

Part XI

Skeptic: But if man can do perfectly well without meat, how does it contribute to his service of the Creator? He could get the energy just as well from other sources.

Believer: Man's pleasure in life can also become an integral part of his service of G-d. For example, it is a mitzvah to pleasure the Shabbos and the festivals with meat and wine. Another example is that of the great Talmudic sage, Rava, who once remarked that were it not for the delicious cut of beef he had for dinner his learning would not have gone as well. On the other hand, if a person seeks pleasure merely for the sake of pleasure, he is indeed no better than the animal he is consuming and his right to consume it is indeed questionable. This is why the Talmud says "A boor is forbidden to eat meat." The bottom line is this: man has no inherent right to consume anything merely to preserve or enhance his own existence. But everything that G-d created realizes its purpose through the actions of man. So it is man's privilege, indeed his duty, to utilize all the resources which have been placed at his disposal to serve the Almighty. Nowhere is this principle more powerfully demonstrated than with the korbanot (animal sacrifices) offered at the Holy Temple. A typical korban was the shlomim, or "peace offering." A ewe or she-goat was slaughtered. Its blood was sprinkled on the sides of the altar and certain veins of fat were removed and burned on the altar's top. Two of its choice cuts of meat were given as gifts to the priests; the rest of the meat was eaten by the one who brought the offering, but only under the strict conditions of ritual purity. Thus the blood, representing the fervor and passion for the material involvements of life, and the "fat," representing excessive indulgence and pleasure-seeking, are to be sacrificed to G-d. The "meat" of the material, after a certain portion of it is shared with others, is for a person's own consumption, but only under conditions of holiness---only for the sake of a higher end. Other sacrifices, such as the chatos (sin-offering), were given in their entirety to the priests, and the olah was completely burned on the altar---representing those circumstances in which certain parts of our world are completely sanctified and off limits for personal use.

Skeptic: Everything you say can be applied to our lives today. Why do we need a "Holy Temple" with the sprinkled blood and all the other gory details?

Believer: First of all, if you're going to eat meat, you need a slaughterhouse and meat-packing plant replete with what you call "all the gory details." But these details can be elevated from their "goriness" when sanctified as the means of man's efforts to perfect G-d's creation. But to answer your question: of course, we can approach everything that we do with all the right ideas. In fact, the way our lives are currently structured, that's just about all we can do---play mind games. When we eat (or otherwise consume and benefit from the physical world) with the intention to devote our energies to a higher purpose, we elevate and sublimate those elements which sustain us. But much of this remains abstract and intangible--the piece of meat is still the same piece of meat. So despite the internal changes we effect in it, the tangible and perceptible reality of our present-day world remains overwhelmingly materialistic and egocentric. The world of Moshiach, however, is a world in which the spiritual content of our lives is as real and as tangible as its physical implements. In the words of Isaiah, "all flesh will see" the Divine essence of reality. Thus, the focal point of this future world is the Holy Temple, in which the presence of the Creator is openly expressed, and the Temple service, with which the material resources of our world are imbued with a holiness that is perceived and experienced by man.

Skeptic: Just one question: did you ask the animal how he feels about all this?