

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 27

Vayikra, Sicha 1

The Rambam:

In the laws concerning a voluntary vow to offer a sacrifice, Rambam writes:

“When a person vows to bring a large animal, but instead brings a small one, he does not fulfill his obligation. If he vows to bring a small one and brings a large one, he fulfills his obligation.

What is implied? He said: "I promise [to bring] a lamb as a burnt-offering" or "...as a peace-offering," and he brings a ram, or he vowed a calf and brought an ox, or a kid and brought a goat, he fulfills his obligation." (*Maase Hakorbonos 16:1*)

Rambam here rules in accordance with the Sages in their dispute with Rebbi, who maintains that "if he vows to bring a small one and brings a large one, he does not fulfill his obligation." (*Menachos 107b*)

Why is it acceptable for the person to offer the larger animal, if, in the end, they did not fulfill the expectation created by their vow, to offer the small animal? Two explanations are offered to justify this ruling:

- a) When the person vowed to offer a small animal, they meant it as a declaration of the minimum level of donation they were committing to. "At the very least, a small animal." This does not preclude them from giving a larger animal. They are still within the parameters of the vow by giving the larger animal, because the explicit mention of "small" was just setting the minimal amount of what their donation would be.
- b) When a person offers a larger animal, included within that is the value of the smaller animal. Within the ram is the sheep that it once was. Therefore, the vow is still being kept.

The Challenge:

According to these explanations, there is nothing amiss in offering the larger animal in place of the smaller one specified in the vow. The scope of the vow to offer a small animal includes within it the ability to offer a larger animal. And considering the fact that when it comes to sacrifices, one should always make the effort to be as generous as possible, as Rambam himself codifies it, then it should emerge that one should actually strive to offer the larger animal, even when vowing to offer a small one.

Yet, from the language of Rambam, it is clear that this law is not the preferred method of fulfilling the vow, it is only after the fact that it is permitted: “If he vows to bring a small one and brings a large one, he fulfills his obligation.” That is, he has still fulfilled his vow, not that he should actively seek to offer a larger animal.

There must be some other explanation for this ruling that is able to justify it, while still acknowledging that it is not best practice.

The Explanation:

In his introduction to the laws of vows, Rambam defines the positive mitzvah of fulfilling one’s vows as follows: “To heed the utterances of one’s mouth and to carry out one’s vow.” Two details are mentioned here:

To heed the utterances of one’s mouth — this refers to the literal meaning of the words uttered by the person.

And to carry out one’s vow — this refers to the content and theme of the vow.

The Sages and Rebbi disagree about which of these components is the main pillar of the law of vows. Rebbi maintains that “the utterances of one’s mouth” are essential to the vow. The person must fulfill the literal meaning of the words he had spoken. Therefore, if he had vowed to offer a small animal, he cannot fulfill his obligation by bringing a larger animal, because that is not in accordance with the literal meaning of his vow.

The Sages maintain that the underlying theme and motivation of the vow is what

binds the person, not the technical choice of words. Therefore, when a person vowed to offer a lamb, they meant to bring an animal from that species, for whatever reason, they only mentioned lamb at the time. When they bring a ram, they are still fulfilling the content of the vow. However, it is also true that the person is not fulfilling the literal meaning of their vow. Therefore, it is acceptable after the fact.

Thus, we now have an explanation for this law that also explains why Rambam rules that this manner of fulfilling the vow is only acceptable after the fact. By offering the larger animal, the spirit of the vow is kept, but not its literal expression.

The Deeper Dimension:

The spiritual concept of sacrifice is to dedicate one’s entire being to G-d. As opposed to other mitzvos which attach specific limbs or faculties with G-d, a sacrifice is an undifferentiated movement toward G-d. Therefore, the “size” of the sacrifice is not important, whether it is a small or a large offering. The essential thing is that one is moving toward G-d.

This leads to a hermeneutical reading of the Rambam: “If he vows to bring a small one” — in the beginning of one’s Divine service, a person is limited to “small” dimensions of service, yet this “brings a large one” — because he occupied with offering himself to G-d, inevitably this will lead to a large, expansive offering. Within the seed of any sacrifice lies the potential for complete and utter dedication to G-d, the “large sacrifice.”
