



Parashat Vayikra
Maimonides' Approach to Sacrifices
by David Silverberg

Arguably the most famous controversy surrounding Maimonides' writings involves his approach to understanding the reasons underlying the sacrificial order, which the Torah introduces in Parashat Vayikra. Although this debate appears – at first glance – to yield few practical or theological repercussions, it has nevertheless occupied the minds and pens and many later writers, some of whom felt an urgent need to resolve and explain Maimonides' otherwise startling position. In this essay we will trace this "sacrifice controversy," from the relevant passages in Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, to Nachmanides' famous censure of his remarks in his commentary to Parashat Vayikra, and to the attempt of scholars from both the Medieval and Modern periods to defend – and dispute – Maimonides' position.

The Indelible Mark of Paganism

In a word, Maimonides maintains that a sacrificial order was necessary only because sacrificial offerings had become the universally accepted mode of religious worship in the pagan world. Having become a nation in the cultural center of that world, Egypt, Benei Yisrael could not possibly have embraced a religious system that did not include a sacrificial rite. In Maimonides' view, then, sacrifices bear no intrinsic significance, and were merely necessitated by the indelible mark left by paganism upon the instinctive religious mindset of the Israelite nation.

We cite here several relevant passages from *Guide to the Perplexed* (3:32):

It is...impossible to go suddenly from one extreme to the other; it is therefore according to the nature of man impossible for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed... The Israelites were commanded to devote themselves to His service... But the custom which was in those days general among all men, and the general mode of worship in which the Israelites were brought up, consisted in sacrificing animals in those temples which contained certain images, to bow down to those images, and to burn incense before them... It was in accordance with the wisdom and plan of God, as displayed in the whole Creation, that He did not command us to give up and to discontinue all these manners of service; for to obey such a commandment it would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used; it would in those days have made the same impression as a prophet would make at present if he called us to the service of God and told us in His name, that we should not pray to Him, not fast, not seek His help in time of trouble; that we should serve Him in thought, and not by any action. For this reason God allowed these kinds of service to continue; He transferred to His service that which had formerly served as a worship of created beings, and of things imaginary and unreal, and commanded us to serve Him in the same manner.

Maimonides then anticipates the uneasiness many readers will experience in response to such a theory:

I know that you will at first thought reject this idea and find it strange; you will put the following question to me in your heart: How can we suppose that Divine commandments, prohibitions, and important acts, which are fully explained, and for which certain seasons are fixed, should not have been commanded for their own sake, but only for the sake of some other thing; as if they were only the means which He employed for His primary objects? What prevented Him from making His primary object a direct commandment to us, and to give us the capacity of obeying it?

Rather than conceding to the sacrificial impulse generated by pagan exposure, one might ask, God could have instead insisted on the ideal condition, of a mode of worship without sacrifices, and have granted Benei Yisrael the inner strength and wherewithal to adjust themselves to this novel concept.

Maimonides answers, quite simply, "the nature of man is never changed by God by way of miracle." The Almighty will never interfere in a supernatural manner with man's instincts and character. He will guide and instruct us how to naturally overcome negative impulses, but will not mold our hearts directly through miraculous intervention.

Several chapters later, Maimonides follows this same general approach to explain why all animal sacrifices are brought from either cattle, sheep or goats. These three species were looked to as deities by various cultures in the pagan world; God therefore ordered that we slaughter these animals for the sake of the one, true God, as a clear and demonstrative expression of our outright denial of their divine qualities.

Earlier Sources?

Maimonides uses this theory to explain the numerous verses in the Prophets condemning the people for their disproportionate emphasis on sacrificial ritual, which came at the expense of social justice and obedience to God's other ordinances. For example, as we read this Shabbat as the special haftara for Shabbat Zachor, the prophet Shemuel admonishes King Shaul, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obedience to the Lord's command? Surely, obedience is better than sacrifice, compliance than the fat of rams" (Shemuel I 15:22-3). Maimonides explains that since the sacrificial order was intended merely to reinforce the people's rejection of paganism, by transferring the pagans' mode of worship into a means of serving the Almighty, the sacrifices become meaningless if they are brought without this objective in mind. The prophets therefore censure the people for focusing their energies on the sacrificial rituals, while disregarding the other precepts of the Torah.

