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MAIMONIDES ON SACRIFICES PART I

I. Concerning the Reason for Sacrifices

Following are excerpts from Maimonides' discussion on sacrifices and related topics (from his *Guide for the Perplexed*, translations from or making use of Friedlander, Pines, Ibn Tibbon, and Qapah) as well as selections from other works relevant to the issues brought up.

It is impossible to go from one extreme to the other suddenly. Therefore man - according to his nature - is not capable of suddenly abandoning that to which he was deeply accustomed.... As it was then the deeply ingrained and universal practice with which people were brought up to conduct religious worship with animal sacrifices in temples.... G-d in His wisdom did not see fit to command us to completely reject all these practices - something that man could not conceive of accepting, according to human nature which inclines to habit. It would have been comparable to a prophet appearing today, calling for the service of G-d, declaring that G-d now commands you not to pray to Him, not to fast and not to seek His help in time of distress, but your service of Him should be in meditation without any deeds whatsoever. He therefore allowed these practices to continue but transformed them from idolatrous associations.... that their purpose should be directed toward Him. Thus, He commanded us to build a sanctuary for Him with an altar to His name and offer sacrifices to Him.... In this way idolatry was blotted out and the great foundation of our faith - the existence and oneness of G-d - was established. This was accomplished without confusing people's

minds by prohibiting the worship they were accustomed to and with which alone they were familiar....

G-d doesn't choose to change man's nature with a miracle.... As sacrificial worship is not a primary intention.... only one Temple has been ordained.... and in no other place is it allowed to sacrifice.... to limit such worship within bounds that G-d did not deem it necessary to abolish it.... because of this the prophets often declared that the object of sacrifices is not very essential and that G-d can dispense with them.... (*Guide* 3:32)

Some consider this view to be an elaboration of a statement in the Midrash.

R. Pinhas in the name of R. Levi stated: This is comparable to a king's son who strayed and was accustomed to eat non-kosher meat. The king said "let him always eat at my table and on his own he will eventually become disciplined." Similarly, because Israel was attached to idolatry in Egypt and would bring their sacrifices to the goat-demons (*Lev. 17:7*), which are identical with the shedim they sacrificed to (*Deut. 32:17*).... and would offer sacrifices on high places and retribution would befall them, the Holy One blessed be He said "let them offer sacrifices before Me at all times in the Ohel Moed and they will be separated from idolatry and be saved." This is the meaning of what is written (*Lev. 17:3-7*): "Any man of the House of Israel who slaughters an ox or sheep or goat.... and does not bring it to the entrance of the Ohel Moed as a sacrifice to Hashem.... that man will be cut off from among

his people.... so that they no longer offer their sacrifices to the goat-demons that they are wont to stray after. (*Vayiqra Rabbah* 22:8)

Speaking on ritual in general and sacrifices in particular, many statements of the prophets make the point that, contrary to pagan beliefs, these practices have value only when sincerely fulfilled with their deeper purpose in mind, which is to bring man closer to the one G-d and to fulfillment of His will. The many castigations of the people for their devotion to sacrifices proclaimed by the prophets (including Samuel, Hosea, Amos, Micha, Isaiah and Jeremiah) do not necessarily indicate opposition to sacrifices per se⁷. They railed against overemphasizing sacrifices, neglecting the more important responsibilities of promoting righteousness and justice, while remaining dedicated to vacuous rituals. As Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon a”h commented:

It is clear from this (Isa. 1:11-17) that Isaiah understood the law to place greater importance on dynamic ethical action than upon ritual requirements. For without practicing dynamic ethics in life the ritual and the prayers were considered hollow and hypocritical.

Let us try and see how the Mosaic Law stressed social obligations and gave it a key role above ritual.

In the laws appertaining to the holidays it is stressed that the festivities and sacrifices were designed to fuse the social strata separated from each other by barriers of snobbishness and exclusiveness. These social barriers must be dissolved by the people of means inviting to their table the children, the slave, the maidservant, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow; in short the underprivileged classes. There was to be a spirit of true brotherhood to bind the nation into an inner, emotional unity, and countless other precepts such as the moratorium on debts every seven years, and similar laws, became the primary concern of Mosaic Law which, as we have said, is not an escapist but a participatory religion... it rather demands actions which lead to social unity and cohesion as the truly

creative act which alone can please the Creator. It does not condemn ritual, for ritual is the vehicle which through symbolism conveys the inner message of monotheism through signs and symbolic acts and non-verbal communication, but it insists that the message of these ritual acts be translated into appropriate action.

Reality Revisited, p. 203

Of course when ritual was used as legal underpinning or psychological support to justify corrupt behavior, the prophets described it as worthless, even perverse.

II. An Illuminating Passage

One passage HaRambam addressed directly is Jeremiah’s famous statement (selected for the haftarah of Parashat Sav) in which the prophet quoted Hashem chastising the people for their sins, utilizing sacrifices for the backdrop. He said: עלֹזְתִיכֶם סָפוּ עַל זִבְחֵיכֶם וְאָכְלוּ בִשְׂרָף, telling them that the way they were acting they may as well add their `olot sacrifices (burnt-offerings, absolutely prohibited to be eaten from) to their sacrifices which are permitted to be eaten from, and eat the meat thereof

For I spoke not unto your fathers nor commanded them on the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices. But just this is what I commanded them: hearken to My voice that I may be your G-d and you may be My people, and that you shall go in the path that I command you so that it shall be well with you (Jer. 7:22-23).

