



Parshat vayakhel -- pequdei

And he made two *kheruvim* of gold, of one piece he made them on both sides of the *kaporet*. One *kheruv* on one side, and one *kheruv* on the other side. He made the *kheruvim* on both edges of the *kaporet*. And the *kheruvim* had their wings spread above, roofing with their wings above the *kaporet*, and they were facing each other; the *kheruvim* were facing the *kaporet*. (Exod.37.7-9)

One of the most unusual features of the *mishkan* and *miqdash* and one of the most difficult to understand is the *kheruvim*. These figures, part human and part aviary, have served as the inspiration for the Western image of a winged angel. But why did G-d command us to make them and place them in the holy of holies? This commandment seems particularly problematic given the prohibition of idolatry. If it is wrong to worship idols, why place two idol-like figures in the holy of holies?

Many theories have been offered. Yehudah Hallevi, for example, explains the *kheruvim* in accordance with his general theory of the *mishkan*. Since the *mishkan* as a whole is a living organism, the various parts of it correspond to the parts of an organism: the *aron* containing the two tablets with the ten commandments is the heart of the *mishkan*, and right beside it are the *kheruvim* which, with their wings, function as the lungs. (Kuzari 2.26)

But as we saw in *parshat* Terumah, Maimonides rejects the idea that the *mishkan* is comparable to a living being. For him the *mishkan* is primarily an educational structure designed to combat the belief in idolatry. This was not a minor aim: in some places Maimonides suggests that the eradication of idolatry was the major purpose of the giving of the Torah. If so, it seems a bit odd to place figures of *kheruvim* in the holy of holies. Why adopt a practice so similar to those one is fighting?

Adopting Enemy Tactics

In Maimonides' view, this is precisely what G-d did. Rather than simply reject all aspects of idolatry, he adopted some of them and turned them to a good purpose. In fact the whole idea of building a *miqdash* was, in Maimonides' view, such a co-option of an idolatrous practice:

Therefore He allowed these kinds of worship to remain, but transferred them from created or imaginary and unreal beings His own name, and commanded us to serve Him in the same manner. Thus he commanded us to build Him a temple: "And they shall make me a sanctuary" (Exod. 25.8); to have the altar erected to His name: "An altar of earth you shall make for me" (Exod. 20.21); to offer the sacrifices to Him: "If anyone of you bring an offering to the Lord"

(Lev. 1.2); to bow down before Him; and to burn incense before Him. He has forbidden to do any of these things to any other being: “He who sacrifices to any G-d, save the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed” (Exod. 22.19); “For you shall bow down to no other G-d” (Exod. 34.14). Through this divine ruse it came about that the memory of idolatry was effaced and that the grandest and true foundation of our belief – namely, the existence and oneness of the deity— was firmly established, while at the same time the souls had no feeling of repugnance and were not repelled because of the abolition of modes of worship to which they were accustomed and than which no other mode of worship was known at the time. (Guide 3.32)

He elaborates on this general principle in chapter 3.45, where he discusses the instructions for the building of the *miqdash* in detail :

It is known that the idolaters in those days built temples to stars, and set up in those temples the image which they agreed upon to worship because it was related to a certain star or to a portion of a sphere. We were, therefore, commanded to build a temple for Him, and to place in it the ark with two tablets of stone containing the words “I [am the Lord],” and “You shall have no other G-d before me.”

In G-d’s battle against idolatry, He worked with existing practices, transforming them to radical new purposes. This was necessary because in Maimonides’ view it is impossible to effect radical changes in a short time. This is a principle which can be observed not only in historical and political movements, but also in biology, which Maimonides studied in his capacity as a physician:

Similarly, G-d made a wily and gracious arrangement with regard to the mammals. For when born, such individuals are extremely soft and cannot feed on dry food. Accordingly breasts were prepared for them so that they should produce milk with a view to their receiving humid food, which is similar to the composition of their bodies, until their limbs gradually and little by little become dry and solid. (Guide 3.32)

Just as a physician knows that one cannot safely wean a child onto solid foods all at once, so too a spiritual leader or educator has to be aware of the need for a gradual weaning process. One needs to understand not only the goal towards which the patient needs to be moved, but also the exact physical state of the patient, and the most effective means of bringing him from one state to another.

In seeking to “wean” the children of Israel from contemporary idolatrous practices, G-d had to proceed slowly, allowing many aspects of contemporary culture to remain in place. Many of the features of the temple can be explained in this way. But, interestingly enough, Maimonides does not explain the use of *kheruvim* as a concession to contemporary idolatry.