In particular, Maimonides emphasizes a verse from the Book of Yirmiyahu, which troubled many commentators by virtue of its seeming denial of the Biblical origin of sacrifices: "Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat! For when I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice" (Yirmiyahu 7:21-22). How can the prophet quote God as denying having instructed the newly freed Israelites to bring sacrifices? Maimonides suggests that Yirmiyahu refers here to the relative unimportance of the sacrifices in comparison with other mitzvot. The prophet stresses that God did not order Benei Yisrael to bring sacrifices as an end unto itself, but rather as a means of reinforcing their monotheistic faith. He admonishes the people for strictly adhering to the means – the sacrifices – while ignoring its objective – enhancing their belief in the Almighty. Alternatively, Maimonides suggests, the prophet here refers to the initial set of commandments conveyed to Israel soon after their departure from Egypt, during their encampment in Marah (see Shemot 15:26). Tradition teaches that at Marah the people were commanded with respect to Shabbat and civil law, which, as Maimonides explains, correspond to the two primary functions of mitzvot in general – to remind us of creation, and to ensure social justice. The concept of sacrifices was not introduced at this point, because

they are of only secondary importance. According to both these interpretations, this verse in Yirmiyahu emphasizes the secondary, rather than primary, importance of the sacrifices, thereby condemning the people's exaggerated focus on these rituals.

We should note, however, that these verses cannot be said to provide proof for Maimonides' theory. After all, the other approaches taken to understand the meaning behind sacrifices, which afford the sacrifices intrinsic value and significance, all involve some change of character or profound lesson that the sacrifice is intended to evoke or convey. According to all views, then, sacrifices lose their meaning and value once the people approach them as a magical means of atonement and the like, rather than some sincere expression of deep feelings of commitment or remorse. As such, these verses in the prophets berating the people's exaggerated emphasis on sacrificial ritual can easily accommodate all views as to the purpose behind the sacrifices.

Don Isaac Abarbanel, in his introduction to the Book of Vayikra, enlists numerous passages in Midrashic and Talmudic literature which he claims provide either support or actual proof for Maimonides' theory. The Talmud (Menachot 110) states that one who occupies himself in Torah "has no need for a sin-offering, burnt-offering, guilt-offering or meal-offering," seemingly lowering the relative stature of sacrifice as a religious value. Likewise, the Talmud elsewhere (Makkot 10) considers Torah study more meaningful than even one thousand burnt-offerings. Clearly, however, the fact that sacrifices pale in comparison with Torah study in terms of religious value in no way suggests that they are of merely secondary importance. After all, the famous first Mishna of Masekhet Pei'a declares that "*talmud Torah ke'neged kulam*" – the reward yielded through Torah study equals that of all other mitzvot combined. The Sages often emphasized the singular importance and value of Torah study, and thus its "superiority" with respect to sacrifices in no way diminishes from the inherent value of sacrifices. To the contrary, one might argue that the Talmud found it necessary to underscore the importance of learning over sacrifices specifically due to the mystique and sanctity associated with the sacrifices. Thus, these passages hardly provide any support – let alone evidence – for Maimonides' theory.

In particular, Abarbanel anchors Maimonides' position in a passage in the Midrash (Vayikra Rabba 22), which compares Benei Yisrael after the Exodus to a prince who had grown accustomed to eating forbidden foods. His father, the king, therefore decided, "Let him eat them at my table, at all times, and he will naturally withdraw [from this custom]." Similarly, the Midrash concludes, "Benei Yisrael were drawn after idolatry and would bring their sacrifices to the satyrs, in violation [of God's laws]... The Almighty [therefore] said: They shall offer their sacrifices before Me in the Tent of Meeting, and they will separate from idolatry." Seemingly, Abarbanel writes, this Midrash formulates the very point Maimonides expressed: the korbanot were intended merely to fill Benei Yisrael's instinctive need for sacrificial worship that resulted from their long period of exposure to pagan culture. Interestingly enough, the 20th-century author Rabbi Barukh Epstein, in his *Tosefet Berakha*, claims that had Maimonides referred his readers to this source, he would have spared himself the sharp criticism evoked by his theory.

