

Weaning Away from Idolatry: Maimonides on the Purpose of Ritual Sacrifices by Reuven Chaim Klein – Excerpts (MDPI)

1. Maimonides' Position

In his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:30, 3:32), Maimonides explains that the Torah's main objective is to eradicate the viewpoint of paganism. Thus, to truly understand the Torah's original intent, one must be familiar with the philosophies and practices of ancient idolaters (in Maimonidean terms, this refers to practitioners of non-monotheistic religions).

Taking this idea a step further, Maimonides seemingly assumes that ritual sacrifices are a sub-optimal form of worship, leading him to making the bold statement that the Torah instituted its system of ritual sacrifices to facilitate the rejection of idolatrous practices. He explains that human nature is that whatever people have accustomed themselves to doing becomes so ingrained in their nature that it cannot be easily uprooted. Man

cannot successfully transition from one extreme to the other without some time to acclimate.

Thus, God did not simply command the Jews to reject idolatry by completely forbidding its classical practices—animal sacrifices, prostration, and burning incense—because these practices were so much a part of human culture at the time that the Jews would not have been able to give them up.

Maimonides illustrates his point by asking us to imagine that one day a prophet announced that God said that one should not pray to Him, fast in repentance, or request His assistance in a time of need, but should worship Him exclusively in thought, without any action. We would not listen to such a prophet because praying, fasting, and requesting assistance are ubiquitous forms of religious worship, and we cannot imagine religious life without them. Similarly, Maimonides explains, animal sacrifice and the like were such widely-accepted forms of worship in the ancient world that religion without them was unimaginable.

1.1. Limited Permission for Ritual Sacrifice

Given this predicament, the question is obvious: How could God get the children of Abraham—the champion of monotheism—to refrain from engaging in idolatrous sacrifice rituals?

Maimonides explains that God permits some of these pagan forms of worship to remain in a *kosher* form. God found this “ploy” necessary in order to eradicate idolatry and establish the great principle of the Jewish religion (i.e., the belief in God and His uniqueness). He allows for a temple, altar, and sacrifices—with the explicit caveat that He alone be the object of worship. This explains the Torah’s repeated, and seemingly unnecessary, emphasis that these practices be done for God:

- *They shall make a sanctuary for Me* (Ex. 25:8).
- *An altar of earth shall you make for Me* (Ex. 20:21).
- *When a man among you brings an offering to Hashem* (Lev. 1:2).

Similarly, the Torah allows for ritual prostration and offering incense, but warns that such worship should not be directed to any force other than Him:

- *One who brings offering to the gods shall be destroyed—only to Hashem alone!* (Ex. 22:19).
- *For you shall not prostrate yourselves to another god* (Ex. 34:14).

Maimonides notes that the Torah allows for certain idolatrous-like practices, but places certain limits upon them to prevent them from devolving into a pagan-like free-for-all. Firstly, although the Torah calls for the construction of a Temple, it only recognizes *one* legitimate Temple, [Footnote 4: In Eim la-Mikra Eim la-Masoras (to Lev. 17:6) R. Eliyahu Benamozegh (1822–1900) notes that some argue that the Torah mandates that all sacrifices be offered in one central location in order to minimize the amount of sacrifices brought, due to ritual sacrifices' inherently suboptimal nature. Benamozegh disagrees with this and argues that all sacrifices must be brought to one central location staffed by well-trained Kohanim so as to ensure that the sacrifices are offered properly. If sacrifices were deregulated and could be offered by anyone, anywhere, then people might end up ruining their sacrifices. The unspoken tension with which Benamozegh grapples is

whether or not (according to Maimonides) sacrifices should be viewed as less than ideal.] not a set of temples as is common amongst idolaters: *Beware for yourself lest you bring up your burnt-offerings in any place that you see* (Deut. 12:13). Secondly, although the Torah calls for a class of priests (the *Kohanim*), this class is limited to Aaron's descendants; other people cannot play any significant roles in offering ritual sacrifices. Thus, unlike other forms of Jewish worship, ritual sacrifice is limited both geographically and genealogically (by contrast, *any* Jew in practically *any* place can engage in, say, prayer). [Footnote 5: R. Israel Chait consistently explains that Judaism always follows a logical path, while paganism/idolatry simply reflect outbursts of emotional expressions. In Chait (2011, p. 184), he applies this paradigm to the Torah's system of ritual sacrifice and somewhat echoes Maimonides in writing: "The sacrifices commanded in the Torah have a unique system of the Temple and the Priests; only with these circumstances and with certain people could sacrifices be brought. In this way, the primitive emotions would also be in check, subordinated to the guidelines and ideas of Halacha.