Choosing One’s Battles

There is another way in which some of the features of the Temple service were related to idolatry: not as a concession to idolatry, but as a demonstrative rejection of the most offensive aspects of it. Thus Maimonides explains many of the sacrificial practices as aiming at negating the animal worship of local Canaanite cults. As Rabbi Shammah's article on this web site shows, on this point Maimonides' theory has been confirmed by numerous archeological findings.

This principle of negating contemporary practices also helps explain many structural features of the *miqdash*:

The commandment that the stones of the altar shall not be hewn and that no iron tool shall be lifted up upon them (Deut. 27.5), has been explained by our Sages as follows: It is not right that the tool that shortens man's life should be lifted up upon that which gives length of life. As an aggadic explanation this is good: but the real reason is this: the idolaters used to build their altars with hewn stones, and we ought not to imitate them. For this reason we have to make an altar of earth: "You shall make me an altar of earth" (Exod. 20.24). If it should be impossible to dispense altogether with stones, they must not be hewn, but employed in their natural state. Thus the Law also prohibits from worshipping over painted stones (Lev. 26.1), or from planting any tree near the altar of the Lord (Deut. 16.21).

The object of all these commandments is the same, namely, that we shall not employ in the worship of G-d anything which the idolaters employed in the worship of their idols. In general terms this is repeated in the following passage: "Take care lest you inquire after their gods, saying, How these nations served their gods, so will I do" (Deut. 12.30). The children of Israel shall not do this, because - as is expressly added - "every abomination unto the Lord, which he hates, have they done unto their gods."

In this case, rather than accommodating the practices of idolaters, the Torah opposed them directly. Maimonides does not say what principle was used to determine whether to adopt a practice or oppose it. But it seems that some of the practices are more offensive than others, and these have to be eliminated even at the risk of waging a war against contemporary opinion.

Even this explanation, however, does not apply to the *kheruvim*. The *kheruvim* served a third purpose, of publicizing truths. Unlike the historical explanations we have used so far, these truths that are the same today as they were at the time when idolatry was popular.

Publicizing Truth

Some features of the Temple served purposes which were not conditioned in any way by the historical time period in which the commandments were given. After all, there would be no reason to combat idolatry in the first place if there were no truth with which to replace it.

When Maimonides says that G-d “transferred to His service that which had formerly served as a worship of created beings, and of things imaginary and unreal,” he makes it clear that the aim was not just to destroy idolatry, but to put something else in its place. As we have seen, we were commanded to “build a *miqdash* to the name of G-d, and to place in it the ark with two tablets of stone which contained the words “I [am the Lord],” and “You shall have no other G-d before me.”” The words written on those stones are at the center of the *miqdash*, and it is the message they contain which replaces the previous idolatry. In short, the *miqdash* is a monument to the scientific and religious beliefs set forth in the Torah.

In addition to the ark with the two tablets, the *kheruvim* also serve the purpose of publicizing true beliefs. In particular, the *kheruvim* are designed to reinforce the belief in prophecy:

The fundamental belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Torah, for without the belief in prophecy there can be no belief in the Torah. But a prophet only receives divine inspiration through the agency of an angel: “The angel of the Lord called” (Gen. 22.15); “The angel of the Lord said to her” (Gen. 16.11) and other innumerable instances. Even Moshe Rabbeinu received his first prophecy through an angel. “And an angel of the Lord appeared to him in the flame of fire” (Exod. 3.2). It is therefore clear that the belief in the existence of angels precedes the belief in prophecy, and the latter precedes the belief in the Law....

When the wise men discovered and proved that there was a being, neither itself corporeal nor residing as a force in a corporeal body, namely the true, one G-d, and that there existed besides other purely incorporeal beings which G-d endowed with His goodness and His light, namely, the angels, and that these beings are not included in the sphere and its stars, it became evident that it was these angels and not the idols or *asherot* that spoke to the prophets.

From this it is clear that the belief in the existence of angels is connected with the belief in the Existence of G-d; and the belief in G-d and angels leads to the belief in prophecy and in the truth of the Torah. In order to firmly establish this creed, G-d commanded [the Israelites] to make over the ark the form of two angels [*kheruvim*]. The belief in the existence of angels is thus inculcated in the minds of the people, and this belief is in importance next to the belief in G-d’s Existence; it leads us to believe in Prophecy and in the Law, and opposes idolatry. (Guide 3.45)

For idolaters, the belief in prophecy merely meant translating their belief in the power of certain astral phenomena to another object, the angels which are not material powers. But there was a danger that this new source of prophecy might be considered another G-d. Maimonides explains that for this reason there needed to be two *kheruvim*, and not just one:

If there had only been one figure of a *kheruv*, the people would have been misled and mistaken it for G-d’s image and thought it was to be worshipped, in the fashion of the pagans. Or they might have assumed that the angel was also a deity, and would thus have adopted dualism. By making two *kheruvim* and declaring “the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is One,” Moses clearly proclaimed the

theory of the existence of a number of angels. He left no room for the error of considering those figures as deities, since [he declared that] G-d is one, and that He is the Creator of the angels, who are more than one.

