

CALL TO THE WILD

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

"... The kohen will burn the entire [animal] on the altar as a completely burnt Fire-Offering to G-d, an appeasing fragrance." (VaYikrah 1:9)

With the beginning of Sefer VaYikrah, also called "The Book of Holiness," we again begin a serious discussion about korbonos (sacrifices). In our day-and-age of "Animals Rights," the idea of sacrificing an animal to atone for our sins, or worse, just to give thanks to G-d, is, to use the term of some, "animalistic."

Such people often cite the Rambam (Maimonides) as a proof. According to the Rambam, the Torah sanctioned the slaughtering of animals for religious purposes to "wean" the newly freed Jewish nation from idol worshipping practices. These are his words:

... The reason for the offerings is because the Egyptians and the Kasdim in whose lands the children of Israel were strangers and sojourners, used always to worship the herd and the flock, the Egyptians worshipping the sheep and the Kasdim worshipping the demons whom they imagined as assuming the form of goats. To this day men of India never slaughter the herd. It was for this reason that He [G-d] commanded [Israel] to slaughter these species [the herd, the flock, and the goats], to the Revered Name, so that it be known that the very act which the idol-worshippers considered to be the utmost sin [i.e., slaughtering the above species], that same act should be done as an offering before the Creator, and through it Israel's sins should be forgiven. For such is the way to cure people of false beliefs, which are the diseases of the human soul, for all diseases and sicknesses are healed by medicines which are antithetical to them ... (Moreh Nevuchim, 3:46)

Needless to say, many disagree with the Rambam's point of view on this matter, especially the Ramban (Nachmanides), who argues at length bringing all kinds of evidence to the contrary (VaYikrah 1:9). However, there are many who run to the defense of the Rambam, citing sources to support the Rambam's point of view (such as the Pesach-Offering) and answer the Ramban's questions; Rabbi Meir Simcha (Meshech Chochmah) even harmonizes the two views.

The Ramban's concluding words begin:

By way of the Truth [Kabballah], there is a hidden secret contained in the offerings. You may be

introduced to it by that which our Rabbis have said in the Sifre and at the end of Tractate Menachos:

Shimon ben Azzai said: Come and see what is written in the section of the offerings! It does not say with reference to them E"l (G-d), or Elokecha (your G-d), nor Elokim (G-d), nor Sha-dai (Al-mighty), nor Tzevakos (G-d of "Hosts"), but only "Yud-Heh" the proper name of G-d [i.e., the Tetragrammaton], in order not to give an opponent an occasion for a point of attack. (Sifre, Pinchas 143)

The Meshech Chochmah explains:

It is known that the name Elokim means "Master of all Natural Forces," or the "Force of Forces." Therefore, if the name Elokim or E"l had been used for the section of the offerings it would have given opportunity to the opponents that He is in need of food. Therefore, only the Tetragrammaton is used in this whole section in order to indicate that His Existence is the only true Existence, and that everything exists only through His existence, for they are all in need of Him, but He is not in need of any of them. (Beginning of Parashas Shoftim)

Part of the ongoing debate has also been, as implied from the Rambam's statement, did the Rambam learn Kabballah? Though the Rambam makes overt references to his knowledge of Kabballah (as we just saw above), the Rambam never does. For this reason, and because of statements the Rambam has made that seem to run contrary to Kabbalistic teachings, some have concluded that Kabballah was one area of Torah learning the Rambam did not focus on, especially given that he was extremely busy with organizing the Revealed Torah, taking care of the infirm, and often on the run from his enemies.

As well, Kabbalistic teachings in the Rambam's day usually flowed only from the mouth of the few existing masters, to even fewer worthy students; writings were not nearly as widespread in the Rambam's time as they are in our day. The Zohar itself, the primary classic work of Kabballah, wasn't even published for the first time until around 1380 CE (by Rabbi Moshe de Lion), and wasn't printed until even later (1558-1560).

However, from many of the Rambam's teachings, one can wonder in the opposite direction. Many of his writings verge on the esoteric, and point in the direction of a great mind at work, and then some. For this reason, even the statements of the Rambam, like the one quoted above about sacrifices, are interpreted Kabbalistically as well (as we will now see).

Shabbos Day:

Very briefly, there are basically three effects that sacrifices are supposed to have on creation. To begin with, korbanos are supposed to purify the world of the spiritual "filth" (Hebrew: zuhama) first brought into the world through Adam's eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and its

resultant effects. This "filth," the Talmud states, was removed from the Jewish people at the time they received Torah at Mt. Sinai (Shabbos 146a), but involvement in the golden calf plunged us back down into the post-sin reality once again (to some degree). Since all sin only happens on the level of our animal-soul (Nefesh), burning the animal helps to purify this aspect of our existence.

