

Parshas Vayikra

IT'S ALL FOR YOU...

In the aftermath of the Golden Calf, the Mishkan laws are delivered. Hashem calls to Moshe, before explaining the laws of the Avoda services:

ויקרא – Hashem called on Moshe; and spoke to him from the Hall, to say... (1: 1)

ויקרא is a deliberate expression, indicating consideration and care. ויקרא has a small א – Rashi quotes a Midrash that takes this to mean that while writing the words, Moshe was drawing an analogy to the prophecy of Bilam, of whom it is said ויקרא אל בלעם – that Hashem chanced a communication with, unplanned. That is, that Moshe was saying that he too was not worthy of being deliberately called, and that his prophecy was also chanced upon him.

There would seem to be a massive problem with this. One of the foundational tenets of Judaism is that Moshe Rabbeinu had perfect prophecy, which cannot be superseded, such that the Torah he delivered is unimpeachable. Surely, Moshe had to believe this too, with full confidence! How then, could he draw an analogy between himself and Bilam?

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that in fact, there is a large similarity. Bilam's prophecy was incidental to the man, as Chazal state, that the nations were given a prophet to preempt the claim that if they had a prophet like Moshe, they might act differently. Bilam was a prophet for the people's sake, not his own merits.

In fact, Moshe is told something very similar. Rashi notes that א, what he is to say, are words that will captivate them and win them over in the wake of the recent tragedy. His instructions were צא ואמור להם דברי כבושים. בשבילכם הוא – I am a prophet because of you!

The opportunities that the Jewish people keep getting are expressions of love from Hashem. Even the greatest of the prophets, and the holiest of instructions, come from that place. The entire book of Vayikra seems esoteric, but we just have to dig a little bit to find incredible riches expressing this central theme. He loves us, no matter what.

LORD – I NEED A MIRACLE! – EFFORT AND THE ETERNAL FLAME

In the set of laws pertaining to how sacrifices are conducted, is the set of laws about the Mizbeach – the altar:

אש תמיד תוקד על המזבח לא תכבה – A continuous fire shall burn upon the altar; it shall not go out. (6: 6)

This is an instruction to the attendant Kohanim, that they need to constantly stoke and fuel the fire. The Mishna in Avos says that their job was made easier – עשרה ניסים נעשו בבית המקדש (...) ולא כבו הגשמים את עצי המערכה – Ten miracles occurred in the Temple, (...) and) the rains did not extinguish the logs on the fire.

Miracles are supernatural events – they are deviations from the usual expected order of events. That being said, miracles are always as simple and natural as possible – it would have been simpler for it not to rain there at all, as opposed to having rainfall on the fire but not extinguish it. Why is the miracle unnecessarily complicated?

R' Chaim Volozhin suggests a very powerful lesson. Our circumstances are fixed, our “rain” does not stop. All we can do is try our best, אֵשׁ תִּמְיֵד תִּוּקֵד עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ – the fire burnt continuously– even in the pouring rain, it would not go out.

We can have all the excuses in the world to stop and falter from what is required of us as Jews. But we have a clear model in how to conduct ourselves in the attendant Kohanim, who would fuel the fire in the pouring rain. The Mishna clearly states that God took care of what was beyond their control. Perseverance and perspiration are what it takes. People pray for miracles, when they don't see that they need to their part – their hishtadlus. This hishtadlus is the part we play in solving our problems, and the solution is ever in our hands. Miracles don't materialise on their own.

The fire on the Mizbeach was not activated by a miracle – it was only sustained miraculously. The fire wasn't “magic”; it didn't burn on it's own. It required constant additional logs; with twenty-four hour work, over hundreds of years, it did not extinguish.

Perhaps it is worth considering that the Kohen Gadol went into the Kodesh Kadashim one single time per year, on Yom Kippur. He performed the service, and said one prayer. The sole prayer ever said in the Kodesh Kadashim was that Hashem should not listen to travellers and tourists who didn't want rain, and that it should rain as much as possible. Literal and figurative.

Ask not for a lighter burden, but broader shoulders.

FAITH WHEN IT'S TOUGH

Sections of the laws of sacrifices detail how to dispose of what is not eaten or burnt as part of the Korban. It opens:

עַוְוֹת אֶהְרֹן וְאֶת בְּנָיו לֵאמֹר זֹאת תִּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה – Command Aaron and his sons, saying, This is the law of the burnt offering. (6: 2)

It is curiously referred to as תִּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה – despite not being the burnt offering at all, which is discussed earlier in the Torah. It is the fats, leftovers and refuse! How is it תִּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה?

