



Parashat Tzav

Why Do We Need All These Animal Sacrifices?

Dear Rebbetzin,

I've been a vegetarian for many years and I have a hard time with the notion of animal sacrifices which is so central in the Book of Vayikra. These rites seem to me barbaric and unethical to animals. Why would G-d command that we take the lives of innocent animals just to atone for our own sins? I just don't understand why so many Torah verses center around describing the horrific animal sacrifices. Since I don't find any meaning in these Torah sections, I end up just skipping them. I certainly hope that these archaic rites will not be reinstated when our Temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt.

Chaya Dinner (name changed)

Dear Chaya,

I totally understand the way you feel, and I'm positive you are not the only one who has a hard time relating to the animal sacrifices. When I was a new returnee to Judaism, I felt exactly like you, and I have to admit that I still do not find the sacrifices the most exciting part of the Torah. Nevertheless, I believe that all the mitzvot have intrinsic value, which transcends any meaning or explanation that we may give. A mitzvah is a mystical powerhouse, regardless of our understanding. There must be deep mystical reasons for the animal sacrifices. Otherwise, why would the Torah go to such lengths to describe them in so many details? The Hebrew word for sacrifice, *קָרְבַּן*/*korban*, derives from the root *קָרַב*/*karav* – "come close," specifically to G-d. Thus, all the sacrifices, including the animal sacrifices, were vehicles to bring someone who had become far from Hashem close to Him once again. Still, why is it necessary to use animal sacrifices in order to engender such rectification? Why is repentance and prayer not enough?

Kabbalistic Reasons for the Sacrifices

I found some fascinating teachings of the Arizal on the sacrifices by Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum in his commentary on *Vayikra*. According to Arizal, it sometimes happens that a person's soul falls to become incarnated in an animal. When the animal is brought as a sacrifice, it rectifies this soul to become elevated to its root and close to G-d again. Even when the sacrificial animal is not an incarnation, it nevertheless may contain holy sparks that fell at the time of creation and that are rectified through the sacrificial ritual. Arizal further explains that when the impure animal aspect of a person's soul gains dominion over him, it causes him to sin. To rectify this, he must bring an animal as a sacrifice. The burning of the animal on the altar draws down an exalted fire that burns away the sins and cleanses the person's animal soul at its very root. Since the impurity of the vegetable and inanimate levels are even greater than that of the animal level, and also cause people to sin, they must also be represented on the altar in the form of wine, flour and salt. In this way, the sacrifices elevate and purify all the fallen sparks and raise the physical vitality of this world to a higher plane.

An Elevation for the Animals

The sacrifices accomplish even more than prayer, which connects us to the spiritual level, because they connect the physical with the spiritual world. They affect not only the person who comes closer to Hashem through his sacrifice, but moreover, elevate all the animals in the world. I remember hearing the Rabbi in my first year of Yeshiva, explain that the sacrifices actually benefited the animals

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to such an extent that they would stretch their necks in their desire to be sacrificed. The human soul has several layers, including the Divine, the rational and the animal within. The sacrifices in the Temple elevated all of these levels, in addition to the animal that was being sacrificed. Thus, the sacrificial service consisted of elements from the inanimate world (salt), the vegetable world (flour, oil and wine), the animal world (the sacrificial animal or bird), the human world (the sinner, who had to confess his sin over the offering) and the world of the souls (represented by the officiating Kohen). These realms correspond in turn to the world of action (*Asiyah*) – inanimate, the world of formation (*Yetzirah*) – vegetative, the world of creation (*Beriyah*) – animate, and the world of emanation (*Atzilut*), corresponding to humanity. Finally, the highest world called *Adam Kadmon* corresponds to the repenting soul. Arizal further explains that the sacrifices rectified the original sin of Adam who caused good and evil to become mixed, thereby blemishing all the worlds and strengthening the forces of evil. Accordingly, G-d commanded man to bring together representatives of the inanimate, vegetative and animate realms. The service of the Kohanim, the music of the Levites, and the repentance of the owner of the sacrifice, cleanses and purifies all the worlds (Arizal, *Ta'amey HaMitzvot, Vayikra*).