Secondly, korbanos help to re-elevate creation back to a less physical plain on which it existed before the eating. For example, before the sin, Adam's skin was closer to being like "light" than the skin we have now. Hence, eating from the Tree caused creation to become spiritually lowered, which always has the effect of concretizing the physical reality, making life more "natural" than miraculous and more of a "veil" for the hand of G-d (which results in "hester panim," the hiding of G-d's face, so-to-speak, and a more judgmental form of Divine Providence). Burning an animal for spiritual reasons reverses this trend, which is why Divine Providence then becomes more mercy-oriented (this is the concept of the sacrifices smelling "sweet" to G-d; Bereishis 8:21; VaYikrah 1:9; Rashi, Ramban).

The third rectification of a korban is even more Kabbalistic, and difficult to understand without sufficient background. However, it too works on correcting one of the damaging effects of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, to bring spiritual completion to the world along the way to a perfected society and the period of Moshiach.

Affected through the sacrifice are all four levels of existence: domaim (literally, "silent" referring to the mineral world), tzomayach ("spouted" referring to the vegetation world), chayah ("living" referring to the animal world), and medabehr ("speaking" referring to man). The salt used rectifies and elevates the mineral world; the wood used for the altar elevates and purifies the vegetation world; the animal itself impacts the animal world, and man, who performs the sacrifice is affected by all of this, and through him, everything is elevated closer toward G-d.

If that is so (I read recently), then it is true: sacrifices draw us away from idol worship, which is similar to what the Rambam said above. After all, it is "hester panim" that gives nature the appearance of being powerful in its own right, and which blinds the minds of men; idol worship is the direct result of the spiritual "filth" inflicted upon mankind as a result of succumbing to the snake's allure to eat from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In short, idol worship is the result of all that sacrifices comes to spiritually "cure."

This explanation of the Rambam, admittedly, is not a perfect fit. However, it does leave room to conclude that the Rambam could have meant more than what some would like to believe. In any case, when all is said-and-done, animal sacrifices as instructed in the Torah appear far from being "animalistic," doing an awful lot to bring creation to its desired level of perfection.

Seudos Shlishi:

G-d called to Moshe and said ... (VaYikrah 1:1) Why did the Torah precede the "calling" to the "saying"? To teach good manners (derech eretz): a person should not speak to his friend before calling him ... R' Menashe the Great said: Where do we learn that when one person gives over information to another that the latter has no right to disclose it to another without permission? The Torah writes, "And He [G-d] spoke to him from the Appointed Tent saying (lomar; this can be divided into two words, "lo" and "mar" which mean "don't say") ... " (VaYikrah 1:1; Yoma 4b)

Sometimes the messages learned out from the verse are obvious and absolute, that is, the verse seems to "beg" to be interpreted that way. Other times, like in the case above, it seems like a case of an interpretation in search of a source. When that is the case, we have to ask ourselves, "Why here-why now?"

Sacrifice is a matter of the heart. It is a way of revealing on the outside what, hopefully, is felt on the inside. Time and time again the prophets warned us that G-d does not need to eat animal offerings; He desires our hearts, our loyalty, our love.

However, we know from the world around us and our own personal experiences that it is far easier to "go through the motions" than for the motions to go "through" us. In this very action-packed world that seems to inspire the yetzer hara to dance all over us and squelch our spiritual drive, in a world that turns our minds into "public domains," it is far easier to go and doven (pray) than it is for dovening to "come to us" (that is, that we can give it our full attention).

It is the same with derech eretz, and raising children proves this true. Children come home from cheder and are able to speak brilliantly on the Parashas HaShavuah one moment, and then speak disrespectfully to their siblings (and even their parents) in the next breath! Even watch the way they play with one another during the school break ... not exactly what they learned during school hours.

"Children will be children!" you say. Fine. However, will adults be children too? Will these "geniuses" grow up and become even brighter, but still lack the most basic communication skills and manners?

