted by Gilad Elituv

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The commandments – practical and moral challenges

We often encounter situations of conflict or ‘collision’ between the demands of halakha and the demands of practical reality. In each such instance we have to make decisions that take halakhic, social and ideological factors into consideration.

For example, in the time of the *Rishonim* the prohibition of *chadash* became a very serious challenge when there was widespread famine in Europe. The *Rishonim* went to great lengths to find creative solutions that would uphold the halakha, on one hand, while providing food for hungry Jews, on the other.

Going beyond the practical challenge presented by a conflict between halakha and the reality of this world, at different times in history issues of principle and morality have been raised in relation to different *mitzvot*. The dilemma posed by the idea of sacrifices has featured at the center of such debate since ancient times. The moral and psychological difficulty surrounding the idea of offering up a whole animal as a sacrifice demands some consideration.

Before addressing the root of the dilemma, we might note, as a point worth thinking about, that while questions and criticism concerning circumcision have likewise been raised in some circles, most of the religious public is not disturbed by this practice. And here too, with the infant wailing in the background, we sit down to a *seudat mitzva* of meat and wine.

It is reasonable to assume that if the commandment of circumcision had ceased to be applicable two thousand years ago, we would find it very difficult to reinstate today, even if it was shown, clearly and decisively, that the commandment must be performed.

My intention here is not to suggest that practice dulls our moral senses. Rather, it may be that continuous observance of a commandment throughout the generations offers a different, deeper perspective and understanding of its significance.

Let us consider three aspects of the dilemma of sacrifices.

Closeness-distance

We begin with the Rambam, who is the first to address the issue:

“Many precepts in the Torah reflect a similar approach adopted by God – i.e., that it is impossible to suddenly move from one extreme to the other. Man is therefore by nature incapable of suddenly abandoning all that he has been accustomed to.

When God sent Moshe to make [*Bnei Yisrael*] a ‘kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ through knowledge of God… and to give themselves over to His service, as it is written, ‘And to serve Him with all your heart’ (*Shemot* 11:13), ‘And you shall serve the Lord your God’ (*Shemot* 23:25); ‘and you shall serve Him’ (*Devarim* 8:5), the accepted custom throughout the world at that time, which everyone was used to, and the general mode of worship which [*Bnei Yisrael*] had grown up on, was to sacrifice various animals in those temples which contained images, to bow down to those images, and to burn incense before them. Religious and ascetic people at that time were those who were devoted to service in those temples erected to the sun, the moon and the stars…

God’s wisdom and His plan, as displayed in the whole of Creation, did not require that He command us to abandon and discontinue all these manners of service, for at that time it would have been unthinkable: the nature of man tends towards that to which he is accustomed, and [such a command] at that time would have been like a prophet in our times calling us to the service of God and telling us, ‘God has commanded you not to pray to Him, nor to fast, nor to seek deliverance in times of trouble; you must serve Him in thought alone, with no action.’

And for this reason God allowed these kinds of service to continue, transforming their orientation from created beings and imaginary, unreal things to His Name, commanding that He be served in the same manner: to build a Temple to Him – ‘And they shall make Me a Sanctuary’ (*Shemot* 25:8), and to build an altar to His Name – ‘An altar of earth shall you make for Me’ (*Shemot* 20:21); to offer sacrifices to Him – ‘If any man of you brings an offering to the Lord…’ (*Vayikra* 1:2); to bow down to Him and to offer incense before Him.” (*Guide of the Perplexed* III:32)

The Rambam, in his customary fashion, views the sacrificial service as a ‘golden mean’ – a middle path – in Divine service. A person seeking to serve God faces a seemingly intractable dilemma: on the one hand, God’s unknowable, abstract essence makes it impossible to understand even the chasm separating man from his Creator. But excessive emphasis on this abstraction may lead to a perception of a God Who is distant and not relevant – as in contemporary Western culture. On the other hand, man seeks dialogue that is alive and dynamic. We sit and talk over a cup of coffee or a good meal. Man would like to encounter God in the same way; but of course, this sort of perception could lead one to imagine different divine powers, heaven forfend, or – worse still – to the idea that God has urges, impulses and inclinations, just as man does – a perception reflected in the mythologies of many cultures.

The Rambam maintains that, given this tension, sacrifices represent a middle path. They allow man to make an offering to God, engendering the sense of a warm, attentive, intimate relationship, while maintaining the necessary distance between them.

Atonement as an act that makes an impression

Second, it must be remembered that at the heart of the Temple is the *Kodsh ha-kodashim*, housing the Ark and the Tablets of the Covenant. Entry into the Sanctuary requires purification and atonement, achieved by means of washing at the *kiyor* (laver – washbasin) and the offering of sacrifices upon the altar, respectively. In our times, when a person transgresses, he might feel remorse or discomfort for a few moments, but afterwards there remains not a trace of any regret or heartache. At best, he might remember his transgression and feel remorse for it when Elul comes around.

Is this a proper and worthy process of teshuva and repair? Obviously not. Following a sin, we expect a person to seek atonement and, moreover, to experience regret and internalize the significance of his misdeed, so that he will not repeat it.

If a person sinned during the Temple times, he had to bring a sacrifice to achieve atonement. He had to look through his herd and carefully choose a lamb – a lamb that was with him from morning until night, a lamb that he had nurtured and protected from all harm. Then he must take a knife and slaughter that lamb, and the sight of the animal a moment before its life is ended will be etched in his memory, preventing him from sinning again. Atonement is not a simple or automatic process. It demands something of the sinner – a profound experience that will prevent him from repeating his actions.

Pain as the price of religious experience

Third, pain as a psychological experience is a significant element in Divine service. When a person brings a sacrifice, and its blood is sprinkled on the horns of the altar, he is obligated at that time to pour out his heart before God. If he fails to do so, his sacrifice is ‘an offering of abomination.’

What *Chazal* teach us by stating that “the prayers were instituted in place of the sacrifices” is precisely that the outpouring of the human soul corresponds to the departure of the animal’s soul. Maintaining a religious experience and connection with God carries a heavy price which must be paid. In order for one to identify with his offering and to truly pour out his soul, there is a need for the pouring of the animal’s blood, which is its soul.

For values that are dear to us we are willing to pay a price: childbirth is likewise accompanied by pain and suffering. The same rule applies to our desire for closeness to God, which entails the offering of sacrifices – both of our animals and our hearts.

(This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat parashat Vayikra 5775 [2015].)