

# DOES HASHEM WANT THE HEART – OR MORE?

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*Speak to the Bnei Yisrael and say to them: When a man among you brings an offering to Hashem...*

Our Rishonim offer vastly different view of the general purpose of *korbanos*. Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim*<sup>[2]</sup> stresses the value to those who bring the offerings, distancing them from primitive and pagan forms and objects of worship. Ramban focuses on the quality of Man's service to Hashem. Thoughts and intentions simply do not make the grade until they are concretized through action. Those who rely on their feelings of duty to Hashem are left in the long run lacking even those feelings. The *avodah* of *korbanos* channels the feelings into meaningful action.

Both of these approaches are included in our *pasuk*, the Torah's introduction to the general order of *korbanos*. "When a man **among you**" – the stress on among you is meant to highlight the importance of the *korban* to the one who brings it. "An offering **to Hashem**" – the *avodah* of *korbanos* ensure that our feelings of devotion become a proper tribute to our G-d.

Looking back at history, we can see that neither of these approaches was appropriate at all times. At the very beginning of history, before *avodah zarah* became common, the reasoning of the Rambam had no place. There was no idolatry from which the Torah wished to distance us! On the other hand, in the infancy of Man's encounter with G-d it was necessary to teach him how to direct his devotional feelings – like the reasoning offered by Ramban. At the very end of history, however, Man will have learned to reject all forms of idolatry. At that time, the surviving argument for *korbanos* will be that of Ramban – a concretized exercise of Divine service. (This might well be the meaning of the line at the end of our *Shemonah Esreih*: The *minchah* of Yehudah and Yerushalayim will be as pleasing to Hashem [in the future messianic age] as it was in days of old [the first generations after Adam].)

In the age of Avraham, however, the needs of the day were entirely reversed. Civilization was rife with deities competing for Man's attention. The Rambam's concerns were paramount. Certainly not needed then, however, were examples of taking G-d more seriously than by harboring vague feelings of connection with Him. Avraham's personal example – including the *Akeidah* – spoke volumes about serious commitment to belief in the One G-d.

In our own times, "progressives" challenge both of the approaches to *korbanos*. We are fully cured of any flirtation with pagan notions and deities, they argue. And as for the Ramban's argument, they concede that it could apply to the small minority of offerings (like the *olah*) that are fully committed to the altar. It is irrelevant, however, to all the *korbanos* that are shared with the *kohanim* and with the

owners. Does G-d really have any use for these? How could it be that, as Chazal say,<sup>[3]</sup> that "*kohanim* eat of the *korban*, and the owners achieve atonement thereby?"

The distinction between offerings in which humans partake, and those that are consumed entirely by the altar, is not without merit. A mishnah<sup>[4]</sup> cites the ruling of Ben Azai that proper *kavanah* (i.e. earmarking the animal at the time of its slaughter for the specific type of offering it was originally designated) is unnecessary for offerings that whose flesh is eaten, rather than burned on the altar. Should the person who slaughters the animal have a different offering-type in mind at the time of its slaughter, the *korban* is still valid, and the remaining steps follow the original designation of the live animal.

We are puzzled by this initially. The essence of any *korban* is not the "gift" of the meat, but of man's devotion to Hashem's wishes. It is truly the heart that counts. If a *korban* lacks Man's fastidious attention to proper detail, what is left?

Upon reflection, we realize that not all mitzvos require such careful focus. Chazal do not look dismissively at people who give *tzedakah* because they wish to tip the Divine scales in regard to some issue weighing heavily on their minds. Their donation may not be as pure as one that is made simply for the mitzvah of *tzedakah* – but it is still full of validity and purpose. In general, when a mitzvah is oriented towards some third-party recipient – like the poor – the intention is not as important as the practical consequence.

A corollary of this applies to Torah study. Should a person teach Torah for less than pure motives, the student still learns. Even studying collegially with others sharpens the members of the group, and adds significance to the contribution of the one who joins for imperfect reasons.

