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THE DEEPER CONFLICT BETWEEN MAIMONIDES AND RAMBAN OVER THE SACRIFICES

Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, known as Ramban, was a pivotal figure in the history of European Judaism. Born in Gerona (1195) in northern Spain, he studied under great rabbis of the Spanish school before traveling to Provence (Southern France) and then studying with the *Ba'alei haTosafot* in Northern France. One of the only men to have studied in these three Jewish traditions, he was a towering Bible commentator, jurist, halakhist, kabbalist, philosopher and writer. Ramban's commentary on the Torah is such a brilliant work that, along with that of Rashi, it is required reading for serious interpreters of the biblical text and the faith of Judaism.

During his lifetime, a furious conflict over Maimonides' writings tore apart much of European Jewry. Rabbis in Northern France, who were far from the cultural centers where science and philosophy were widely studied, attempted to seal out these ideas and banned the reading of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (*More Nevukhim*) and his *Sefer haMada*, the first book of his *Mishne Torah*, for Jews living everywhere. Leaping to the defense of Maimonides, the Rabbis of Provence placed the Rabbis of Northern France and their communities in *herem*, and soon the Jewish cities and towns of Provence, France and Spain were drawn into the fight. Ramban tried to mediate this dispute while defending Maimonides and his works. His efforts did not succeed.¹

Ramban, however, was no clear supporter of Maimonides. He vigorously disputed many of Maimonides' ideas and argued for his own interpretations. Maimonides' view of the sacrifices is one area in which Ramban strongly objected to Maimonides' ideas. Ramban was so disturbed by Maimonides' interpretation that in his *Commentary on the Torah*, he claimed Maimonides had made "the table of the Eternal pol-

luted.”² This is a strong statement from the man who had publicly praised Maimonides, writing, “Our communities are concerned for the honor of the great Rabbi [Maimonides] and are jealous for him with a great jealousy in honor of his learning, his saintliness and the glory of his excellent majesty.”³

Ramban’s attack on Maimonides’ view of the sacrifices focused on the idea Maimonides presents in his *More Nevukhim*:

At that time [of the Exodus] the way of life generally accepted in the whole world, and the universal service upon which we were brought up in Egypt, consisted in offering various species of living beings in the temples in which images were set up, in worshipping the latter and in burning incense before them⁴Therefore He suffered these kinds of worship to remain, but transferred them from created or imaginary things to His own nameThus He commanded us to build a Temple for Him . . . to have an altar for His name . . . to have sacrifice offered up to Him . . . to bow down in worship before Him and to burn incense before Him Through this divine ruse [trick] it came about that the memory of idolatry was effaced and . . . the true foundation of our belief—namely the existence and oneness of the deity—was firmly established. At the same time, the souls [of the Jews] had no feeling of repugnance and were not repelled because of the absence of modes of worship to which they were accustomed, [along with the fact that] no other mode of worship was known at the time.⁵

It was Maimonides’ combined anthropological-psychological-sociological-historical explanation for the commandments to sacrifice that so upset Ramban. He wrote critically:

Far be it that they should have no other purpose and intention except the elimination of idolatrous opinions from the minds of fools⁶ [These words of Maimonides] are mere expressions, ‘healing casually a severe wound and a great difficulty,’ and making the ‘table of the Eternal polluted’—[as if the offerings were intended only] to remove false beliefs from the hearts of the wicked and fools of the world when Scripture says plainly that sacrifices are, “The food of the offering, made by fire, for a pleasing odor.”⁷

To Ramban, all *mitsvot* have a transcendent effect in the spiritual world, and by performing them, men partake in the divine. The fact that the text of the Torah in *Leviticus* (1:9) claims that the burnt sacrifice provides “a pleasing odor to God” is the reason for the sacrifice. In

his *Commentary on Leviticus* (1:9) he writes, “Now this verse mentions a reason for the offerings, namely that they are ‘a fire-offering of a pleasing odor unto the Eternal!’”⁸ Ramban argues that sacrifices are offered “in order to approach God” and put the giver in position to be reached by a communication from Him.⁹

In addition, following Ibn Ezra, he claims that the sacrifices are important symbols so “a person should realize that he has sinned against his God with his body and his soul and that his blood should really be spilled and his body burned—were it not for the loving-kindness of the Creator . . . so that its blood should be in place of his blood.”¹⁰ Ramban finishes his commentary on this verse with the statement, “by way of the Truth [the mystic teaching of the Kabbala], there is a hidden secret contained in the offerings.”¹¹ He explains, however, that only the highest name of God, the YHVH which represents God as the cause of all existence, is used in these verses to keep us from thinking that God has any need for food or nourishment from our sacrifices.¹²