The Midrash tells how the students of R' Yosi bar Kisma asked him when Mashiach would come to which he cryptically responded “זֹאת תִּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה”.

R' Moshe Wolfson quotes the Satmar Rav in the name of his father, who explained. Disposal of the leftovers and undesirable parts at night seems mundane and inelegant; just something that has to be done. The Torah states that an attitude adjustment is called for – this work is not mundane at all, it's תִּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה – and therefore entirely holy!

By quoting this, R' Yosi was telling his students that their question was fundamentally flawed. Their underlying assumption was that exile is a waste of time, but just has to be, like taking the trash out. His answer was that it is not a waste of time at all, it is a separate but equally important component in the bigger picture, just in a different form.

The origins of formal prayer can be pegged to two sources. They either correlate to the Temple sacrifices that are lost to us; or they symbolise the three times the Patriarchs prayed. The Torah records how Avraham stood in prayer in the morning, which we call Shachris; Yitzchak stood in the afternoon, which we call Mincha; and Yakov in the evening, which we call Maariv.

The Patriarchs were prototypes of the Jewish people, each generation refining and honing what was there, discarding undesirable traits; Yakov was the final version. It seems counter-intuitive that he is credited with Maariv, which is the least required of all the prayers. Shachris and Mincha have clearly defined Halachic requirements, and Maariv does not, to anywhere near the same degree. Arguably, it could even be said to be optional! So why is the least significant prayer attributed to our most significant ancestor?

The Sfās Emes answers along a similar vein. Yakov embodies and encapsulates the Jew in exile. There is an imprint in our national identity left by our ancestors footsteps. Forcibly displaced from his home in Israel, to a degenerate foreign soil, yet a remarkable model of quality, integrity, dignity, and class. Perfect in every way, he set the bar as high as possible. Maariv, and Yakov, are the Jew persevering against all odds, when it may even be understandable for not pulling through. This is why he was the final prototype, and why Maariv is attributed to him.

The slumps and downside of things have their key role too, and must be recognised as part of the greater web of events that lead us onward. The laws under discussion concern fats of the animal that are burned at night. Fat represent a lack of faith – it is stored energy, hedged against the possibility that the next meal may be hard to come by. Faith in the dark, in the hard times, is critical. This is what Yakov embodied, and that is what תורת העלָה is.

It is pertinent to note that the Torah obliges us to burn the fat, this lack of faith, specifically at nighttime. להגיד לבנות – at night, or when things seem unknown, cold, dark, when we feel most alone, that is precisely when we have to persevere most.

WHY DO WE BRING KORBANOS?

It's a very basic question, and there are many approaches to take. The Ramban on Vayikra 1: 9 discusses various approaches we will analyse, and is widely considered one of the fundamental parts of the Ramban's commentary on the Chumash.

The Ramban quotes the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim as the first approach. The Rambam writes there that the idea of Jews using animal sacrifice was necessary for the people as they needed a physical method of worship, having been a part of the pagan culture in Egypt and other such places. To battle and rectify the idol worship in the world, the Jews would do the same action for a sacred purpose.

The Ramban disagrees strongly with this on many facets. If we base an entire method of service to Hashem on the actions of fools and sinners, why would Hashem gain anything from it at all? Vayikra 1: 9 says that the korban creates אשה ריח ניחוח ליהוה – Hashem “enjoys” the fact that we bring korbanos. The implication of the Rambam is that the korbanos are more for man than Hashem, but if the korbanos were for man, why would Hashem enjoy it? We must find a suitable explanation for bringing korbanos that also explains why Hashem instructs it of us, rather

than why we ought to do it.

The Ramban points out that if the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim is correct, that Jewish animal sacrifice only exists to battle idol worship, then we would not find instances of korbanos before an instance of idol worship. But this is not so – Adam was the first human – there were obviously no other people around to worship idols – yet he brought korbanos nonetheless, and so too with Noach; his family were the sole survivors of the Flood – so again, there could be no idol worshippers – and we find that nonetheless he did bring korbanos. How would the Ramban explain these instances where there was no idol worship to fight?