Halacha safeguards our correct use of the Temple; it is regulated by logic and ideas. Conversely, primitive emotions (expressed in pure idolatrous sacrifices) are attached to particular actions and objects. It was vital that man remove himself from that emotional mindset and relate to the universal ideas of Halacha”.]

1.2. Downplaying Ritual Sacrifice

Maimonides seems to maintain that the Torah’s concept of ritual sacrifice is simply a means of weaning the Jews away from idolatrous sacrifices. It is a sort of concession to the frailties of mankind who, by the time the Torah was given, were steeped in idolatry. At face value, Maimonides seems to understand that ritual sacrifices have no inherent value. They are just a means—albeit a valuable means—towards the end of weaning people away from idolatry, but they are not an end in their own right.

Maimonides presents a series of Biblical passages that seem to downplay the importance of ritual sacrifice:

- *Is Hashem's desire in burnt-offerings and sacrifices like in listening to the voice of Hashem? (I Sam. 15:22).*
- *"Why [do you offer] to Me the multitudes of your sacrifices?" says Hashem (Isa. 1:11).*
- *[F]or I did not speak to you forefathers and I did not command them on the day I took them out of the Land of Egypt on the matter of burnt-offerings and sacrifices; rather this matter I commanded them saying, "listen to My voice and I will be for you as God and you will be for Me as a nation" (Jer. 7:22–23).*

On the surface, these passages and others like them seem to eschew ritual sacrifice altogether. However, Maimonides explains that they actually convey the message that God's *primary* concern is that the Jewish people worship Him exclusively. Sacrifices are a means towards that end, because they allowed the Jews to transfer a deeply-ingrained religious practice from idol worship to Divine worship. Under this theology, the sacrifices themselves are less important than the

underlying goal of “knowing [the true] God” and following His rules.

The verses above downplay the importance of ritual sacrifices because when the Jews do not follow God’s rules in other aspects, He finds their ritual sacrifices entirely superfluous.⁹ Ritual sacrifices might be the proverbial icing on the cake, or the spoonful of sugar which helps the medicine go down; but when there is no cake, or no medicine, then there is no need for icing and sugar.

1.3. Commandments to Counter Idolatry

Later in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:37), Maimonides bolsters his claim that ritual sacrifices are intended to prevent the Jews from engaging in prevalent idolatrous practices by arguing that other commandments in the Torah were given for the same reason. These commandments follow the theme of “don’t do what they did”. Some of these examples are also found in Maimonides’ *Sefer ha-Mitzvos*:

- The prohibitions of shaving the corners of the head and the beard (Lev. 19:27) are to avoid mimicking

the look [Footnote 11: Alternatively, in Chemdas Yamim (to Lev. 19:27 and Deut. 12:31), R. Shalom Shabazi (1619–1720) asserts that some idolatrous cults legislated that a boy must burn his first hairs grown during puberty as a sacrifice to their gods. To counter that practice, the Torah forbade cutting one's beard altogether. Similarly, Shabazi explains that some cults demanded that farmers burn the first yield of their fields, so to counter that practice, the Torah requires that this produce be brought to Jerusalem (Ex. 23:19, Deut. 26:2).] of ancient idolatrous priests. [Footnote 12: Guide (there) and Sefer ha-Mitzvos (Negative Commandment #43). In Sheilos u-Teshuvos Min ha-Shamayaim (§28), R. Yaakov of Marvege (a 13th century French Tosafist) also offers this reason for the prohibitions of shaving, and even argues that the prohibitions' association with idolatry justifies rendering extra-stringent rulings. Tur (Yoreh Deah §181) cites and disagrees with Maimonides' rationale for these prohibitions. He comments that this reason is not explicit in the Bible, noting that one should not seek

reasons for the mitzvos, as they are all commandments of the King that are to be followed irrespective of whether their reason is known. R. Yosef Karo in Beis Yosef (there) understands that Maimonides really meant that the rationale for the prohibition is to avoid idolatrous practices and Tur disagrees that one cannot rationalize the commandments. However, R. Moshe Isserles (Darkei Moshe there) explains Tur's intent differently: While Tur accepts that one can offer theoretical reasons for the commandments, he rejects using those reasons to create practical ramifications in the implementation of the commandments. The reasons must remain in the realm of theory, but cannot affect practical law. Therefore, for example, even if the idolaters' practices change, the prohibition intended to counter idolatrous practice must always remain in place (certainly, Maimonides himself would agree to this conclusion, see his Guide 3:34). See also Turei Zahav (Yoreh Deah §181:1).]

