

The notion of animal sacrifice to the mind of the twenty first century thinking Jew seems to be quite difficult. In Temple times in Jerusalem there were all kinds of sacrifice offered in the Temple from wine, oil and meal offerings to bird and animal sacrifices. Why the need for the Torah to expend so much time on this issue and indeed in our prayers we mention the request “Restore the service to Your sanctuary and accept with love and favour Israel’s fire offerings and prayer” which insinuates a future return to sacrifice?

The Rambam (Maimonides) in the Guide for the Perplexed proposes that the essential idea of animal sacrifices is an antidote to the problem of idolatry. Israel were previously so engrossed in pagan practice and sacrifice that in order to slowly wean them away from their infatuation it was necessary to introduce the idea of serving G-d through animal sacrifice. For this reason the animal sacrifices were brought from those animals that were worshipped in pagan societies- to teach that we take those professed deities and use them for serving G-d. However, this was only a momentary concession to man’s weakness, in reality the goal would be to ultimately move away from any need of sacrifice.

Nachmanides disagrees vehemently with Rambam’s opinion; in the Torah the sacrifice is called the sweet smelling fragrance to G-d. If sacrifice was only brought as a compromise to the frailties of man why should it be of pleasure to G-d? Indeed even before pagan practice became fashionable our ancestors served G-d by bringing sacrifices, yet these also brought G-d pleasure. So if they pre-date pagan practice why does the Torah instruct the animal sacrifices to be brought? His response is that the ultimate goal of sacrifice is in order to change man and bring him closer to G-d. What should have been done to the animal ought to be performed on the person bringing the sacrifice, it is only through the sacrifice and the various stages through which it was brought could one affect essential change in ones thought, speech and action.

This idea is perhaps best expressed through the well known words of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi who said that in the Torah’s introduction to sacrifice he notices what seems to be a grammatical inaccuracy in the verse. It says *Adam ki yakriv mikem korban Lashem*- a person who offers up from you a sacrifice to G-d. It would have perhaps been more correct to have said *Adam mikem ki yakriv*- a man from you who offers up- Rabbi Shneur Zalman puts forward the idea that it is not the physical act of sacrifice that is important but the inner approach of the Jew to G-d, that indeed if a Jew wants to draw near to Him (*korban*- sacrifice means to draw near) it must come from *mikem*- from you, with your heart and soul to G-d.

Shabbat Shalom