

Rambam and Korbanot

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Sefer Vayikrah is all about Karbanot. Its a good time to consider the role of sacrifice in Judaism. On this issue, the Rambam has a famous statement, which resulted in great controversy. He said in Moreh Nevukhim 3:32:

It is, namely, impossible to go suddenly from one extreme to the other: it is therefore according to the nature of man impossible for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed. Now God sent Moses to make [the Israelites] a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:6) by means of the knowledge of God. Comp. "Unto thee it was showed that thou mightest know that the Lord is God (Deut. 4:35); "Know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart, that the Lord is God" (ibid. 5:39). The Israelites were commanded to devote themselves to His service; comp. "and to serve him with all your heart" (ibid. 11:13); "and you shall serve the Lord your God" (Exod. 23:25); "and ye shall serve him" (Deut. 13:5). But the custom which was in those days general among all men, and the general mode of worship in which the Israelites were brought up, consisted in sacrificing animals in those temples which contained certain images, to bow down to those images, and to burn incense before them; religious and ascetic persons were in those days the persons that were devoted to the service in the temples erected to the stars, as has been explained by us. It was in accordance with the wisdom and plan of God, as displayed in the whole Creation, that He did not command us to give up and to discontinue all these manners of service; for to obey such a commandment it would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used; it would in those days have made the same impression as a prophet would make at present if he called us to the service of God and told us in His name, that we should not pray to Him, not fast, not seek His help in time of trouble; that we should serve Him in thought, and not by any action. For this reason God allowed these kinds of service to continue; He transferred to His service that which had formerly served as a worship of created beings, and of things imaginary and unreal, and commanded us to serve Him in the same manner....

...By this Divine plan it was effected that the traces of idolatry were blotted out, and the truly great principle of our faith, the Existence and Unity of God, was firmly established; this result was thus obtained without deterring or confusing the minds of the people by the abolition of the service to which they were accustomed and which alone was familiar to them.

Rambam recognized very well the shocking nature of this assertion. Many have said in his name that in the Messianic future, sacrificial offerings will be abolished. This is could not be further from the truth, as Rambam not only never says this, but explicitly says the opposite in Mishneh Torah, and even devotes 2 whole books of Mishnah Torah, a work intended as a practical law book, to the topic. However, the purpose of this essay is to make a fascinating argument with compelling evidence: despite the shocking nature of the Rambam's opinion, there is ample evidence that Chazal were of the same.

Before looking at the relevant sources, it is worth noting that Rambam never says sacrifices have no symbolic meaning or worth, but just that the institution is reactionary and not the abstract ideal. That in no way implies the system has no inherent value, which is an important

distinction to be made. Chazal are certainly of the opinion that there is extreme value and symbolism in the offerings, so it is important to note that Rambam never disputed this. Thus, our goal is to demonstrate at least some of Chazal were of the opinion that Karbanot were a less than ideal reaction to Pagan practices. There are 2 primary sources that are relevant. First lets examine Vayikra Rabbah 22:8.

The context of this Midrash are the verses in Vayikrah 17. The pesukim are about the Issur Bama, the prohibition of sacrificing outside of the temple (or Mishkan) altar. This prohibition is commonly understood as prohibiting sacrificing to God outside the Temple, so that God has a single, central place of worship. However, the pesukim give a different reason for this prohibition! In verses 5-7 we read:

למען אשר יביאו בני ישראל את זבחייהם אשר הם זבחים על פני השדה והביאם ליהוה אל פתח אהל מועד אל הכהן וזבחו זבחי שלמים ליהוה אותם:

This is in order that the Israelites may bring the sacrifices which they have been making in the open—that they may bring them before the LORD, to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and offer them as sacrifices of well-being to the LORD;

וזרק הכהן את הדם על מזבח יהוה פתח אהל מועד והקטיר החלב לגרים ניחם ליהוה:

that the priest may dash the blood against the altar of the LORD at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and turn the fat into smoke as a pleasing odor to the LORD;

ולא יזבחו עוד את זבחייהם לשעירים אשר הם זנים אחריהם חקת עולם תהיה זאת להם לדורתם:

and that they may offer their sacrifices no more to the goat-demons after whom they stray. This shall be to them a law for all time, throughout the ages.

The clear thrust of the prohibition is so that people bring Korbanot to Hashem in the Mikdash, not as opposed to bringing Korbanot to Hashem elsewhere, but as opposed to bringing Korbanot to demons!