But Ramban’s most devastating attack on Maimonides’ views claimed that sacrifices to God were offered up from the very beginning of mankind. According to Ramban, sacrifices were not just an invention of the Egyptians and the Chaldeans that had to be eliminated from Israel’s psyche after their sojourn in Egypt. On the contrary, Ramban points to three people who were close to God, and all three, Noah, Abel and Balaam, brought sacrifices. He writes:

When Noah came out of the Ark with his three sons, there were as yet no Chaldeans or Egyptians in the world, yet they brought an offering which was pleasing to God. Abel likewise ‘brought of the first born of his flock and the fat thereof’. . . yet [at that time] there was as yet not the slightest trace of idol worship in the world!¹³

To most readers, Ramban’s arguments completely undercut Maimonides’ anthropological-historical position and appears to leave him without any facts to present in reply. Yet Maimonides’ actual position on sacrifices is much deeper than the relationship he draws between the law of sacrifices and the psychological conditioning of the Jewish people at the time of the Exodus.

Maimonides would agree with Ramban that the offering of sacrifices preceded the sacrificial practices of the Egyptians. He actually makes two points about sacrifices in the *More Nevukhim*. First is that during their captivity in Egypt, Israel became habituated to a style of worship that focused on bringing sacrifices, having priests, and worship-

ping in temples. The objects of this worship had to be extirpated from the Jewish people because these were the foundations of pagan/idol worship. But because men are habituated to the familiar, the Law had to save the forms of worship while switching the object of worship from the pagan forces to God. Maimonides' second point is much deeper. This is his view that the entire panoply of the sacrifices and the Temple misrepresented the essential relationship between God and his creations and were therefore to be ultimately diminished as people's knowledge of God and their beliefs advanced.

To Maimonides, a God beyond matter and form could not be properly worshiped through human actions because actions involved objects utilizing matter and form. As Maimonides states, "How is it possible that none of the commandments, prohibitions and actions—which are precisely set forth for the fixed seasons—should be intended for its own sake, but for the sake of something else, as if this were a ruse invented for our benefit by God in order to achieve His First Intention?"¹⁴

Maimonides continues:

Because of this [fact] . . . people were frequently blamed in the books of the Prophets for their zeal for sacrifices and it is explained to them that [sacrifices] are not the object of a purpose sought for its own sake and that God can dispense with them. As Samuel says, 'Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in listening to the voice of the Lord?' Isaiah writes, 'To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?' And Jeremiah admonishes them, 'For I spoke not unto your fathers nor commanded them in the day I brought them out of Egypt concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices!'¹⁵

Asks Maimonides:

How can Jeremiah say [this] of God . . . seeing that the greater part of the commandments are concerned with these things [sacrifices]? . . . [However], Jeremiah says that the First Intention consists only in apprehending God and not worshipping someone other than Him. . . . The laws concerning sacrifices and going to the Temple [the Second Intention] were given only for the sake of the realization of this [First] fundamental principle. You [people] however, abolished this end [the First Intention] while holding fast to that [the Second Intention] which had been done [only] for its sake!¹⁶ . . . You know from texts of the Torah . . . that the First Intention of the Law as a whole is to put an end to idolatry, to wipe out its traces and all that is bound up with it, even its memory¹⁷. . . . [In fact], Scripture explains to us that in regard to

this kind of divine worship, I mean sacrifices, no sin whatever will fall upon us if we do not perform it at all.”¹⁸

According to Maimonides, Jeremiah is explaining to the people that:

The first commands given after the Exodus from Egypt were the ones given to the Children of Israel at Mara, namely His saying to us at that place: ‘There He made for them a statute and a judgment.’ The correct tradition says, “The Sabbath and the civil laws were prescribed at Mara”. . . accordingly it is already clear to you that in the First [Intention] legislation there was nothing at all concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices, for these belong to the Second Intention [and second legislation].¹⁹ . . . This kind of worship—I mean the sacrifices—pertain to a Second Intention, whereas invocation, prayer and similar practices and modes of worship come closer to the First Intention and are necessary for its achievement [the knowledge of God]—God has made a great difference between the two kinds [of intentions].²⁰

If invocation, prayer and similar practices and modes of worship only come closer to God’s First Intention, what form of worship does Maimonides believe actually supports the First Intention of the Law? He hints at the answer later, when he describes the overwhelming psychological grip sacrifices and temple worship had on the people who left Egypt:

For one could not then conceive the acceptance of [a Law without sacrifices] considering the nature of man, which always likes that to which it is accustomed. At that time, this would have been similar to the appearance of a prophet in these times who, calling upon the people to worship God, would say: “God has given you a Law forbidding you to pray to Him, to fast, or to call upon Him for help in misfortune. Your worship should consist solely in meditation without any [actions] at all.”²¹ . . . For he who praises through speech only makes known what he has represented to himself. Now this representation is the true praise, whereas the words concerning it are meant to instruct someone else or to make it clear concerning oneself that one has had the apprehension in question.²² It is clear that to this ultimate perfection there do not belong either actions or moral qualities and that it consists only of opinions toward which speculation (philosophy) has led and that investigation has made compulsory.²³

How does Maimonides counter Ramban’s argument that Cain and Abel brought sacrifices to God long before people worshiped idols, and

that Noah brought sacrifices to God long before there were Chaldeans or Egyptians? The Maimonidean answer lies in the very first chapters of the *More Nevukhim*, where he chronicles the downfall of man from the purely rational being created by God and placed in the Garden of Eden, to the being we recognize, a being forever embroiled in trouble and evil.

God created man in perfection. To Maimonides, the perfection of man was in the intellect that God gave to man alone among the creations. As Maimonides writes:

For the intellect that God made overflow into man...[this] is his ultimate perfection - and was that which Adam had been provided with before he disobeyed. It was because of this [intellect] that it was said of Adam that he was created 'in the image of God and in His likeness' . . . because through the intellect one distinguishes between the true [*emet*] and the false [*sheker*] and that was found in [Adam while he was] in his perfection and integrity. However, when Adam disobeyed and inclined toward the desires of his imagination and the pleasures of his bodily senses . . . he was punished by being deprived of that [pure] intellectual apprehension . . . and became absorbed in judging things to be good [*tov*] or bad [*ra*]. Adam then knew how great was his loss, what he had been deprived of, and upon what [low] state he had entered . . . [because] with regard to what is of necessity there is not good and bad at all, only truth and falsehood.²⁴

Maimonides is explaining that, in the beginning, Adam knew the true purpose for all things and all his actions were in support of these truths. However, the episode with the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" symbolizes man's attraction to the beautiful over the true, as Scripture says, "Nor was any tree in the garden like unto it in beauty,"²⁵ and "She saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes."²⁶ Now the true, as Maimonides stated, is known by the intellect, but the beautiful is known only through man's imagination. For example, while $2+2=4$ is a truth, beauty, whether in a painting, a statue, a person or in nature, is only an opinion. By the end of this episode in the Garden, both man and woman lost their ability to know "true" and "false," and instead are delivered to a world where men will be governed by their imaginations: a world that fluctuates between good and evil, a world far from the paradise of Eden.

Out of the Garden and now living in this different world, Adam and Eve give birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. Describing them,

Maimonides says, "None of the children born to Adam before [Seth] had been endowed with true human form."²⁷ Maimonides explains:

You know that whoever is not endowed with this form [the intellect that is in control of the imagination] is not a man but an animal having the shape and configuration of a man. Such a being has the faculty to cause various kinds of harm and to produce evils that are not possessed by the other animals. For he applies the capacities for thought and perception . . . to all kinds of machinations entailing evils and engendering all kinds of harm. . . . The [first] children of Adam were of this sort.²⁸

Maimonides supports this with a quote from the *gemara* and *Midrash* that says in the way of hyperbole: "During the entire period of 130 years [while] Adam was under rebuke, he begot spirits or devils."²⁹ These devils are Cain and Abel. As the Torah states, "Adam lived 130 years and he begot a son [Seth] in his own likeness after his image." Why, asks Maimonides, is Seth described as being "in his likeness after his image?"³⁰ Because, he explains, unlike Cain and Abel, "Adam instructed him [Seth] and procured for him understanding, and he attained human perfection."³¹

According to the Torah in *Genesis* (4:2-4), "Abel became a keeper of sheep and Cain became a tiller of the soil. [And] in the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the Lord from the fruit of the soil, and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock."³² These lines from the Torah explain why these two sons were considered "devils" capable of "machinations entailing evils and the engendering of all kinds of harm." For Cain's idea to bring sacrifices to God was evidence of his total failure to understand the "truth" regarding God's nature. The collapse of his intellect made him fall slave to the workings of his imagination. Maimonides explains: "All this follows imagination which is also in true reality the 'evil impulse.' For every deficiency of reason or character is due to the action of the imagination or consequent upon its action."³³

Cain, the Torah points out, was the first who thought of bringing sacrifices to God. It is no accident that Cain, the first farmer, conceived of bringing sacrifices. As Maimonides says, "Idolaters connected idolatry with agriculture [because successful agriculture] was necessary for the subsistence of man and most animals."³⁴ Farmers, falling victim to the arbitrary whims of nature, began investing these vital forces with divine powers. In Cain's case, perhaps he only wanted to influence God or thank Him as the force behind nature, rather than deify the forces

themselves as later generations were to do. But the crucial point is that he was never commanded to bring a sacrifice, nor did Adam teach him that this was a proper action.