Divergent Views on the Sacrifices by Rambam and Ramban

Rambam notes that the sacrifices served to nullify belief in idol worship. By sacrificing animals worshipped by pagans, we declare: “Don't worship these animals! Use them in the service of Hashem!” For example, the Egyptian's believed in a ram god; hence, the Passover sacrifice is a lamb, which is then eaten at the Passover Seder celebration. During Biblical times, it was the general practice among all nations to worship by means of sacrifice. G-d did not eliminate this practice since “to obey such a commandment would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used.” Therefore, G-d allowed Jews to make sacrifices, but He transferred that which had served as idol-worship to His service. This way He redirected the sacrificial order to wean people away from paganism and towards monotheism (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:32, 46). Ramban objects to Rambam's anthropological-psychological-sociological- historical explanation for the sacrifices. He holds that the animal sacrifices are fundamental and not merely a response to external influences on the Jewish people. Firstly, the Torah tells us that Kayin offered a sacrifice, obviously predating any pagan influence. Secondly, in many places the Torah refers to *korbanot* as being *ריח ניחוח ליהוה/reiach nichoach laHashem* – a pleasant fragrance to G-d. If the sacrifices were merely a concession to man's weakness, why would G-d be so pleased with them?

Will the Animal Sacrifices be Reinstated in the Third Temple?

In line with Rambam's approach, there would be no need to reinstitute the animal sacrifices at a time when it is no longer the way of people to worship by sacrificing, especially when there is an aversion against such worship. The Torah requires that sacrifices must be slaughtered *לרצונכם/lirtzonchem* – ‘willingly’ (*Vayikra* 19:5). As the Talmud explains, one must be able to say, ‘I want to bring this offering’ (*Babylonian Talmud, Erchin* 21a). When the slaughter of animals is no longer acceptable to society, this condition will not be fulfilled. According to Rav Kook, only the mincha offering consisting of flour and oil will be reinstated in the third Temple. At that time, all aspects of the universe will be elevated, including the animals. They will advance to a level of awareness of G-d similar to the level of people today (Arizal, *Sha'ar Hamitzvot*). Therefore, no sacrifice could be offered from such humanlike animals. It is about this messianic era that the Midrash makes the startling prediction, “All sacrifices will be annulled in the future” (*Tanchuma Emor* 19, *Vayikra Rabbah* 9:7). The prophet Malachi

similarly foretold of a lofty world in which the Temple service will consist only of grain offerings, in place of the animal sacrifices of old:

ספר מלאכי פרק ג (ד) וְעִרְבָה לַיהוָה מִנְחַת יְהוּדָה וְיִירוּשָׁלַם כִּימֵי עוֹלָם וּכְשֵׁנִים קִדְמֹנִיּוֹת:

“Then the grain-offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to God as in the days of old, and as in ancient years” (*Malachi* 3:4).

The fact that we may feel uncomfortable killing animals, emanates from a hidden anticipation of the future, already ingrained in our souls, like many other spiritual aspirations (*Gold from the Land of Israel* pp. 173-176. Adapted from *Otzarot HaRe'iyah*, vol. II, pp. 101-103; *Olat Re'iyah* vol. I, p. 292).

Animal Sacrifices Provide Eternal Meaning to an Animal's Existence

Still, as Ramban asserts, the animal sacrifices do have intrinsic value, and it is hard to believe that the Torah verses describing them would not have eternal relevance. The halacha transforms the sacrifices from a primitive religious practice into a sophisticated and advanced form of worship. By virtue of this transformation, the sacrifices are referred to as a sweet odor to Hashem (*Meshech Chachmah, Vayikra*, Introduction). Personally, I look forward to the rebuilding of the third Temple, when we will find out whether the animal sacrifices will be reinstated or not. I can see reasons for both possibilities. As we have demonstrated, animal sacrifices are not necessarily cruel to the animals. Rather, they engender spiritual elevation for them. Furthermore, by helping humans live more righteously, share with others, feel thankful and repentant, and fulfill the commandments, an animal's existence gains eternal meaning.