

It is religiously challenging to experience an entire book of Chumash as a source of discomfort rather than of uplift.

Sefer VaYikra begins with an extensive and detailed manual for animal sacrifice. This has, so far as I can tell, always been a source of religious concern for Jews, as the prophets already contain numerous critiques of those who see sacrificial ritual as having direct or primary religious significance: "Obedience is better than sacrifice", "Why do I need your numerous sacrifices, says Hashem", etc.

With the Batei Mikdash destroyed, and sacrifice therefore halakhically forbidden (leaving aside the controversy over whether the Pesach sacrifice can be brought at the Mikdash site even absent a Mikdash) the concern shifted from the practical – is following VaYikra improving our souls? - to the theoretical – why would anyone think that killing animals could improve our souls? – and Rav Kuk's suggestion, however seriously intended, that only vegetable sacrifice would be revived in the Third Temple has great contemporary appeal.

I am very fond of Rabbi Hertz's suggestion, taught to me by Rabbi Saul Berman, that Vayikra is intended to make the practice of priesthood transparent and accountable. In other religions, priests might be able to blackmail the people by threatening to subtly err ritually and therefore bring the wrath of the gods down, but in Judaism, the kohanim are more like contemporary baalei keriah, whose every vicarious religious action is subject to potentially humiliating public correction.

Rabbi Hertz's suggestion, and Rav Kuk's, emerge from a religious sensibility to which the entire institution of animal sacrifice is seen as a concession to the cultural framework of the ancient Near East. This is the standard understanding of Maimonides' position in the Guide, although much ink has been spilled as to whether this position can be reconciled with his own devotion of an entire book of the Mishneh Torah to sacrifices.

This sensibility is appropriately controversial, both intrinsically – is it really okay to declare that significant chunks of Torah ritual are historically/sociologically contingent, and were always bediavad? - and on slippery-slope grounds – what if we find other elements of Halakhah uncongenial? It is not always easy to explain with perfect coherence why we celebrate the obsolescence of the laws regulating slavery while proclaiming the necessary eternity of laws regulating divorce.

I am always interested by the way that theological defensiveness, often expressed as polemical attacks on heresy, often requires taking positions more religiously radical, if one stops to think, than those being defended against. In the context of Judaism, think of how many defensive polemics require the rejection of long lists of traditional figures and works, and implausible and unprecedented rereadings of traditional texts? I was immediately struck by, and regularly return to, one of my teachers' willingness to throw Abravanel and Ibn Ezra out of the Tradition rather than tolerate the idea that Shavuot is not connected by the Torah itself to Matan Torah.

An interesting example of what we can call "radically creative reaction" is Shadal's reaction to the Guide's position on sacrifices. Shadal is implicitly scandalized by the Guide's claim that the sacrificial ritual was tolerated rather than endorsed, and centralized in the Mikdash so as to limit it, and perhaps

put it on the path of eventual extinction. Here is my rough translation of excerpts of his response (with some parenthetical clarifications), and I trust that its radicalness will be self-evident.

“Sacrifice did not begin in commandedness, but rather in the space of human initiative, with human beings volunteering to give thanks to G-d for His graciousness to them, or to bring a gift before him so as to cause His anger to be forgotten, or to appease Him so that He would fulfill their wishes, because it would be implausible for a human being to behave toward his god in a manner different than he would behave with a flesh and blood king,

Now when they sought to bring a gift to G-d, they found no scheme other than to burn it in fire, as by burning it they would remove it from their sphere and from the sphere of other human beings, and from the sphere of the animals and beasts and birds, and also because while it was burnt its smoke rose up to the heavens, so that it appeared to them as if it rose up to G-d.

Now the thing that was burnt for the honor of G-d they called *kodesh*, etymologically from *yekod esh*, and from this the term *kedushah* eventually was lent to other matters. Now the Divine Torah, whose purpose is not to teach the people wisdom-and-knowledge (=philosophy), but rather to guide them on the paths of righteousness, did not nullify the ritual of sacrifice, not because (contra Guide) it was not (sociologically) able to do so, but rather because this practice was not an intrinsic evil, nor did it damage humans or their characters, but rather aided them, because if the Torah had informed the nation that G-d had no desire for sacrifices, the next day they would say “What desire has G-d of our becoming righteous, and what purpose in our perfecting our ways?” Seeing as one of the foundations of Torah is the belief that G-d watches over the actions of human beings and loves the doers of good and hates the wicked, it was necessary for the Divinity not to be described as infinitely exalted in accordance with His true level, rather as-if-it-were possible to lower His exaltedness slightly and have him appear in human minds as if he were a great king who understood all their deeds and heard their cries and received their gifts, and this necessity was not only in that generation, but rather is equally needed in every generation. Had G-d, in place of sacrifices, commanded prayer and songs and Torah reading and listening to inspirational speeches, and not commanded regarding sacrifices, the greatness of G-d and His reverence would not have been engraved into the hearts of the masses, because it would have seemed to them that the gods of the nations, whose worshippers bring before them many sacrifices, were greater and more honored than our G-d, whose worship involved mere words. Because this is the characteristic of the masses in every generation, not merely the hoi-polloi, but rather most people have this characteristic: Whom do they honor? The one who honors himself and exalts himself, whereas one who is forbearing and does not seek greatness for himself, they do not see as significant. Now G-d has no need to be honored by flesh and blood, but for our own good He needed to bring His awe into our hearts so that we would not sin . . .

But all the community could bring their sacrifices in one place which G-d would pick and this was not, G-d forbid, so as to limit the bringing of sacrifices, as per Guide 3:32, but rather for the good of the nation and its success and to perfect character and preserve religion, because with one Mikdash for all the people, they would all gather to one place and their hearts would be bound up with fraternal bonds and they would always be one faction, rather than each tribe and clan forming its own nation, whereas if each individual built his own altar, each would have found it sufficient that G-d was appeased by him and accepted his sacrifices, and his heart would have given no worry to the rest of his nation . . .”

Shabbat shalom