

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 30: Ethical Issues in Tanach 8: Sacrifices

by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman, New West End Synagogue



A large part of the Torah is dedicated to describing the many details relating to animal offerings brought in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), and later the Temple in Jerusalem, such as those which are to atone for sins and to repair

the relationship between mankind and God. The 18th century Turkish rabbi, Chacham Yitzchak ben Moshe Magriso (known as the *Meam Loez*) notes that the primary reasons for animal offerings are impossible for us to fully comprehend. However, he offers explanations which relate to the psycho-spiritual reality of sin and the atonement process in Judaism, which help provide context to the sacrificial services.

God, who lacks nothing, does not need our offerings; therefore whatever He asks of us must always be for our own sake and not for His. In reference to God saying during the creation of mankind “let us make man in our likeness and our image” (Bereishit 1:26), the Ramban (known as Nachmanides, 1194-1270) explains that ‘likeness’ and ‘image’ refer to the two elements of mankind’s essence; heaven and earth – spiritual and physical respectively.

The physical part of us (our body) is similar to that of other creatures and generates similar animalistic drives within us, such as to eat and drink, to reproduce and to protect ourselves and our offspring.

The spiritual element, however, is something unique to mankind. Our God-given soul equips us with higher executive functions, which we can employ to moderate our behaviour and subdue our physical urges. Sin can be generalised as a failure of our spiritual essence (our soul) to be in control of our more animalistic desires (our

body). These two elements are known as the *yetzer hatov*, the inclination to act in a moral way in line with God’s will and the *yetzer hara*, the inclination to be self-serving (see Mishnah Berachot 9:5).

The *Meam Loez* explains that offering an animal arouses a person’s heart to recognise how lowly the body can be. The nature of the physical world is that nothing lasts forever; the pleasure or benefit gained from sin is only ever a fleeting indulgence of instant gratification which is nothing in comparison to the performance of a mitzvah, for which the reward is infinite. As the sinner witnesses the animal being taken for slaughter, they are forced to confront the fact that this offering represents their own inner animalistic urges, which should have been channelled towards God. This is how the offering serves to inspire *teshuvah* (repentance), drawing us closer to the Almighty. The Hebrew for offerings is *korbanot* (קרבנות) from the Hebrew verb *lakerev* (לקרב), which means to draw near.

Since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, we are no longer able to offer animals in the Temple. However, the prophet Hoshea entreats us to repent and “offer the words of our lips instead of calves” (Hosea 14:3). In this sense, our prayers have replaced the sacrifices of old, but have retained many references to the Temple services.

