

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayikra

The Role and Purpose of Korbanos

Introduction: the Rambam and the Ramban

There is a famous dispute between two of the great Rishonim regarding how to understand the purpose of the *korbanos* commanded by the Torah:

- ▷ **The Rambam** writes that *korbanos* were a form of concession to the people who were not able to conceive of religious worship that did not involve sacrifices. In order that they would fully be able to relate to Judaism, and thereby completely disassociate themselves from other religious systems, the Torah provided a program of *korbanos*.¹
- ▷ **The Ramban** strenuously disagrees with the above approach, insisting that *korbanos* are of intrinsic value, playing a central role in harmonizing the cosmic spiritual forces and different levels of Creation,² and are not merely preventative or concessional in nature.³

Harmony: Bamos and the Beis Hamikdash

The Meshech Chochmah, in his Introduction to Chumash Vayikra, suggests a middle approach to the offering of *korbanos*, into which both of the above opinions can be incorporated, depending on the setting in which they are being offered:

¹ See *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:32 and 46, (See also Rambam's Commentary to *Maseches Avos* 1:2, and *Mishneh Torah Hilchos Me'ilah* 8:8).

² As the Meshech Chochmah describes it, "ענין עלעקטרי רוחני," a form of "spiritual electricity."

³ Commentary to *Vayikra* 1:9.

The Torah commands that there be a central place of worship – initially the Mishkan and ultimately the Beis Hamikdash – where *korbanos* are to be offered as part of the avodah. The *korbanos* offered there are to achieve the effect of harmonizing the cosmic forces of creation, as discussed by the Ramban.

However, under certain circumstances, the Torah also allows for the making of a private altar, known as a *bamah*. The *korbanos* offered on these altars do not achieve the above-mentioned spiritual effects, and are provided purely in order to distance the people from the pagan practices of others, as discussed by the Rambam.

Resonance in Rishonim and Chazal

The Meshech Chochmah enlists support for this basic approach from another of the Rishonim, the Ralbag who, in his commentary to sefer Melachim,⁴ writes as follows:

The intention [of korbanos] is one of the secrets of Creation, which can be fathomed by those who are dedicated for purposes of this Divine service, after much contemplation. Yet this effect will only be achieved if the service is performed by the kohanim.⁵ However Hashem allowed each person to do as he sees fit, to offer [korbanos] on a bamah... in order that they may fully enlist in the service of Hashem. [This was] on account of what had been ingrained in them from the services of other religions, leading them to think that Hashem would not be for them as a God if they did not serve Him in this way.

We see that the Ralbag clearly distinguishes between *korbanos* offered in the Beis Hamikdash, where their service relates to the secrets of Creation, and those offered on *bamos*, which exist solely to enlist the people fully in the service of Hashem in a manner to which they could relate.

Indeed, the Meshech Chochmah writes that this distinction is to be found in the Mishnah itself, for this is the meaning of the statement of the Mishnah in Zevachim⁶ that a private altar does not have the effect of “*reyach nichoach* – a pleasing aroma.” The idea of *reyach nichoach* reflects all the positive and pleasing spiritual effects of bringing a *korban*. These exist only in *korbanos* brought in the Beis Hamikdash.

Rabbeinu Chaim Kohen

With the above idea in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains the famous opinion of one of the Baalei HaTosafos, Rabbeinu Chaim Kohen. The Mishnah⁷ informs us that

4 Melachim I, Chap, 11, toles 1.

5 And the requirement that a Kohen specifically do the *avodah* exists only when it is performed in the Beis Hamikdash, not with a *bamah* (Commentary of R'Yehuda Copperman).

6 113a.

7 Zevachim 112b.

bamos were only permitted prior to the time that the Beis Hamikdash was built. After that, *korbanos* could only be offered in the Beis Hamikdash. With regards to the permissibility of bamos after the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, a simple reading of the Gemara⁸ would seem indicate that it is dependent on the question as to whether the sanctity that was imbued in the location of the Mikdash was for all time (קידשה לעתיד לבא), or only for the duration of its existence (קידשה לשעתה). If it was the former, then bamos would remain prohibited, while if it was the latter, they would again be permitted.

However, Tosafos⁹ cite Rabbeinu Chaim Kohen as saying that even if the sanctity of the Mikdash was only temporary and no longer remains, bamos are nevertheless prohibited in our times. What is the basis of this prohibition?

The Gemara elsewhere¹⁰ informs us that at the beginning of the time of the second Beis Hamikdash, the Anshei Knesses Hagedolah (Men of the Great Assembly) eradicated the yetzer hara for idol-worship. As such, since the institution of bamos existed solely for the purpose of preventing the Jewish people from lapsing into the pagan practices of other religions, with the concern for such a lapse having been nullified, bamos no longer serve any purpose and thus remain forbidden!

In Tehillim

The Meshech Chochmah proceeds to explain how this distinction between bamos and the Beis Hamikdash can be seen in the words of Tehillim. In chapter 51, David Hamelech states:

כִּי לֹא תִחְפֹּץ זֶבַח וְאַתְנָה עוֹלָה לֹא תִרְצֶה

*For You [Hashem] do not desire a sacrifice, that I would give it, a burnt-offering You do not want.*¹¹

This verse expresses the idea that a sacrifice per se, e.g. one that is offered on a *bamah*, is not something for which Hashem has an essential desire. However, two verses later, David entreats Hashem to build the Beis Hamikdash:

הִיטִיבָה בְּרִצּוֹנְךָ אֶת צִיּוֹן תִּבְנֶה חוֹמוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם

*Do good in Your favor unto Zion, build the walls of Jerusalem.*¹²

⁸ Megillah 10a.

⁹ Ibid. s.v. *u'mai taama*.

¹⁰ Yoma 69b.

¹¹ Verse 18.

¹² Verse 20.

With the Beis Hamikdash having been built, the setting will then exist where *korbanos* can fulfill their spiritual function of aligning the different spheres of Creation and bringing blessing into the world – and will therefore be something that Hashem desires for their intrinsic value. Thus, David concludes:

אֲזַ תִּחְפֹּץ זִבְחֵי צְדָק עֹלָה וְכָלִיל

*Then You will desire the offerings of righteousness, a burnt-offering and a whole-offering.*¹³

As the Shabbos of *Vayikra* leads us into Purim this year, may the joy and celebration over the eternity of the Jewish people lead us to merit the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash, the healing of our wounds, and the restoration of our national glory, which is the glory of Hashem. 📖

Purim Sameach!

13 Verse 21.