Not everyone accepted this thinking. We know that Rabban Gamliel banned those with imperfect intentions from the study hall,<sup>[5]</sup> and that they were admitted when R. Eliezer ben Azaryah succeeded him as the *Nasi*. To Rabban Gamliel, purity of intention was everything. He accepted no compromises. R. Eliezer ben Azaryah – and the majority of the *chachamim* who deposed Rabban Gamliel – left room for the value of the certain mitzvos, performed with imperfect intentions, but that enhanced the lives of others.

It is quite possible that Rabban Gamliel saw the *derashah* that permitted a *korban* slaughtered with the wrong intention as an inexplicable *gezeras ha-kasuv* – a just-so Divine edict. The Torah said so, and we had to accept it. (Had the Torah not included such a *derashah*, we would have reasoned that proper intention is the very heart of every offering; without it, the offering certainly should be rejected.) Possibly, the anonymous first opinion of the *mishnah* we cited followed the thinking of Rabban Gamliel. According to this view, there is no distinction between different types of offerings. The Torah decided for its own reasons to allow offerings slaughtered for the wrong purpose.

The *mishnah* continues with the dissenting voice of R. Eliezer ben Azaryah, albeit only after a historical introduction that is uncharacteristic of the brevity of *mishnah* in general. "R. Shimon ben Azzai said, So I have received the *halachah* according to the seventy-two elders (he actually uses the singular form for elder) on the day that they installed R. Eliezer ben Azaryah as the head of the yeshiva: all offerings that are eaten, but slaughtered with the wrong intention, are nonetheless valid."

According to our approach, we should understand this as consistent with R. Eliezer ben Azaryah's general position. Unlike Rabban Gamliel, he could accept the *derashah* as eminently reasonable – at least insofar as offerings that were eaten. Those offered gifts of satiety to the hungry and caring to the downtrodden with whom the *korbanos* were shared, even if they were slaughtered with improper intention. It makes sense that they are acceptable! The implication is that this would not be true of the *olah*. The burnt-offering has no purpose other than demonstrating attachment to Hashem's Word. When brought with improper intentions, it has no value at all, and is not valid. The contrast between the two positions became clear on the day that the seventy-two elders, acting as one, in concert, removed Rabban Gamliel from his leadership role, rejecting the severity of his position that purity of intention was always – without exception – the *sine qua non* of service to Hashem.

This discussion offers a new way of looking at the *rasha*, the evil son of the Haggadah, who mocks the *korban* Pesach – the first offering commanded to the Jewish people, which happens also to be eaten! "What is this *avodah*?" he asks. Projecting his own skepticism on everyone else around, he questions the need for any offerings in more enlightened times. "No one anymore is a serious believer in anything. We have no reason to fear that religious passions will lead people back to pagan beliefs. The Rambam's argument for *korbanos* is no longer relevant. If you will counter with Ramban's argument and insist that you are all true believers, but need *korbanos* to give concrete form to your religious striving – I will call you out for your hypocrisy. What is this *avodah* to you? If your offering were a form of religious devotion, you would offer it on an altar, not eat it at your table!"

The contemporary form of the *rasha's* challenge is a variation on his theme. Its proponents question not the *avodah* of *korbanos*, but of the entire mitzvah system. "Who needs it?" they ask. "G-d has no need for ceremonial actions. He seeks nothing but the heart of Man. Couple it a few Jewish symbols, words and songs reminding us of our nationhood, and we have a perfect religion."

Our answer to him is built upon the tradition that the Bnei Yisrael kept their names, their language during the Egyptian period. They were surrounded, even in the worst of times, with reminders of their national distinctiveness. Nonetheless, lacked the merit necessary for redemption. They needed something more. "It is because of this that Hashem acted for me when I left Egypt.<sup>[6]</sup> As Chazal tell us, "'This' can only mean when the *pesach*, the matzoh and the *maror* are placed in front of you." In other words, the Jewish nationalism of the Bnei Yisrael did not spring them from their exile. The observance of practical mitzvos did.

Nothing has changed.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Vayikra (1) by R. Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l.
2. Moreh Nevuchim 3:32.
3. Yevamos 90A.
4. Zevachim 11B.
5. Berachos 27B.
6. Shemos 13:8.