However, as pointed out by the early 20th-century German scholar Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman, there is good reason why Maimonides did not enlist this Midrashic passage as a basis for this theory. In his work to the Book of Vayikra, Rabbi Hoffman demonstrated that Abarbanel worked off a faulty text of the Midrash. According to the text cited by Abarbanel, the king wanted his son to "eat them at my table, at all times." Meaning, he asked that his son bring his forbidden foods to the royal dining hall, which would somehow cause the son to "naturally withdraw." For one thing, it is hard to understand why the son would withdraw from the forbidden foods to which he had grown accustomed by partaking of them at his father's table. Even more troubling, however, is the parallel declaration of God in the case for which this analogy is introduced. Did God really ask that Benei Yisrael eat their "forbidden foods" at His "table," that they should sacrifice to pagan gods in the Tabernacle? He invited them to the Tabernacle not to do anything forbidden, but rather to worship Him in a manner to which they could easily relate.

Indeed, Rabbi Hoffman notes, the prevalent texts of the Midrash word the king's request differently: "He shall come regularly to my table, and he will naturally withdraw." The king asks the son to spend more time with him in the palace, where he will grow accustomed to royal

protocol and gradually withdraw from unbecoming behavior. Translating this analogy into the context of Benei Yisrael's condition after the Exodus, God wanted to ensure that they would make frequent visits to the "palace," to the Tabernacle, where they would behold His "presence," and thereby gradually eliminate their pagan tendencies. Accordingly, this Midrash has nothing at all to do with the underlying purpose and objective of sacrifices. As Rabbi Hoffman explains, it addresses an entirely different issue – the law that applied during Benei Yisrael's sojourn in the wilderness, requiring that they eat meat only in the context of a sacrificial offering in the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The Midrash attributes this provision to the need for Benei Yisrael to expose themselves regularly to the Shekhina (divine presence) in the Mishkan, so that they would gradually withdraw from their pagan instincts.

Thus, although a number of verses and Talmudic and Midrashic passages may be interpreted as reflecting Maimonides' position, they can hardly be seen as ironclad proofs to this theory.

Contradiction from the *Code*?

Some writers have called Maimonides' comments in the *Guide* into question based on the seemingly different sentiments he expresses elsewhere, in his *Code*. In his conclusion to the book of Avoda (end of Hilkhot Me'ila), Maimonides elaborates on the importance of obeying Halakha regardless of whether or not one grasps the underlying reason behind a given ordinance. He introduces this point in this context because he views the Torah's sacrificial system as paradigmatic of a "chok" – a mitzva whose underlying reason eludes human comprehension:

All the sacrifices are included under 'chukim': the Sages said that the world is sustained on account of the sacrificial service, for through the performance of [both] the 'chukim' and 'mishpatim' [rules whose underlying rationale is easily understood] the upright ones earn life in the world to come.

Maimonides refers here to the famous second Mishna of *Pirkei Avot*, where we are told, "The world is sustained on account of three things: Torah, service, and performing kindness." According to Maimonides (both in the aforementioned passage, and in his commentary to Avot), "service" here refers to the sacrifices. They help "sustain the world," he explains, because they represent the entire range of "chukim," laws whose rationale cannot be grasped by most human beings. Submission of human intuition and unconditional obedience to divine law, regardless of access to its logical underpinnings, constitute one of the pillars that sustain the world.

