

**Part X**

**Skeptic:** You know, your Moshiach idea was beginning to look no more ominous than a touching bit of optimism for our ill-fated world. But then I came across something which reinforced my first impression of it.

**Believer:** What was your first impression?

**Skeptic:** That it is a relic of an archaic past, a throwback to an age in which people referred to religious ritual to define their relationship with reality. I was reading the final chapters of Maimonides' Mishnah Torah--you know, where he writes about the era of Moshiach--when I came across the part about the Holy Temple and the sacrifices... I'm sure you know the passage that I'm referring to...

**Believer:** I know. But why don't you quote it for the benefit of our readers.

**Skeptic:** You mean our conversation is being published?! You've got to be kidding!

**Believer:** Why not? If you don't want your views to be known, we'll keep it anonymous...

**Skeptic:** No, no, no... It's not that at all. Anyway, here is the passage from Maimonides' Laws of Kings, chapter 11: "The King Moshiach will arise and restore the kingdom of David to its glory of old, to its original sovereignty. He will rebuild the Holy Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel. In his times, all laws of the Torah will be reinstated as before: the sacrifices will be offered and the Sabbatical and Jubilee years instituted as commanded in the Torah..."

**Believer:** And you find the prospect disturbing.

**Skeptic:** To talk about a universal belief in G-d is one thing. But a Holy Temple, with animal sacrifices whose blood is sprinkled on the alter and its flesh ritually consumed by white-robed priests? You want to bring all that back?

**Believer:** What about the ritual we call "dinner"? A yearling calf is slaughtered, its blood recycled as fertilizer, its bones ground to gelatin, its hide tooled into \$600 boots, and its flesh grilled a meticulous medium-rare by a white-topped chef, borne aloft by white-shirted waiters and solemnly consumed by white-tied diners to the sound of piano music in a posh restaurant?

**Skeptic:** You're right---that's just as barbaric. Many times, while digging into a steak, I've thought: "What right do I have to consume the flesh of another animal"? It's not as if I couldn't live without it. More than once I've resolved to stop eating meat.

**Believer:** Do you think that turning vegetarian would solve your moral dilemma? If man lacks the right to consume the flesh of animals, what right has he to consume any of his fellow creatures? If human life is no more worthy than animal life, who decided that it is more worthy than vegetable life? For that matter, what "right" do we have to consume water or oxygen? And do you realize that by taking a stroll through a flowering meadow on a summer afternoon, you destroy thousands of seedlings and insects?

**Skeptic:** But an animal has feelings. It wants to live. It suffers pain.

**Believer:** And what if I kill it painlessly? Does that make it all right? Everyone agrees that it is wrong to kill a fellow human being, be it in the most painless and "humane" manner, even if one greatly profits from the deed. The infliction of pain and suffering is a secondary issue. The real question is: If I am no better than an animal, and even if I am "better", what justifies my taking its life in order to fill my belly? The same could be applied to all existences: What right do I have to kill half-dozen roses in order to beautify my mantelpiece, to pull out the weeds in my garden, or to cut down trees and level a mountain in order to build a shopping mall? What right do I have to destroy any fellow being for my own benefit?

**Skeptic:** Listen, man cannot be more “moral” than nature itself! The very nature of existence determines that the mineral world sustains the vegetable world, that they both be consumed by the animal kingdom that animals prey on each other, that thunderstorms start fires which consume forests, that living tissue die and decompose and nourish a new generation of life. No one would consider the cat “immoral” for tormenting the mouse---it does so out of mindless instinct.

**Believer:** So why these stirrings of vegetarianism in your soul?

**Skeptic:** Well, the human race is different in one very important respect. Man does not act by instinct only. We have been blessed with a discriminating intelligence---we choose how and to what extent we will exploit our fellow creatures to serve our needs. To us, it is not only a question of survival, but also of taste, convenience and pleasure. This is what makes “morality” an issue for us: how far should we go?

**Believer:** Indeed, how far should we go? Should we eat only vegetables? Are milk or eggs okay? How about fish? If eating meat for pleasure is morally acceptable, how about leather shoes or a fur coat? May we relieve our headaches with drugs that have been developed through painful experimentation on animals? Attend a bullfight for entertainment? And what about the one who claims that acting out his “killer instinct” by hunting large mammals fills a “deep psychological need” of his and allows him to experience a “spiritual oneness with nature”?

