

Geulas Yisrael #45

Tzav

Evolution or Apocalypse

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What is the primary function of korbanot and mikdash sacrifices? The Ramban asserts that a chatat or sin-offering substitutes for the punishment we deserve in the wake of our religious failure. The animal's death replaces our own potential punishment. Beyond the acquittal effect of a sin-offering the broader set of korbanot serve a higher mystical purpose, impacting upper realms which lie far beyond human reach and understanding.

By contrast, the Rambam (in his Guide to the Perplexed) proposed a "cultural" role for korbanot: ancient pagan cultures routinely slaughtered animals to their pagan deities. It would have been impossible to abruptly sever the Jewish people from these established cultural and religious norms. Instead of banning sacrifices Hashem redirected them. By sacrificing korbanot to Hashem we slowly 'wean away' from pagan rituals. Hashem adopted contemporary customs to help transition the people from paganism to monotheism.

The Rambam's view of korbanot raises an intriguing and controversial question: will sacrifices be restored during the Messianic era? After all, the world has veered away from paganism and from animal slaughter. Moreover, when Moshiach arrives, the entire world will appreciate Hashem and reject all religious corruptions. Under those ideal conditions korbanot will no longer be necessary to stem paganism. Perhaps korbanot will not be restored! Perhaps their function

has already been served!

This scenario has been roundly rejected by our masorah. We regularly daven for the restoration of the mikdash and the resumption of korbanot. Every tefilah is strewn with multiple references about the restoration of korbanot. Even the Rambam himself (Hilchot Melachim 11; 11) details the offering of sacrifices as an event which succeeds the arrival of Moshiach. The Guide to the Perplexed is a philosophical treatise but not a regularly cited halachik source. Jewish tradition has firmly concluded that korbanot will one day be restored.

In addition the Rambam's provocative comments, many cite several veiled references in Rav Kook's writings (Otzarot Re'eyah 2-3, and Olat Re'eyah 1:292) in which he vaguely portrays a future of expanded religious consciousness which has no need for ritual sacrifices. However, it is unclear whether he refers to a Messianic future or to the next world of Olam Habah which will introduce an entirely different reality. Even if Rav Kook intended the Messianic era, his position suggesting the fading of korbanot remains a minority opinion.

Beyond the special question of korbanot during mashiach, this question raises a broader issue: how do we view the Messianic era? Will it be an extension of our current state of affairs improving the world we know? Will the Messianic era be based upon current conventions, and existing cultural norms? Or will Moshaich inaugurate a complete overhaul of human consciousness and transition humanity into an entirely different reality. Perhaps the human mind of the 21st century finds animal sacrifice abhorrent, but the Messianic mind will not. Will ימות המשיח be evolutionary or apocalyptic?

This question stems from a veiled statement of the amora Shmuel (Shabbat 63) which claims that the "only" novelty of the Messianic era will be the elimination of "שעבוד מלכיות" or shibud malchiyut – which translates literally into the suppression and tyranny. In its limited form, this ambiguous phrase could refer to the eradication of totalitarian dictators. It can also refer to a broader elimination of wars and strife. It probably also portrays the restoration of Jewish sovereignty and the abolition of antisemitism. However, one thing seems clear from Shmuel's statement- the Messianic era will not entail a complete apocalypse. Rather, it will be an evolution and a perfection of our current reality.

This "evolutionary" view of Moshiach contradicts Yeshayahu's prophecy (chapter 11) about a lamb and a wolf reposing peacefully "side-by-side", as human weapons of war are reconfigured into ploughshares. This dramatic scene clearly indicates the entire world order- including the natural order will be reconstituted. Those who take Shmuel's statement literally (such as the Rambam), interpret Yeshayahu as mere metaphor. Yeshayahu doesn't refer to actual wolves and sheep. Instead, he describes a world of violence turned peaceful by using a metaphor of sheep and wolves reconciling.

To summarize: there are two different versions of the Messianic era. One which is evolutionary and doesn't radically alter human consciousness or the world order. The second version is more apocalyptic and entails a complete overhaul of everything we know.

Which will occur? It is impossible to say. To paraphrase the Rambam in his description of the messianic era: "we will only fully know the details of this event once it occurs". There is no

way to accurately predict when the era will begin, how it will unfold and what reality it will introduce. This information was intentionally encrypted by Hashem who doesn't want us distracted by Messianic fever at the cost of halachik, moral and practical engagement with this world. Throughout the ages Millenarians- or those who actively labor toward a utopian apocalypse- have wreaked great havoc upon humanity.

While we can't predict whether Moshiach will be evolutionary or apocalyptic, it is important to believe in the possibility of apocalypse. We have become too confident in, and too comfortable with modern society. As humanity has advanced and evolved, we have become duped into "generationism" or the delusion that our generation is superior to previous ones. Indeed, we have witnessed spectacular success and innovation, but in many spheres society has degenerated. We must believe that there can be a different condition introduced by Hashem to replace and radically improve our own. Despite our impressive human success, there is a divine order which far surpasses the human one.

Most moderns bristle at the prospect of animal sacrifice. People of faith conjure the vision to imagine a world relandscaped by Hashem and which accredits animal sacrifice. The ability to imagine a divinely-crafted reality is a cornerstone of faith and of our belief in higher wisdom. We don't invest absolute belief in our own reality- as impressive and evolutionary as it feels.

The greatest fall in life, is to fall so far that you forget you are fallen. Two thousand years ago we fell. After our national betrayals we were evicted from Yerushalayim, and the world shifted. We have labored under imperfect conditions for two

millennia. Despite being short-handed, we have crafted a rich Jewish experience and have thrived even as we were deficient so many vital elements of Jewish identity such as: prophecy, temple, sanhedrin, monarchy, and sovereignty. Despite our handicaps we flourished. However, this world isn't our ideal reality. As we try to restore a perfect state we must continue to believe in the unbelievable and imagine the unimaginable. For a Jew, apocalyptic consciousness is essential to faith and to identity.