At first glance, this passage in the *Code* runs counter to Maimonides' own comments in the *Guide*, where he indeed presents a logical – if surprising and controversial – explanation for the laws of sacrifices. How can he speak of the sacrifices as the quintessential "chok" if he himself suggested a rational explanation for their inclusion in the Torah?

The answer emerges clearly from a basic principle that Maimonides established earlier in his *Guide* (3:26) concerning the general issue of *ta'amei ha'mitzvot* – offering logical explanations for divine commands: "each commandment has necessarily a cause, as far as its general character is concerned, and serves a certain object; but as regards its details we hold that it has no ulterior object." Maimonides contends that even the reasons underlying the "chukim" may perhaps be determined through study and analysis; the detailed laws, however, cannot be explained, and must be seen as merely "tests for man's obedience." Accordingly, even if the general concept of sacrifices can be understood as fulfilling an instinctive need for this mode of worship, this cannot possibly even begin to explain their innumerable intricacies and details. Justifiably, then, Maimonides speaks of sacrifices as paradigmatic of "chukim," even while offering a rational explanation for the overall notion of sacrificial worship.

Nachmanides' Assault

In his commentary to the ninth verse of the Book of Vayikra, Nachmanides denounces Maimonides' approach in particularly strong terms. He writes, "These are nonsensical words, which offer healing offhand for a great wound and considerable difficulty, and make the table of the Lord defiled, as it serves only to oppose the wicked and fools of the earth." Nachmanides formulates his first accusation, that Maimonides here offers "healing offhand for a great wound and considerable difficulty," based on a verse in the Book of Yirmiyahu (6:14). As the late Professor Nechama Leibowitz has noted, an understanding of the context of this verse may shed light on Nachmanides' diatribe. Yirmiyahu here records the Almighty's lamentation, "For from the smallest to the greatest, they are all greedy for gain; priest and prophet alike, they all act falsely. They offer healing offhand for the wounds of My people, saying, 'All is well, all is well,' when nothing is well." As opposed to Yirmiyahu, the true prophet, who castigated the people for their unethical behavior and betrayal of God in an effort to inspire them to improve, the false prophets, eager to win the masses' favor, eased their conscience by cavalierly dismissing the looming threat of destruction. While Yirmiyahu warned of bloodshed and exile, the false prophets promised a bright future of freedom and success, opposing Yirmiyahu's calls for fundamental change.

Accordingly, Nachmanides here treats Maimonides' theory as a shallow, easily digestible solution to the great mystery of the Torah's sacrificial order. Rather than seriously and intensively studying its details and nuances to uncover the deep, spiritual and theological origins of these laws, Maimonides' approach conveniently and effortlessly dismisses the enigma with a single fell-swoop. We may reasonably assume that Nachmanides does not actually accuse Maimonides of intellectual laziness, but was rather disturbed by the stifling consequences of his theory. Once we view the sacrifices as a concept intended merely as a concession to human nature, we obviate the need for any further analysis and exploration. Later in this passage, Nachmanides speaks of the "sod gadol" – profound mystical meaning – latent within the institution of korbanot. Aware of this deeper level of understanding, Nachmanides objected to Maimonides' theory, which in effect renders these deeper levels superfluous.

Nachmanides then proceeds to pose specific challenges to Maimonides' approach. Firstly, the Torah repeatedly refers to sacrificial offerings as a "*rei'ach nicho'ach isheh le-Hashem*" – "offering by fire of pleasing aroma to the Lord." Though it is difficult in any event to understand how the Almighty would find any aroma "pleasing," this anthropomorphic image of divine gratification seems hardly suitable in the context of a ritual that God would have ideally wished to avoid. This expression appears to raise sacrificial offerings to a uniquely high stature of religious service, as it has the effect of "pleasing" the Almighty more so than the fulfillment of other commandments.