**Skeptic:** Certainly, it's a complex issue. Most moral issues cannot be summed up in terms of black and white --- we can only ponder their shades of grey. That's why we debate them and grapple with them.

**Believer:** You remind me of a certain Israeli politician of whom it was said that if you'd ask him if he would like coffee or tea he'd answer “Half and half”. I hate to break it to you, but there are certain either/or issues in life.

**Skeptic:** So where would you draw the line?

**Believer:** If you'll bear with me for a few minutes more, I'll tell you. I'll even get back to the sacrifices in the Holy Temple.

**Skeptic:** Please, go ahead.

**Believer:** Ultimately, there are only two ways of looking at ourselves vis-à-vis our world. Either the natural order is the result of the way things happened to have developed of their own accord--in which case it is not really an “order” at all--or else it is a purposeful creation. If nature has no meaning or purpose beyond its own existence, then our “discriminating intelligence” and “freedom of choice” is probably just a figment of our imagination. If it does exist, then why? Is it just another animal's tool for survival, like the tiger's claws and the turtle's shell? Is it just there, for no particular reason? In any case, the issue of “morality” becomes a moot point. Each individual may decide which elements of his environment he is “allowed” to consume and for what purposes, and each such set of “moral” standards is as valid as any other. Our second option is that our world was designed and created by a purposeful Creator and thus exists for a higher purpose, one that transcends its own existence and continuity. In such a world, each creature's particular qualities are not only implements for survival, but are also specific to the role it fills in the realization of this purpose. In light of this, a certain quality that is unique to the human being, man's “Freedom of Choice” becomes particularly significant.

**Skeptic:** Why?

**Believer:** Because in speaking of a purpose to our world, we are faced with a “catch-22” of sorts: If the world was created from nothing, then everything it has, all its potentials and possibilities have been given it by its Creator. So how can anything the world produces be anything more than what is already programmed into creation? Say that you take a few colors and combine them in different ways to produce many more shades of color. Have you created something new? All you've done is bring to light what already latently existed. It's like trying to program a computer to select a truly “random” number: since the

computer's chips and wires cannot invent anything, any number it comes up with is ultimately determined by your program; ultimately, you are telling the computer which number to choose. The same can be asked about our world: Since G-d created everything, how can we speak of a "purpose" whose significance extends beyond what the world already is? This is where man's freedom to choose comes in. If doing good and refraining from evil were as instinctive to us as our ingestion of food and the rejection of its wastes from our bodies, than our deeds would have no more moral significance than the viciousness of the shark or the dove's loyalty to its mate. But because our behavior is free and non-determined, because we can follow or resist our natural tendencies at will, we can create something that goes beyond what has been "programmed" into creation. The point of all this is that if our world has a purpose, man is the focal point of this purpose. As the only being with free choice, only his actions are truly meaningful. So he is apex of creation, the top of the pyramid: the only way in which any other creature or element can be involved in the realization of the purpose of creation is through its participation in the actions of man. When man consumes the flesh of an animal, and then uses the energy to do something positive and transcendental--say he earns money and, despite his primal instinct to keep it all for himself, gives some of it to charity--the animal has transcended the limits of its own being, something it could never have achieved on its own. The Talmud sums it up this way: "The entire world was created to serve me, and I was created to serve my Creator."

**Skeptic:** So man can exploit his environment in any way he chooses, so long as he does good deeds and serves his Creator?

**Believer:** No, because man does not define how and with what the Creator is to be served. The Creator defines it. That's what the Torah is all about---it is G-d's communication to man of His purpose in creation and the manner in which it is to be achieved. The Torah tells man that he may eat the flesh of certain animals but not of others; that he may eat meat, and milk, but not the two together; that he may cultivate an orchard, but may not partake of its fruit for the first three years after its trees have taken root; that six days a week he may burn fuel to produce energy, but that it is forbidden to do so on the Shabbos. In short, the world is not man's to do with as he desires. It exists to serve him in his service of his Creator---not for his own selfish ends.