

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayikra

Maimonides (Laws of Sacrifice Misuse) writes that we ought to try to understand the reasons for the mitzvot of the Torah as much as possible. But then he says there are many mitzvot which the Torah itself calls chukim, which means laws that do not have a clear rational explanation. He says although we can try to find meaning in these mitzvot, we must realize that the true rationale for these mitzvot is hidden from us. He lists bringing sacrifices in this category, along with several other examples. Ritva (13th century) says pithily that when it comes to understanding sacrifices, even the Kabbalists only understood “a drop in the sea.”

Indeed, of all the chukim in the Torah, sacrifices might be the most difficult for us to understand. Kuzari (12th century) writes that if not for the Torah’s instruction to offer sacrifices, we would think that animal sacrifices distance us from G-d. Yet paradoxically, “korban,” the hebrew word for sacrifice, can also be translated as something that brings us closer to G-d.

R’ Gifter (20th century) pointed out that the hebrew word “taam” either means a reason or a taste. When it comes to understanding the reasons for the mitzvot, he said the reasons for the mitzva help us taste the flavor of the mitzva better. But just as tasteless food still sustains a person, a mitzvah can fully sustain a person spiritually even if he does not understand its true meaning. Although we do not expect to figure out G-d’s deepest desire in commanding us to bring sacrifices, we can still try to scratch the surface of understanding them.

Zohar (2nd century) explains sacrifices connect us to the higher spiritual realms which trigger the flow of all physical bounty and blessing in this world. Sacrifices come in many different forms, as they could be daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly sacrifices. They also differ in purpose, as they could atone for a sin between man and G-d, atone for a sin between man and his fellow, or could be brought as a form of thanksgiving. However, they all share the common thread of connecting us to the higher realms of existence through offering the most physical of things on the altar.

In a similar vein, Arizal (16th century) adds that the diversity of elements used in sacrifices shows how every part of creation could be raised to its perfection by offering it to G-d. The meal offerings, oil, and wine libations represent the plant kingdom, the salt sprinkled on sacrifices represents the mineral kingdom, and slaughtered animal offerings represent the animal kingdom. The kohen, representing mankind, takes all of these and elevates them by offering them as sacrifices.

This also helps explain why sacrifices are called ‘holy things’ (kodashim) in the Mishna and the Tamud. R’ Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (18th century) explains the difference between a holy person (kadosh) and a pure person (tahor) lies in his attitude to the material objects of the world. The pure person separates himself from the anything of the physical world as much as possible, only involving himself in things of the physical nature when he must. But the holy man does not run away from the physical world. On the contrary, he uses everything physical and elevates it for its spiritual purpose.



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Man, the only creature possessing intelligence and free choice, elevates all the other parts of the physical world in the Temple service. The Talmud says when the kohanim eat the meats from the sacrifices on behalf of the sinner, he achieves atonement for his sin. Confession and prayer alone do not accomplish atonement; the owner of the sacrifice also needs the kohen to enjoy the meat. Kedusha (holiness) is only achieved by engaging in the most physical of acts and elevating them in the service of G-d. Therefore, the animals used in the Temple service are called holy animals.

Additionally, in order to properly achieve the goal of the particular sacrifice, a person had to offer his most precious possessions. The Torah says a wealthy man should offer his bulls or cows, a middle class person his sheep or birds, and a poor person his flour. Similarly, we find that when Cain offered inferior goods on the altar (Genesis 4:4-5), G-d did not like it. But when his brother Abel offered his expensive animals as sacrifices, this pleased G-d. Why does the quality of a sacrifice make a difference?

By offering his prized possessions to G-d, a person shows that everything he has belongs to G-d, just as a servant does not have any private ownership. If a wealthy person brings a simple flour offering when he could afford to bring an animal offering, he fails to demonstrate this idea. The sacrificial service is called avodah, whose root “eved” means servant. When one offers his cherished possessions to G-d, he demonstrates that he views himself like a servant in front of his master. This is another idea we learn from the laws of sacrifices.

In this light, we can understand why the Talmud says that while we cannot bring animal sacrifices in the absence of a temple, our prayers take the place of sacrifices. If we pray properly to G-d, we surrender our egos and sense of independence to him. We show G-d that we feel totally dependent on him and cannot achieve any of our dreams and aspirations without his help. Therefore, the Talmud refers to prayer as avodah of the heart, for prayer is meant to be a form of servitude, requiring the same negation of self that was needed to properly offer an animal sacrifice.

Although we do not know the full reason for sacrifices, we learn from sacrifices how to elevate the physical world in service of G-d, the proper attitudes we ought to have to our possessions, and the negation of self that G-d desires from us. Practically speaking, when we ponder the negation of self required in offering one’s animals as sacrifices, we can approach our prayers with a deeper sense of dependence on G-d.

Shabbat Shalom

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