Abarbanel offers a simple solution in justification of Maimonides' theory. Just as the institution of sacrifices itself was intended to accommodate Benei Yisrael's instinctive need for this form of religious expression, so does the Biblical description of sacrifices accommodate this instinct. The pagans offered sacrifices with the intent of presenting a gift to their gods and thereby win their favor. The corresponding system established by the Torah ("le-havdil") allowed Benei Yisrael to offer sacrifices to the Almighty as if they present a gift. The Torah therefore refers to the sacrifices as a "pleasing aroma" that God lovingly accepts from His subjects.

Later, Nachmanides raises a more compelling challenge against Maimonides' theory, noting that sacrificial offerings preceded the emergence of idolatrous beliefs. Kayin and Hevel, representing the second generation of humanity, brought offerings to God, and He in fact willfully accepted Hevel's offering (Bereishit 4:3-5). And after the deluge that destroyed all mankind with the exception of Noach and his family, Noach brought an animal sacrifice which pleased God (Bereishit 8:20-21). Quite obviously, no idolaters lived on earth at that moment. We might add that according to a rabbinic tradition which Maimonides himself records (*Code*, Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira 2:2), Adam, the very first human, offered a sacrifice to God at the future site of the Temple. Therefore, Nachmanides asks, how could Maimonides deny the intrinsic religious significance of sacrificial worship, and claim that it was introduced only due to the pressures of paganism?

Moderating Maimonides' Position

This long history of sacrificial worship of God, which predated the advent of idolatry, all but compels us to moderate Maimonides' theory, such that he, too, to one extent or another, acknowledges the intrinsic religious value of sacrificial worship.

In traditional sources, we find different strategies taken in modifying the straightforward reading of the aforementioned passages in the *Guide* to accommodate an acceptance of the inherent significance of the sacrifices. One approach suggested that Maimonides indeed acknowledged the intrinsic religious value in offering sacrifices, but felt that this value alone would not warrant the inclusion of a sacrificial order within Torah law. Abarbanel claims that Maimonides recognizes the sacrifices' function "to draw a person nearer to his God and for him to subdue himself before Him and believe in His existence, unity and providence," and it was with this function in mind that Adam and Noach offered sacrifices. However, Abarbanel explains, Maimonides felt that this purpose can be served by other means, such as prayer and study, more effectively than through sprinkling animal blood upon an altar. Maimonides therefore found it necessary to explain why God chose to include a system of sacrifices, if its objectives can be achieved more effectively through other media.

Rabbi Avraham Sofer of Pressburg (19th century, Austria-Hungary), in his famous commentary, *Ketav Sofer*, cites a work entitled *Tzofnat Panei'ach* as moderating Maimonides' position in a slightly different vein. According to this approach, Maimonides sought to explain why God allowed for the inclusion of sacrifices within Torah ritual law despite its predominantly pagan association. Although sacrificial worship is, indeed, intrinsically meaningful even from a Torah standpoint, we would have expected it to be excluded from Jewish practice once the pagans embraced it as their primary mode of worship. Maimonides therefore explained that to the contrary, the prevalence of sacrificial worship in the pagan world actually necessitated its inclusion with the rubric of Torah law.

Both Abarbanel and the *Tzofnat Panei'ach* maintain that Maimonides' acknowledged the intrinsic religious value of offering sacrifices yet felt that this value in itself would not have warranted the establishment of a sacrificial order as part of the Torah. Abarbanel explained that other modes of worship more effectively achieve the basic goals of the sacrifices, whereas the *Tzofnat Panei'ach* suggested that the pagan association of sacrifices should have rendered them inappropriate as a Torah obligation.

