



Parashat Vayikra is devoted entirely to the subject of *korbanot*, outlining the various categories of sacrifices and the procedures that are required for each. This topic is the focal point of a famous controversy between Maimonides and his critics regarding the underlying purpose behind the Torah's sacrificial order. In one of the more famous passages in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:32), Maimonides contends that God commanded *Benei Yisrael* to offer sacrifices because they had grown accustomed to this mode of religious worship over the course of their exposure to pagan culture. Rather than demand that they follow a religious creed devoid of any sacrificial rite, God "transferred to His service that which had formerly served as a worship of created beings...and commanded us to serve Him in the same manner."

Nachmanides famously voices his strong objection to Maimonides' theory, in his commentary to Parashat Vayikra (1:9). Towards the beginning of his critique, Nachmanides charges that this theory "makes the table of the Lord defiled" ("*ya'aseh shulchan Hashem mego'al*"). To appreciate the severity of this accusation, we must consider the Biblical context from where Nachmanides borrows this expression. In the Book of Malakhi, the prophet chides the Jews of the early Second Temple period for their disregard for the sacrificial order, as expressed by their selecting the lowest quality animals as sacrifices. He condemns the people for desecrating the Name of God in that they (figuratively) said, "the table of the Lord is defiled, and His word – His food – is contemptuous" (Malakhi 1:12). Nachmanides charges that Maimonides' approach to the sacrifices is similarly disrespectful to the sacred institution of the *Mikdash* and the *korbanot*, as it views this entire order as borrowed from the pagans. Rather than approaching the sacrifices as intrinsically holy and meaningful rituals, whereby an individual draws closer to God, Maimonides' view relegates the sacrificial rite to a "necessary evil" required due to the pervading pagan influences of the ancient world.

Maimonides would likely respond that the underlying purpose of these laws – and of all the Torah's laws – need not affect or undermine their sacred quality. He, too, undoubtedly conceded that the Temple rituals are sacred acts of *avodat Hashem*, a means of serving and expressing devotion to the Creator. Some explanation must be given, however, as to why the Almighty chose animal sacrifices as the preferred means of *avodat Hashem*. Why did He invest animal sacrifices with sanctity, rather than some other mode of worship? Maimonides responds that *Benei Yisrael* had grown accustomed to this mode of religious service and could not be expected to embrace a code of law that did not include a sacrificial rite. But once such a rite was instituted, it undoubtedly

assumes great importance as one of the pillars of religious service demanded of the Jewish people.

Additionally, perhaps, viewing the Temple rituals as a means of opposing and leading *Am Yisrael* away from pagan worship need not necessarily be seen as a "relegation" of its status. After all, was not the designation a special nation intended for the purpose of responding to paganism and representing to all mankind the truth of monotheism? *Am Yisrael* was charged with the mission began by the nation's patriarch, Avraham, to disseminate the true belief in a single, non-physical Creator who governs the world (see Maimonides' famous comments in the beginning of *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim*). The sacrificial order plays a critical role towards fulfilling this mission by demonstrating our subservience to an omniscient, omnipotent God, rather than to any other force or object. Thus, rather than "defiling" the Temple rituals, Maimonides' approach affords it great importance as part of our nation's mission to represent the monotheistic truth to all mankind.