- The prohibition of wearing wool-linen mixtures (Lev. 19:19, Deut. 22:11) is to avoid mimicking the garments of idolatrous priests, who merged wool and linen in their clothes to unite the forces of flora and fauna.
- The prohibition of crossdressing (Lev. 22:5) is to avoid imitating cultic ritual crossdressing. For example, Maimonides claims that one idolatrous source calls for men to dress in women's clothes when the planet Venus has influence, and for a woman to don armor and weaponry when the planet Mars has influence.
- The prohibition of mixing (i.e., grafting) different types of trees (Lev. 19:19) is to distance Jews from the cultic practices involving ritual tree grafting. As an extension of the ban on grafting different types of trees, the Torah also bans planting mixtures of different types of seeds. According to Maimonides, the Sabians claimed that if certain types of trees were grafted together, accompanied by sacrifices and incantations, then those trees would yield fruits that had special properties. The Sabians also

required that the branch used for the grafting be held in the hand of a beautiful maiden while a man fornicated with her in a disgusting way.

- Maimonides also suggests that the thrice-repeated prohibition of cooking a kid in its mother's milk (Ex. 23:19, 34:26, and Deut. 14:21) serves to distance the Jews from that idolatrous practice (possibly on their holidays, as Gersonides adds). Although, Maimonides admits that he did not see evidence of such practices in the Sabian writings.¹⁸ More recently, scholars have identified an Ugaritic (i.e., Canaanite) text that describes the rituals of Asherah worship, and one line there possibly calls for "A slaughtered kid in its mother's milk".
- The prohibition of lacerating oneself (Deut. 14:1) is to avoid the idolatrous practice of cutting oneself in service of their god.
- Maimonides also writes that the prohibition of deriving benefit from an idol and its paraphernalia or from idolatrous sacrifices (Deut. 13:18) is to prevent a Jew from keeping an idol on hand—even if he may

have originally seized it with intent to destroy it—and eventually being ensnared in the sin of idolatry.

1.4. Ritual Sacrifice to Contest Idolatry

In a follow-up discussion later in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:45–46), Maimonides explains how elements of the Jewish sacrificial rituals counter idolatrous practices. These also loosely follow the theme of “don’t do what they did”:

- Idolaters built temples and set up images of their god(s) as their foci. In a similar but different way, God commanded the Jews to build a temple and place the tablets of the Ten Commandments in a special ark as the temple’s focus. However, the Ten Commandments begin with the recognition of God’s sovereignty and a rejection of idolatry, thus establishing that the non-depictable One God is the focus of the Jewish Temple.
- The commandment to build the altar out of earth or uncut stone (Ex. 20:21–22) counters the idolatrous practice of building altars of hewn stone.

- The commandments that the Kohanim wear trousers (Ex. 28:42) and refrain from ascending the altar via stairs, lest their nakedness be exposed (Ex. 20:23), counter the cultic practices of Baal Peor, which involve ritual body exposure.
- The commandment to sacrifice cows, goats, and sheep exclusively counters various idolatrous cults which revered these animals and forbade their slaughter. Cows were revered by most cults, goats by the Sabians, and sheep by certain sects of ancient Egyptians.
- The commandment to sacrifice domesticated animals counters most forms of idolatry, which largely confined ritual sacrifice to wild animals like lions and bears. [Footnote 27: Maimonides notes that since not every Jew can afford to offer an animal, the Torah sometimes allows one to bring a bird or meal offering instead. He even suggests that because of poverty, the Torah stresses that if one completely refrains from pledging sacrifices, he does not have a sin (Deut. 23:23 [or 22]).]

- The commandment to sacrifice a young lamb as the Paschal offering countered the Egyptian idea that lambs were sacred, and the notion that the Jews were redeemed through the power of the zodiacal force of Aries (which is associated with the month of Nissan when they exited Egypt).
- The prohibition of sacrificing any leavened bread or honey on the altar (Lev. 2:11) counters²⁹ those idolatrous cults which sacrificed leavened breads and honey. The Torah's commandment of accompanying every sacrifice with salt (Lev. 2:13) stands in stark contrast to the prevailing idolatrous practice of never offering salt and often adding honey to sacrifices. [Footnote 32: It could be argued that the pagan practice of offering "sweet sacrifices" comes from an overly anthropomorphic conception of the divine. They may have reasoned that if people especially enjoy eating sweet things, then the gods do so as well. The Torah, by contrast, rejects this notion and instead prescribes "salty sacrifices", because God does not actually "taste" sacrifices in

the same way that a human being tastes the food that he or she eats.]