A much different explanation of Maimonides' view was suggested by Rabbi Menachem Kasher (20th century, United States), in his *Torah Sheleima* (Parashat Vayikira, appendix 1, chapter 11). Rabbi Kasher discusses at length the particular importance of sincere motives and religious aspirations in the system of sacrificial worship. He cites numerous sources that underscore the role of sacrifices as an expression of one's devotion, sense of submission, and desire to improve. This function, Rabbi Kasher suggests, is accepted even by Maimonides. However, Maimonides was troubled by the halakhic significance afforded to sacrifices offered without these sincere feelings and emotions. The Torah allows one to offer a sacrifice even if he does so for ulterior motives or without any interest in spiritual elevation. In such an instance, the basic purpose of the sacrifice is not served, and the significance of such a sacrificial act requires explanation. Maimonides therefore explained that even a sacrifice of this nature serves some purpose, in that it provides an outlet for the sacrificial instinct that would otherwise express itself in idolatrous rituals. Thus, he does not at all deny the intrinsic meaning and value of sacrifices, but rather points to an additional dimension of the sacrifices, to lend them significance even when they appear to serve no religious purpose.

A third, perhaps questionable, approach to modify Maimonides' theory, is to undermine altogether the significance of Maimonides' comments in his *Guide*. Rabbi Kasher (ibid.) cites a work entitled *Derashot Ibn Shu'ib* which writes, "There is no doubt that Maimonides followed a different approach in this regard [from what he wrote in the *Guide*], and wrote this [merely] to close the mouths of those who speak of this, and so he brought the matter closer to the intellect." Ibn Shu'ib simply dismisses Maimonides' comments in the *Guide* as an effort to deflect the

challenges to Judaism posed by those who reject the authority of Torah law. These passages thus do not reflect Maimonides' true approach to the function served by the sacrifices. A similar theory was advanced earlier, by the Ritva (among the classic Talmudists of Medieval Spain), in his work *Sefer Ha'zikaron* (a work defending Maimonides' from Nachmanides' critiques).

Needless to say, this notion touches upon the much broader issue of Maimonides' intent in writing the *Guide*, a topic that clearly lies well beyond the scope of our discussion. But assuming that Maimonides wrote the *Guide* as an actual exposition of Jewish thought, we have no right to take its content as anything but an accurate and genuine expression of his philosophy.

The General Purpose of the Commandments

Maimonides' understanding of the reason behind the sacrifices must be considered in light of his approach to the purpose behind the mitzvot in general. A bit earlier in the *Guide* (3:27), Maimonides writes that in addition to establishing "good mutual relations among men by removing injustice and creating the noblest of feelings," the commandments also seek "to train us in faith, and to impart correct and true opinions when the intellect is sufficiently developed." In other words, many mitzvot are intended to convey certain philosophical ideas. In the next chapter, he writes, "in some cases the law contains a truth which is itself the only object of that law, as e.g., the truth of the Unity, Eternity, and Incorporeality of God." Maimonides' approach to the sacrificial order follows this model: it is intended to protect Benei Yisrael from pagan theology, by directing their sacrificial instincts towards the service of the Almighty.

Interestingly enough, Rabbi Hoffman, in his lengthy discussion of the reason behind the sacrifices, disputes Maimonides' position in this regard because he disapproves of Maimonides' approach to the reason behind the commandments generally. According to Rabbi Hoffman, the commandments constitute the goal, rather than the means. They are not intended to remind us of philosophical truths; to the contrary, a correct philosophical approach is necessary to properly commit oneself to the performance of the mitzvot. In this instance, then, the sacrifices must have some intrinsic value, rather than simply reminding the people of monotheism.

It emerges, then, that the controversy surrounding Maimonides' theory to the sacrifices perhaps extends well beyond this specific context, and relates to the more general question of how to approach the commandments. In this regard, we must bear in mind the two dimensions of mitzva observance, as manifest in Maimonides' discussions in his *Guide* and in the *Code*. In the *Code*, he focuses on the inherent value of obeying the Almighty's commands, irrespective of their ultimate aim and underlying rationale. In the *Guide*, by contrast, he seeks to nevertheless uncover the basic themes and objectives behind the commandments. Whereas Rabbi Hoffman rejects the prospect of commandments serving to advance a certain philosophical precept, Maimonides believes in a dual function served by the mitzvot: the inherent purpose of displaying obedience, as well as the conveying of certain philosophical truths that every Jew is required to understand and accept.