Perhaps this is why the Torah and the Talmud introduce this third and crucial book with lessons in derech eretz, as if to say, "Let's get it straight from the beginning: the goal of all the details in this book is not only to change the world around you, but specifically to change the world within you! Derech Eretz not only preceded Torah (Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu, 1), it is the path toward holiness." And, it is, in the end, the only true path to Torah:

G-d said, "The man has become one of Us knowing good and evil. Now, in case he stretches out his hand to take also from the Tree of Life and live forever [I will send him out]." And G-d sent him from the garden ... and banished the man and set up angels and a flaming sword to the east of the garden to guard the way (derech) to the Tree of Life. (Bereishis 3:22)

The way ... this is derech erez-Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu Rabbah

Derech Eretz ... That is to say, the acquisition of positive traits ... The essential existence of man in this world is to break his bad traits ... (Tuvi Chaim)

As the Talmud points out, this is alluded to in the Shema, which commands us to serve G-d with all our hearts, that is, both parts: the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara (Brochos 54a). This means that our outer devotion to G-d must be indicative of our inner devotion to G-d, and one of the best ways to prove this is the way we behave toward others, especially when they are more needy than us.

In fact, a friend of mine spends a lot of time and energy trying to raise money to help extremely needy families survive, which necessitates approaching very wealthy people for help (his own financial position is not so secure, but he is devoted to helping those less fortunate than himself). What bothers him the most, he told me, far more than be turned down by people who spend tens of thousands of dollars on Bar Mitzvos, Bas Mitzvos, and even more on weddings, is not having his telephone calls returned by the people he has tried to contact! In his own words, "I can handle a 'no,'" he says. "After all, no one has to answer to me for how they appropriate their wealth. But a simple phone call to tell me one way or the other ... That's a matter of derech erez!"

Another person told me about how others, in the name of "helping people," have "stolen" her clients behind her back; another, about how, on a rainy day, while walking up a hill with heavy groceries, was passed by communities members who simply drove past them. That's derech erez?

I'm not one to hang "dirty laundry" out in public (especially over the Internet), and we certainly have a mitzvah to judge others to the side of merit. On the other hand, if the Torah saw fit to begin the Book of Holiness, one that is often taught to cheder children before all the other books, with a heavy message about derech erez, it is worthwhile for all of us to stop on that point and contemplate just how deep our Torah ideals have penetrated our hearts, and has helped us to help our fellow Jews.

Melave Malkah:

"Furthermore, you must salt every Meal-Offering. Do not leave out the salt of your G-d's covenant from your Meal-Offerings." (VaYikrah 2:13)

Salt ... covenant: There was a covenant established with salt during the six days of creation, when He [G-d] promised the lower waters that they would be offered on the altar ... (Rashi; salt is derived from the sea; Sifsei Chachomim)

This highlights the importance of salt as part of the sacrificial service in the Mishkan and Temple. It also helps explain why we dip our bread into salt after making the blessing over the bread at our tables. After all, the Talmud refers to our eating tables as replacements for the altar after the

Temple's destruction:

Rebi Yochanan and Reish Lakish said: When the Temple stood, the altar atoned for a person. Now the table of a person atones for him (when he feeds guests; Rashi; Chagigah 27a)

Curiously enough, the same letters (mem, lamed, ches) can be re-arranged to spell the word "lechem" (lamed, ches, mem), or bread. In fact, the same letters are also the root of the Hebrew word for war: milchama (mem, lamed, ches, mem, heh), hinting at the fact that the main "war" against the yetzer hara is in the arena of survival (i.e., "earning a living"), as represented by bread (the main staple of life), and salt, which our bodies depend upon heavily. (In "Redemption to Redemption," we saw the connection between the "munn," the miraculous bread from heaven and the war with Amalek.)

In fact, the word "milchama" (war) can be divided into two words, "melach" (mem, lamed, ches) and "mah" (mem, heh), where the last two letters are numerically equal to the word "Adam" (the name of man in his perfected state) and which (Kabbalistically) represent a name of G-d and the special light that G-d used to make creation during the first six days.

If so, then we can understand somewhat why Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt while fleeing the destruction of S'dom, since she glanced back to a city that totally defied the purpose of creation by being anti-derech eretz (Bereishis 19:26). And, we can appreciate how, if a seemingly innocuous part of the Temple service could allude to so much, the more complex details of the service can teach so much more.

Shabbat Shalom.

Pinchas Winston

P.S. In case you're wondering what the title "Call to the Wild" was based upon, it is a play on the title of a well-known (to Canadians at least) Canadian novel called, "Call of the Wild" about the Great Canadian Outdoors. The idea is that, G-d "called" (VaYikrah) to the "wild," that is, to man who is in need of spiritual perfection, in order to instruct us in the sacrifices to help us achieve it. Just in case you were wondering.

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