- Maimonides writes that he does not have an explanation as to why the Torah prescribes wine-libations to accompany certain sacrifices, as this was the practice amongst many idolaters.
- The commandment to avoid eating blood (Lev. 17:10, 17:12, Deut. 2:16, 12:23) counters the belief (held by Sabians and others) that blood is the food of demons, and that drinking blood will cause the demons to come and tell one the future. Furthermore, to prevent people from eating blood, the Torah commands that the blood of slaughtered birds and wild animals (Lev. 17:13) be covered, and that the blood of ritual sacrifices be sprinkled in the Temple instead of gathered in a vessel for consumption. In fact, notes Maimonides, when the Jews wandered through the desert, God forbade them from eating all non-sacrificial meats altogether (Lev. 17:1–9), save for birds and wild animals, so that they would not eat their blood. This prohibition only lasted while the Jews lived in the

wilderness because, according to the accepted lore, demons only live in the wilderness but not in inhabited areas.

1.5. Other Commandments

In addition to Maimonides, several other commentators understand that some of the Torah's commandments and prohibitions are intended to counter certain idolatrous practices. They too generally follow the theme of "stay away from what they did:"

- R. Saadia Gaon writes that when he heard about ritual prostitution in India,³⁶ he was then able to understand why the Torah forbids using a prostitute's fee for ritual sacrifices (Deut. 23:19).
- While idolaters embraced unbridled sexual expression, the Torah labels a man who had any form of seminal emission "impure" (Lev. 15:16). Dr. Yehuda Leib Katzenelson (1846–1917) argues that the Torah's purpose in branding post coital men as "impure" was to distance the Jews from the promiscuous idolatrous lifestyles epitomized by the ritual orgies associated with Baal and

Asherah. The Torah is so opposed to the many sexual rites that often accompanied idolatrous sacrifices that anyone who entered the Holy Temple or ate sacrificial meats had to first purify himself from sexual activity or seminal emissions.

- The Halacha that an animal slaughtered for personal or sacrificial use must have its throat cut may have been a way to avoid the more gruesome idolatrous practice of sacrificial heart excisions from live animals.
- In fact, Prof. Asa Kasher (a grandson of R. Menachem Kasher) takes Maimonides' view to the nth degree and applies it to almost every single commandment. For example, he argues that the commandments to work six days and rest on the Sabbath serves to prevent one from deifying either work or inactivity by providing the proper balance between the two.
- In a departure from the “stay away from what they did” theme, it can be noted that from an archaeological perspective, the physical structure of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem mirrors many of the

architectural features found in other cultic temples throughout the ancient world. Moreover, the Holy Temple shares many of the same cosmological imports attributed by ancient idolaters to their temples. Perhaps Maimonides' doctrine can be extended to argue that the Temple itself is another way of mimicking idolatrous practice in order to help wean the Jews away from it.

There are also rabbinic enactments or recommendations which some explain are intended to distance Jews from idolatrous practice. For example:

- Gersonides writes that some idolatrous cults were not so fond of actually drinking blood. Instead, they would use a pit or receptacle to catch the slaughtered animals' blood. Then, they gathered around the blood and ate from the animal's meat, with the belief that while they feasted on the animal's meat, the demons would come and feast on the animal's blood. In response to this sort of ritual practice, the rabbis instituted that it is forbidden to slaughter an animal such that its blood will spill into a vessel, pit, or any other receptacle.

- Shabazi writes that some idolatrous rites called for idolaters to smell the odor of their flatulence while engaging in rituals. It seems that rabbinic law reacts to this by forbidding prayer in the presence of malodorous smells like dung and flatulence.
- In presenting a variant reading of a list of recommendations in the Talmud, Shabazi includes: “One should not apply makeup to one eye”. He explains that some idolaters used to purposely color one eye and not the other, so that they would look more pitiful and their gods would have mercy on them.

Interestingly, Josephus in *Against Apion* (1:26) cites the Hellenic writer Manetho as having written that the Mosaic Laws “were mainly opposite to the customs of the Egyptians”. The Roman historian Tacitus (56–120 CE) similarly sums up his view of Judaism by writing in his *Histories* (5:3): “Among the Jews all things are profane that we hold sacred; on the other hand they regard as permissible what seems to us immoral”. Thus, it was fairly clear to some ancient pagans that the Torah’s laws directly conflicted with

those of the neighboring pagans, just like Maimonides said.

2. Difficulties with Maimonides' Position

2.1. Nachmanides' Objections

Nachmanides (1194–1270) cites Maimonides' position regarding ritual sacrifice and strongly disagrees with him. Nachmanides asserts that ritual sacrifice is a lofty practice that cannot be reduced to a historical concession to idolatry.

