

Parashat Acharei Mot, 5776, 2016:

The Mitzvot and the Religious Consciousness

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The prohibition of imbibing blood is one of the well-known *mitzvot* found in our *parasha*. (*Sefer Vayikra* 17:10-11) In this context we find the unusual expression, “*v’natati panai*,” which is explained by both Onkelos (first century CE) and Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon (882-942) as “I [G-d] will place My anger.” *V’natati panai* is found one other time in the Torah, namely, in the *Tochacha* (*Sefer Devarim* 28:15-68), the admonition to the Jewish people as to what will transpire if we fail to keep Hashem’s *mitzvot*. Since the expression is used in these two contexts, and the second instance refers to the entire Torah, we may logically deduce that the prohibition against eating blood must be exceptionally important, an idea that is strongly supported by the multiple times the Torah warns against consuming blood (*Sefer Bereishit* 9:4, *Sefer Vayikra* 7:26-27, 17:10-11, 19:26 and *Sefer Devarim* 12:23-24 among others).

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), as he often did in matters of this nature, adopted an anthropological/historical explanation as to why the Torah forbade the ingesting of blood:

Know that the Sabians [a group briefly mentioned three times in the Koran] held that blood was most unclean, but in spite of this used to eat of it, deeming that it was the food of the devils and that, consequently, whoever ate it fraternized with the jinn [supernatural

creatures in Islamic mythology, and the source for the word, “genie”] so that they came to him and let him know future events – according to what the multitude imagine concerning the jinn... Consequently, as they deemed, these jinn would come to them in dreams, inform them of secret things, and be useful to them... Thereupon the Law [i.e. the Torah], which is perfect in the opinion of those who know it, began to put an end to these inveterate diseases [i.e. practices]. Consequently it prohibited the eating of blood, putting the same emphasis on this prohibition as on the prohibition against *idolatry*. For, He, may He be exalted, says, *I will set My face against that soul that eateth blood, and so on* (Lev. 17:10) just as He has said with regard to *him who gives of his seed to Molech* (cf Lev. 20:4-6): *I will even set My face against that soul, and so on*. No such text occurs regarding a third *commandment* other than the prohibition of *idolatry* and of *eating blood*. This is so because the eating of blood led to a certain kind of *idolatry*, namely, to the worship of the jinn. (*The Guide of the Perplexed*, translation, Shlomo Pines, volume II, III: 46, pages 585-586, brackets my own)

In sum, Maimonides presents the prohibition of eating blood as G-d’s strategy for deterring us from adopting an existing *avodah zarah*-based (idol worshipping) ritualistic behavior.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) on *Sefer Vayikra* 17:10-11 suggests that the while the Rambam’s presentation is sound (“*v’alu devarim miyushavim*”), it nonetheless is lacking all manner of textual support (“*aval haketuvim lo yoru kane*”), i.e. the Torah never mentions the Sabians and their perverse practices in its presentation. Moreover, he notes that many of the verses that mandate the prohibition of eating blood consistently employ the word, “*nefesh*” (soul), as seen in the following examples:

For the soul of the flesh is in the blood...

For [regarding] the soul of all flesh its blood is in its soul, and I said to the children of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any flesh, for the soul of any flesh is its blood; all who eat it shall be cut off.

However, be strong not to eat the blood, for the blood is the soul; and you shall not eat the soul with the flesh. (*Sefer Vayikra* 17:11, 14 and *Sefer Devarim* 12:23, all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Nachmanides' recognition of the Torah's emphasis of the term, "*nefesh*," leads him to a 13th century statement of "you are what you eat," and to an insightful exploration of the underlying rationale of our *mitzvah*:

It is further known that what is eaten becomes part of the body of the one who has eaten the food material and they merge into one entity. Therefore, if a person eats the soul of all flesh (i.e. blood), and joins it with his blood, they become united in his being; this results in a thickness and arrogance in the soul of man. Moreover, he will enter (literally, "return") to a [spiritual] state that is close to the animal soul that has been eaten... and the man's soul will be combined with the blood of the animal. [This is intimated in the text] that states: "Who knows that the spirit of the children of men is that which ascends on high and the spirit of the beast is that which descends below to the earth?" (*Sefer Kohelet* 3:21) Therefore it states, "For [regarding] the soul of all flesh its blood is in its soul..." (*Sefer Vayikra* 17:14) for in all the flesh of both man and the animals – the soul is to be found in the blood. [Moreover,] it is not fitting to mix the soul that has been cut off [that of the animal that has been killed] with the soul that continues to live [that of the man] ... And this is the reason why I [Hashem] have said to the Jewish people [not to eat blood], since the blood is the soul – and it is not fitting for a soul to eat another soul [i.e. the blood of an animal]. (*Commentary on Sefer Vayikra* 17:11-12, translation, underlining and brackets my own)

In short, the Ramban's spiritually oriented explication of our *mitzvah* focuses upon the following major elements:

- Ingesting blood results in a thickness and arrogance in the soul of a person
- Eating blood will cause a person to enter a spiritual state that is similar in kind to that of the animal he/she has eaten
- It is not fitting to mix the soul that has been cut off [that of the animal that has been killed] with the soul that continues to live [that of the man]

Nachmanides' repudiation of Maimonides' analysis of our *mitzvah* is part of a much larger struggle in Jewish philosophy that ultimately became two radically opposing camps, the Maimunists and the Anti-Maimunists. The former advocated on behalf of the Rambam's rationalistic approach in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, whereas the latter rejected it in its entirety. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal*

(1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his followers and disciples, persuasively explains why the Anti-Maimonists ultimately held sway in this crucial conceptual controversy:

Judging Maimonides’ undertaking retrospectively, one must admit that the master whose thought shaped Jewish ideology for centuries to come did not succeed in making his interpretation of the commandments prevalent in our world perspective. While we recognize his opinions on more complicated problems such as prophecy, teleology and creation, we completely ignore most of his rational notions regarding the commandments. The reluctance on the part of the Jewish *homo religious* [religious being] to accept Maimonidean rationalistic ideas is not ascribable to any agnostic tendencies, but to the incontrovertible fact that such explanations neither edify nor inspire the religious consciousness. They are essentially, if not entirely, valueless for the religious interests we have most at heart. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind: An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought*, page 92, brackets and underlining my own)

In a word, the Rav’s understanding as to why Maimonidean rationalistic explanations of the *mitzvot* were rejected by the majority of Jewish thinkers asserts that “such explanations neither edify nor inspire the religious consciousness. They are essentially, if not entirely, valueless for the religious interests we have most at heart.” At this juncture we might well ask, “What, then, are the hallmarks of the religious consciousness and the religious interests we have most at heart?” Rav Soloveitchik provides a poetic answer to this question in his analysis of why man ultimately seeks G-d:

Man seeks G-d out of a thirst for the freedom of life, a desire to expand and deepen the universe. The search for G-d means liberation from the burden of tyrannical nature weighing heavily upon him, release from the blind forces besetting man’s life. Weary from the travail of dull life, man flees to the region of complete liberty and conjoins with G-d. Man desires peace of mind and seeks to wipe the tears of sorrow from his face. Out of the totality of spiritual experience that flows from the inner uniqueness and independence of the creative spirit that rises ever higher, the religious experience is revealed. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek*, translation, Naomi Goldblum, pages 41-42)

May we ever be *zocheh* (merit) to have “a thirst for the freedom of life, [and] a desire to expand and deepen the universe” as we seek Hashem and strive to keep His *mitzvot*.

V’chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.