Indeed, what these pesukim seem to be saying is that the purpose of having a central sacrificial location, and prohibiting all others, is so that the Bnei Yisrael stop offering pagan sacrifices.

Now that we have that context, we can look at Vayikrah Rabbah to this perek, which says exactly this:

רבי פנחס בשם רבי לוי אמר משל לבן מלך שגס לבו עליו והיה למד לאכל בשר נבילות וטרפות, אמר המלך זה יהיה תדיר על שלחני ומעצמו הוא נדור

[גדור], כִּן לְפִי שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהוֹטִים אַחַר עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים בְּמִצְרַיִם וְהָיוּ מְבִיאִים קְרִבְנֵיהֶם לְשַׁעֲרֵי־מִצְרַיִם, דְּכָתִיב (ויקרא יז, ז): וְלֹא יִזְבְּחוּ עוֹד אֶת זְבַחֵיהֶם לְשַׁעֲרֵי־מִצְרַיִם, וְאִין שַׁעֲרֵי־מִצְרַיִם אֵלֹהִים אֲלֵא שְׂדִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים לב, יז): וַיִּזְבְּחוּ לְשְׂדִים, וְאִין שְׂדִים אֵלֹהִים אֲלֵא שַׁעֲרֵי־מִצְרַיִם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה יג, כא): וְשַׁעֲרֵי־מִצְרַיִם יִרְקְדוּ שָׁם, וְהָיוּ מִקְרִיבֵי־ן קְרִבְנֵיהֶם בְּאֶסּוּר בְּמָה וּפְרַעְנֵי־וֹת בְּאוֹת עֲלֵיהֶם, אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יְהוָה מִקְרִיבֵי־ן לְפָנָי בְּכָל יַעַת קְרִבְנוֹתֵיהֶן בְּאֶהֱל מוֹעֵד, וְהֵן נִפְרָשִׁים מֵעֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים וְהֵם נִיצוּלִים, הֵדָא הוּא דְכָתִיב: אִישׁ אִישׁ מִבֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגו'.

Thus, we see from the pesukim themselves, and even more explicitly from Rabbi Pinchas, that the opinion of the Rambam is correct.

There is also a second line of reasoning in Chazal that leads to the same conclusion. It is based on the Tanchuma.

מדרש תנחומא, כי תשא ל"א

פסל לָהּ. אִימְתִי יֵרַד מֹשֶׁה מִן הַהָר? אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בַּר שְׁלֹמִי, מֵאֵה וְעֲשָׂרִים יוֹם עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה אֶצֶל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא. כִּיצַד? בַּחֲדָשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לְצֵאת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגו' (שמות יט, א). בְּשֵׁשֶׁת בַּחֲדָשׁ נִתֵּן לָהֶם עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרוֹת, וְכָתִיב בּוֹ: וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים (שמות יט, ב). וְעָשָׂה שָׁם אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, עֲשָׂרִים וְאַרְבָּעָה מִסִּיּוֹן וְשֵׁשֶׁת עָשָׂר מִתְמוֹז, הָרִי אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם. יֵרַד בְּשִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר בְּתַמּוּז, רָאָה אֶת הָעֵגֶל וְשִׁבַּר אֶת הַלּוּחוֹת, וְרָדָה אֶת הַסְּרוּחִין שֶׁמוֹנֶה עָשָׂר וְתִשְׁעָה עָשָׂר. וְחָזַר וְעָלָה בְּעֲשָׂרִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וַיְהִי מִמֶּחֶרֶת וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָעָם אַתֶּם חֲטֹאתֶם חֲטָאָה גְדוֹלָה וְעַתָּה אֶעֱלֶה אֶל ה' וְגו'. וְכָתִיב: וַיֵּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי חֲטָא הָעָם הַזֶּה חֲטָאָה גְדוֹלָה וְגו', עָשָׂה שָׁם עֲשָׂרָה מִן תְּמוּז וְכָל חֲדָשׁ אָב, הָרִי אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם. עָלָה בְּרֵאשׁ חֲדָשׁ אֱלוּל כְּשֶׁאָמַר לוֹ פֶּסֶל לָהּ וְהָיָה נֶכּוֹן לְבַקֵּר וְגו', וַיִּפְסַל וַיִּשְׁכֵּם מֹשֶׁה בְּבַקֵּר וַיַּעַל. עָשָׂה שָׁם אֱלוּל כָּלֹו וְעֲשָׂרָה מִתְּשַׁרִי וַיֵּרַד בְּעֶשְׂרִים. וְהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂרוּיִים בְּתַפְלָה וְתַעֲנִית, וְבוֹ בַּיּוֹם נֶאֱמַר לוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה: סִלַּחְתִּי כְּדַבְּרְךָ (במדבר יד, כ). וְקִבְעוּ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא סְלִיחָה וּמַחֲלָה לְדוֹרוֹת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטָהָר (ויקרא טז, ל). וּמִיָּד צִוָּה לוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה, וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ.