HaRambam states:

This passage has been found difficult in the opinions of all those whose words I heard or read. They ask, how can Jeremiah say that G-d did not command us about burnt-offerings or sacrifices considering that so many Torah laws refer to them? The explanation of this passage is according to what I will now explain. Jeremiah states that the primary purpose of the precepts is what G-d says, “Hearken to my voice that I may be your G-d and you may be

My people.” [Meaning that He is saying:] The commandments to bring sacrifices and visit the Temple are only for the purpose of leading to that goal; for that goal I transferred these modes of worship to My name, thus blotting out idolatry and firmly establishing the faith of Israel. You have ignored the goal and taken hold of the means.... (*Guide* 3:32).

Perhaps recognizing that many would not accept an explanation that considers sacrifices as if not commanded in the Torah, HaRambam proffered a second explanation. The phrase, “on the day I brought them out of the land of Egypt” can be seen as recalling the pre-Sinai laws given at Marah, concerning which the Torah states *שם שם לו חק ומשפט*, that they constitute “statute” and “ordinance” (Ex. 15:25). Tradition teaches that “statute” refers to Shabbat and “ordinance” refers to civil laws. Shabbat teaches about the Creator and creation while civil laws remove injustice from society, together comprising the basics of the Torah. Sacrifices are not included in that first lawgiving to Israel, demonstrating their secondary importance.

Many were dissatisfied with these explanations. Some interpreted Jeremiah as referring to the fact that the Ten Commandments - containing the essence of the Covenant - do not mandate sacrifices. Some say the statement refers to the fact that the Torah’s sacrificial program does not include any command to an individual who does not commit certain transgressions to necessarily bring a sacrifice, leaving the choice to do so optional (excluding special cases, such as festivals and experiencing certain bodily effects). Abarbanel is of the opinion that the Jeremiah passage supports the opinion that the Tabernacle and the related sacrificial program were not part of G-d’s original plans for Israel but were only prescribed as a corrective following the golden calf apostasy.

III. Questions and Answers

Others differed with HaRambam’s thesis and claimed that outward similarity between the Torah and the practices of idolatrous cultures, notwithstanding that they were widespread, do not prove that sacrifices were merely a concession to

what had then become an ingrained human practice. They were of the opinion that sacrificial service was of primary and essential value in the first instance and considered HaRambam to have based himself on his subjective understanding of G-d’s goals for man and human society, guided by his personal interpretation of the words of the prophets. Their questions against him included the sacrifices of Hebel and Noah, shortly after Creation and the Flood respectively, when there was not as yet a widespread custom and those individuals would presumably act on their own natural instinct, as well as the sacrifices of the patriarchs, who should be thought of as worshipping G-d in an ideal manner.

Defending HaRambam, it has been pointed out that the aforementioned examples were cases of individual choices of serving G-d at a time when the natural thinking of the world considered animal sacrifices as desired by G-d. In the case of Abraham, the Torah clearly downplays his engaging in animal sacrifice, portraying him as eventually moving beyond it (see our study on Parashat Lekh Lekha). As noted in the interpretations of the Jeremiah passage, the Torah’s outlook on an individual’s bringing sacrifices appears neutral at best while some view the whole sacrificial enterprise as a response to the golden calf. Additionally, HaRambam may have understood the pre-Mattan Torah sacrifices of Hebel and Noah in an allegorical fashion, as retrojections, symbolizing pure service of G-d as later conceived.

In any event, in recent decades a wealth of archaeological discoveries has decisively demonstrated that the magnitude of outward similarity of Torah ritual with the idolatrous practices of the pre-Torah neighboring cultures is absolutely immense. As those cultures expired well over two thousand years ago and their remains were buried under debris accretions of centuries, direct knowledge of their practices was long ago forgotten until recently rediscovered. Moshe Weinfeld (*Olam HaTanakh to Leviticus*) cites numerous examples of remarkable similarities, including laws concerning: types of sacrifices and acceptable species; priestly emoluments; the woman who gave birth; purifying the stricken house; use of birds, cedar wood and crimson cloth in certain

purification rites; Day of Atonement procedures, including priestly linen garments, confession of sins and altar purification rites; the scapegoat; holiday ceremonies, including similar types and numbers of sacrifices and accompaniments; dedications to the Temple; evaluations; the red cow and sanctuary for the unintentional killer.

This profusion of the Torah's outward ritual similarity with idolatrous cultures has been seen by many to support, at least to a degree, HaRambam's view that the sacrificial program G-d gave Israel was externally akin to the one they had been accustomed to because it was so deeply ingrained and that we must be sensitive to the numerous subtle nuances of modification and symbolism found in the Torah text. In a thoroughly consistent manner virtually all those rituals that possessed idolatrous associations were "cleansed" and adopted for G-d's program for Israel.

As much of this knowledge was forgotten, HaRambam and others, in addressing details in areas other than the general admissibility of sacrifices, developed an interpretive principle that assumes that the Torah often prohibited a certain

ritual or other because it was the practice of the neighboring idolatrous societies. In some cases their conjectures as far as the details under discussion being part of the pagan cult have stood the test of modern research, as appears to be the case with HaRambam's explanation as to why honey was unacceptable for the altar, because of its widespread use in pagan rites (Guide, 3:46). However, such views are often clearly in conflict with the evidence, such as his suggestion that the Torah mandated salt for all sacrifices because it wasn't used by the pagans in their rituals, a mistaken assumption. A more nuanced and comprehensive approach is required, taking into account the purpose of the particular practice. But that is not the topic of this study. Suffice it to say that the great increase in knowledge about ancient Near Eastern culture makes it possible to understand many details about Torah rituals in a way closer to how they were intended to be understood. And, in some respects, HaRambam's basic overall view on the reason for sacrifices may have had a broader application than he thought.

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