He further asks why the solution to idol worship would be to do the same thing in a different way – this seems to lend credibility to the idolatry the korbanos are trying to fight, chas v'shalom. It would seem that it would be better to just eat animals and not have sacrifices at all if we were indeed trying to fight the credibility of idol worship, as eating them shows we don't consider them to be worthy of special attention.

R' Yakov Minkus explains the solution to this issue. The Rambam in his magnum opus, the Mishneh Torah (Hilchos Me'ila 8: 8) writes explicitly that the yesod – the distilled, fundamental, reason to bring korbanos is a חוק – there is no reason to do it other than the fact we were told to. The Moreh Nevuchim explains the inverse of this – once the mitzva exists, there is a spillover effect that we can relate to more, but the underlying reasoning remains a חוק. With this knowledge at hand, of course Noach could bring a korban, and the question about the non-existence of idol-worship falls away. Battling idol worship isn't why there are korbanos as a starting point, rather, it helps explain it after the fact.

With this knowledge of the Ramban's true approach to korbanos, we can suggest an answer to the question of why the countering of idol worship would take a similar form, rather than denigrating it, by simply eating all animals regularly, without any sacrifices at all.

Korbanos have their blood sprinkled on the Mizbeach, by a kohen, in the Beis Hamikdash. The Korban Pesach had none of these key functions, so why is it called a korban at all? R' Moshe Shapiro explains that the key to understanding this issue is that idol worship is not nothing. Paganism and idol worship have a כח הטומאה – they usurp and corrupt spirituality. Eating an animal doesn't battle the the negative of idol worship, it just nullifies it. The nullification does not require the Beis Hamikdash, or sprinkling of blood by the kohen. This is why the Pesach could be brought publicly in Egypt. The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim was saying that all korbanos have this nullifying the negative aspect to which we can relate, but we now see this isn't the full spectrum of his opinion.

The Ramban then offers a second approach. There is an intrinsic good on man's part in having korbanos. The idea of a korban is that a person should see the animal as being his substitute, and really, he ought to be sacrificed. The animal takes his place and atones for his sins, and this is the reason to have korbanos.

There is a mighty flaw with this approach too however. Most korbanos are donated, rather than obligated of people, so the Ramban's approach doesn't explain the existence of donated korbanos at all.

The Ramban offers a third solution, that is beyond the scope of this site to explain properly. The word קרבן, the root of which is the word קרב, means “closeness”. Offering a korban engenders closeness with Hashem. This is a difficult concept to explain, let alone understand, but to illustrate: we perform mitzvos to emulate Hashem's ways, but we are not emulating Hashem by bringing korbanos – we are doing something else: we are interacting with Hashem. We are provoking a reaction in Hashem, as the pasuk says; “אשה ריח ניחוח ליהוה” – on which Rashi remarks “נחת רוח לפני, שאמרתני ונעשה רצוני”. This is difficult to illustrate, but there is a difference between doing Hashem's will, and making it. When we bring a korban, we bring more of Hashem's will into the world. One could

suggest there is an element of creation here.

The Ramban brings a proof from Isaiah 60:7 that says: יַעֲלוּ עַל רִצּוֹן מִזְבְּחֵי יְבִית תִּפְאֲרֹתַי אֶפְאֵר – the Mizbeach is the expression of Hashem's will.

So in bringing a korban, a person intentions are going to correlate to how they have extended G-d's will in the world. This is why there is a concept of pigul, (a lengthy concept regarding what happens in the event that all the actions of a korban were carried out correctly, but someone in the process was thinking about something mundane, like the weather. Around 40 pages of Meseches Zevachim are devoted to this) – because the physical animal isn't what matters – there is a transfer of spirituality here, from potential/theoretical to physical in this world. It's a very big deal. The improper thoughts mean one can't interact with what he's trying to, and the korban has served its purpose, as the whole idea is not the physical at all.

So in answer to why we bring korbanos: there is the simple Moreh Nevuchim approach that we are counteracting paganism, the Ramban's simple approach that we can atone our sins, and the Ramban's esoteric Kabbalistic approach. We can suggest though, that perhaps the חוק aspect that the Ramban referred to was this third approach, and perhaps all the opinions harmonise together. Admittedly, this doesn't answer why we bring korbanos, but it does explain what the function of the korban is. (edit)

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