By this means the existence of a second non-material power, the angels is also affirmed. But what are these angels?

The Shem Tov, one of the commentators on the *Guide*, offers further speculation about the meaning of the exact details of the *kheruvim*. In *mesechet Yoma* it is said that the *kheruvim* were male and female, and were portrayed in an embrace. Shem Tov explains that this is designed to reflect the composite nature of the angels:

For the angels are composed of something similar to matter and something similar to form, and they have a superior and an inferior aspect, and a part which is active and a part which is passive (literally: a cause and an effect)... (comments on Guide 3.45)

In Guide 2.6, Maimonides describes the angels as non-material principles, also known as separate intellects, by which G-d acts on the world. They include both natural and psychic forces which are responsible for all the actions that take place in the world. We may think of the laws of nature. Since these are non-material principles, they do not contain matter; but because they are capable of acting and being acted upon, they are may be described as composed of something analogous to form and matter, as Shem Tov suggests.

But if the *kheruvim* are non-material beings, why are they represented in the *miqdash* as possessing wings? Shem Tov explains this in the following way:

And they have wings to indicate that the purpose of the Torah and the Tablets is to improve the human species and to make them rise to virtue... and it is fitting for them to be guided by this Torah, for it will give them wings to rise to virtue.

Maimonides offers a different explanation. In chapter 1.49, he explains that angels are described in the Tanach in material terms because people have a hard time imagining the existence of an intellectual principle apart from matter. They are specifically given traits that are derived from animals in order to indicate that they are below the rank of G-d, who is never compared to an animal. But despite this, the Tanach is careful not to give them too many animal attributes:

An animal shape is attributed to them by attribution of wings only and in no other way. For flying cannot be represented to oneself without wings, just as walking cannot be represented to oneself without legs.... The notion of flying has been chosen in order to indicate that the angels are living beings. For it is the most perfect and the noblest of the motions of the irrational animals, and man believes it to be a great perfection, so that he even wishes to fly... Moreover, a bird appears and is hidden, approaches and moves away, in a very short time. And all these are characteristics which we must believe the angels possess. (Guide 1.49)

The *kheruvim* are especially important because they represent the intellect. Maimonides explains a Talmudic dictum on this basis:

“when man sleeps his soul speaks to the angel, and the angel to the *kheruv*.”
Thereby they have stated plainly to him who understands and cognizes intellectually that the imaginative faculty is called an angel and that the intellect is called a *kheruv*.” (Guide 2.6)

The *kheruvim* in the *miqdash* symbolize not only the existence of angels per se, but specifically the existence of the intellect. Moreover, they symbolize the fundamental Jewish idea that the intellect is capable of providing a guiding force to human life, of providing a Law which guides the human community rightly. Unlike the idolatrous religions, which used the power of imagination as the basis for their foolish practices, the Torah that Moses brought was based purely on the use of the intellect, the *kheruv*, and by no other kind of angel. Perhaps that is why only *kheruvim* were represented in the Temple, and why Maimonides sees them as representative of prophecy.

Conclusion

In short, the provisions of the Temple can be explained in three distinct ways. 1) some provisions are borrowed from contemporary idolatrous practices. These are neutral practices, such as building a Temple, which can be used for good or for bad. 2) other provisions were designed to eradicate unacceptable pagan practices, such as immodest behavior and false beliefs. 3) finally, some practices were designed to promulgate the scientific and religious truths that stand at the basis of the Torah. The *kheruvim* belong to the third category.

These principles obviously have important implications to anyone who is active as an educator or a parent. Effective teachers and parents know how to speak in a language their students or their children understand. In his *Laws of Talmud Torah*, and in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides speaks at length of the ruses that good educators must use in order to draw their students in the right direction. One must work within the student’s frame of reference – offering rewards the students want; one must set clear limits to acceptable behavior; but in addition, one must always have a clear idea of the ideals towards which one is working. One of these principles without the others will lead to disaster; but together they form the basis of a sound education.