Cain's course of action resulted from his inability to think clearly about God. Using his imagination rather than his intellect, he thought that what was important to himself as a man would bring pleasure to God. "For they did not separate themselves from things perceived by the senses and had not attained intellectual perfection."³⁵ It was through his tragic error that the idea that God wanted sacrifices was brought into the world. Later generations, including Noah and others, fell ever deeper under the control of their imaginations and further lost their ability to know what was "true" from what was "false." They confused the weak stirrings of their imagination with what God desired from mankind.

The Torah is very clear on this point. Nowhere does God command either Adam or his son Seth to offer sacrifices to Him.³⁶ Because of their perfection, and the true knowledge of God contained in their intellect, they never thought of offering sacrifices. Because of their perfection, the Torah speaks of them both with the highest praise, describing Adam as being created "in our image, after our likeness,"³⁷ and praising Seth as being formed "in his [Adam's] likeness after his image."³⁸ Even Moses, a man whose perfection elevates him to talking "face to face"³⁹ with God, and with whom God says, "with him do I speak mouth to mouth,"⁴⁰ never seeks, nor is he ever commanded, to bring a sacrifice before Sinai and the episode of the Golden Calf.

In contrast to the actions entailed in offering sacrifices, Maimonides sums up man's highest duty in the final chapter of the *More Nevukhim* declaring, "It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved [in a measure corresponding to his capacity] an apprehension of God—and [further] who knows [how] His providence extends over His creatures as revealed in the action of bringing them into existence, and in their governance as it is."⁴¹ According to Maimonides, the sacrifices discussed in *Leviticus* 1:9 did not have a pleasant odor that God smelled, but were called a "sweet odor" only because "these sacrifices were performed with a view to putting an end to idolatrous opinions."⁴²

Why did Ramban not attack these deeper views of Maimonides when he wrote his *Commentary on the Torah*? Three possible reasons present themselves. First, perhaps he did not understand the connection between Maimonides' view of the problems caused by the release of the imagination and the institution of sacrifices; second, perhaps he

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understood Maimonides' position but rejected it because, in his kabbalistic conception of the Law, the whole of the Law [including sacrifices] is invested with transcendent divine qualities; or third, perhaps he understood and even agreed with Maimonides' deeper views, but would not openly reveal them for political reasons; though he believed them to be true, he thought this knowledge could weaken the faith of the multitude whose belief depends on a literal and straightforward understanding of the Torah.

NOTES

1. R. Charles B. Chavel, *Ramban: His Life and Teachings* (New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1960), pp. 15-41.
2. *Malakhi* 1:12
3. R. Moses ben Nachman, "Letter to the French Rabbis," translated by R. Charles B. Chavel, *Ramban: Writings & Discourses* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, Inc., 1974), p. 388.
4. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* III:32, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 526.
5. *Ibid.*, III:32, p. 526.
6. Moses ben Nachman, *Commentary on Leviticus: VaYikra*, translated by R. Charles B. Chavel, *Ramban: Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, Inc., 1974), p. 20.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
12. *Ibid.*; see note 123, p. 22.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
14. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III:32, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 527.
15. *Ibid.*, III:32, p. 530.
16. *Ibid.*, III:32, p. 530.
17. *Ibid.*, III:29, p. 517.
18. *Ibid.*, III:46, p. 582.
19. *Ibid.*, III:32, p. 531.
20. *Ibid.*, III:32, p. 529.
21. *Ibid.*, III:32, p. 526
22. *Ibid.*, II:6, p. 260.
23. *Ibid.*, III:27, pp. 510-11.
24. *Ibid.*, I:2, pp. 24-25.
25. *Ezekiel* 31:8.
26. *Genesis* 3:6.
27. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* I:7, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 32.

28. Ibid., I:7, p. 33.
29. *Eruvin* 18b; *Genesis Rabba* XX & XXIV
30. *Genesis* 5:3
31. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* I:7, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 32.
32. *Genesis* 4:2-4.
33. Ibid., II:12, p. 280.
34. Ibid., III:30, p. 522.
35. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* I:63, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 154.
36. For a *midrash* on Moria and antediluvian sacrifices, see *Hil. Bet haBehira* chapter II.
37. *Genesis* 1:27.
38. *Genesis* 5:3.
39. *Exodus* 33:11.
40. *Numbers* 12:8.
41. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* III:54, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 638.
42. Ibid., III:46, p. 591.