This Midrash, as cited by Rashi Shemos 31:18, asserts that Moshe was commanded to build the Mishkan only after the sin of the Eigel, and indeed seemingly as a result of that sin and as part of the repentance process.

Fascinatingly, in the Torah, the command to build the Mishkan comes first, but as Rashi famously puts it “אִין מִקְדָּם וּמֵאַחַר בְּתוֹרָה”, by which he means that literary and other considerations sometimes result in stories in the Torah being written out of chronological order.

(It is interesting to note that the Rambam's most famous disputant on the Korbanot issue, the Ramban, argues on this Midrash and says the order in the Torah is indeed chronological.)

Taking this Midrash at face value, it understands the command to build the Mishkan as reactionary to the Eigel. In other words, seemingly had there not been an Eigel, there would have been no Mishkan.

To understand this idea, we must ask ourselves what exactly the Eigel was about. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, in the Kuzari (1:97) makes a very strong case for the argument that the Eigel was about the Bnei Yisrael desiring a physical manifestation of God. As he explains, the pagans of those days all were accustomed to this, and the Jews of the time desired the same thing. Accordingly, the Eigel was Avodah Zarah not in the sense of worship to a foreign god, but rather foreign worship of God.

Indeed, the position of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi emerges quite clearly from the pesukim themselves. The call to make the Eigel (Shemos 32:1) is "let us make a god **that can walk before us**", a clear desire for a physical manifestation. And it is clear they viewed this not as a new god, but as a representation of the God they knew, as they proclaim in verse 4: "this is your God, oh Israel, that took you out of the land of Egypt." Rabbi Yehuda Halevi seems to be spot on.

Thus, what the Tanchuma is telling us, is that the Bnei Yisrael sinned by making the Eigel, by adopting a pagan practice out of a desire for a more intimate, physical connection to God. As a result, God gave them the Mishkan, a physical manifestation of his presence, so that the hole in their relationship with Him that they felt, that prompted them to make an Eigel, could be filled in a holy, God sanctioned manner.

This understanding of the Eigel and the Mikdash as profane and holy duals of each other is not new to this Midrash. We need look no further than Tanakh itself, where in Melachim 1, Chapter 12, Yeravam is afraid that people will abandon his kingdom in favor of the Temple. He thus consults with his advisors, and erects 2 Eigelim in the North, proclaiming to the people "why would you go to Jerusalem? Here is your God, oh Israel, that took you out of Egypt." Yeravam is seeking an alternative to the Mikdash, and builds an Eigel!

In summary, what emerges from this Tanchuma, in addition to our analysis of the Eigel, is an idea quite similar to that of the Rambam.

One last point: Rabbi Menachem Leibtag, in his article "Terumah: The Mishkan - Before or After Chet HaEgel?", cites the Rashi that quotes this Tanchuma, and raises a number of objections to the idea that the Mikdash would not have existed had there not been an Eigel. He points out that Shemos 23:14-17 presents the commandment to appear before the Lord on the Regalim.

Presumably (as Rashi explicitly says there to 31:18), these laws were given before the Eigel, and yet they clearly imply some sort of Temple. Indeed, verse 19 even speaks of "The house of your God" regarding Bikkurim. Mustering this as well as some other points, he concludes that even Rashi, and accordingly the Tanchuma, agree that eventually there would have been a Mikdash. However, this would have only happened once they entered the land. The Mishkan was a result of the Eigel, not the Mikdash. Even with this understanding, the connection between the Eigel and Mishkan still supports the Rambam we cited, that as a result of the Eigel Korbanot were needed immediately.

In conclusion, support from for this Rambam can be found in the pesukim in Vayikra 17, even more explicitly in the Midrash on those pesukim, as well as in the Midrsh Tanchuma, especially combined with the understanding of the Eigel that emerges from the pesukim in both Shemos and Melachim, whether one takes the Tanchuma at face value, or understands it as Rabbi Leibtag does. It seems Here Rambam's innovation is in his bluntness of expression, not in his idea itself, which is well sourced in Chazal and Tanach itself.