He notes several logical difficulties created by Maimonides' position:

First, Nachmanides understands that even those idolaters who revered cows, goats, and sheep and forbade their slaughter, only forbade casual slaughter, but allowed ritual slaughter. Thus, if ritual sacrifice were viewed through the lens of distancing the Jews from idolatry, then in these cases the Torah actually *strengthens* the idolatrous position with its endorsement of slaughtering these animals for ritual purposes!

Second, if the entire purpose of ritual sacrifices is to counter idolatry, then why do we find God accepting Cain and Abel's (Gen. 4:4) sacrifices before idolatry came about in the time of Enosh; and Noah's sacrifice (Gen. 8:20–21) immediately after the Deluge that ostensibly wiped out all idolaters?⁵³ Similarly, R. Yaakov Emden (1697–1776) points to Ezekiel's prophecies (Ezek. 43) concerning the sacrifices to be brought in the Messianic Era—a time by which idolatry will already cease to exist. If the whole purpose of sacrifices is to wean people off of idolatry, then why are they necessary in times when idolatry does not exist?

Additionally, Nachmanides questions why Balaam offered bulls and rams to God on the seven altars that he had prepared (Num. 23:4), if Balaam presumably did not intend to oppose the idolatrous ritual sacrifices (nor did he intend his sacrifices as a form of idolatry).

In light of these questions, Nachmanides explains that the underlying idea behind ritual sacrifices is that fulfilling God's command brings one close to Him.⁵⁵ He notes that the very word for ritual sacrifice—*korban* (קרבן)—is related to the Hebrew word for “closeness”, *kirvah* (

קרבה). For example, Balaam sought to use ritual sacrifice to bring himself closer to God, so that God would grant him the malevolent prophecy against the Jews that he wished to receive.⁵⁶ Similarly, Cain, Abel, and Noah sought to use ritual sacrifice to bring themselves closer to God as an expression of their gratitude (though Nachmanides does not mention this explicitly).

One of the points Nachmanides makes is that when a sinner offers an animal sacrifice, he should contemplate the fact that he himself really deserves to be sacrificed/killed, but God in His abundant kindness allows the sinner to bring an animal instead.

2.2. Other Commentators' Objections

Furthermore, asks R. Yitzchak Arama (1420–1494): if ritual sacrifices are not intrinsically valuable, then why does the Bible laud King Solomon for having offered one-thousand burnt-offerings at a time (I Kgs. 3:4)? Why are King Solomon's additional sacrifices considered praiseworthy; the minimum amount of sacrifices should suffice if the whole point is simply to counter idolatrous practice?

Similarly, R. Asher ben Chaim of Monzón (a 13th century student of the Rashba) asks the following: if the purpose of sacrifices is simply to wean the Jews away from idolatry, then why does the Talmud say that the rabbis instituted prayer in lieu of sacrifices? If sacrifices are not meaningful in and of themselves, then why do they need to be replaced with anything?

Another difficulty with Maimonides' position is that he seems to have put the proverbial cart before the horse. Maimonides understands that the Torah's sacrifices are meant to counter idolatrous ritual sacrifices. However, the truth seems to be that idolatrous practices developed from the saintlier concept of sacrifices to God, not vice versa.

In fact, the Mishnah contends that even idolaters followed the Noahide laws of sacrifices to disqualify blemished animals for idolatrous purposes, just as those animals are disqualified from being offered to God. Rashi explains that pagan idolaters continued to practice sacrifices to their idols in the same way that their ancestors had originally offered legitimate sacrifices to God. Thus, idolatrous sacrifice seems to be an

outgrowth of legitimate sacrifice, not the other way around.

2.3. Maharit's Questions

R. Yosef de-Trani (1538–1639), known by his initials as Maharit, offers a comprehensive analysis of Maimonides' view and ultimately explains Maimonides differently. Like Nachmanides, he too finds it difficult to accept that God would allow pagan abominations to enter the Torah's holy framework simply so that the Jews would be able to wean themselves off the idolatry to which they had previously become accustomed.

First, he argues that presumably, only the generation of Jews who lived through the exile in Egypt and were exposed to the most heinous forms of idol worship would need the Torah's ritual sacrifices to help them climb out of that rut. Once the first generation had weaned itself from idolatry, their descendants should no longer have needed ritual sacrifices. However, the Torah presents these laws as binding for all future generations. [Footnote 68: This argument is not as strong as it sounds, because many major trends in human history can take centuries to shift. In fact, the Bible itself

documents the Jews' recurring reversion to idolatry over a span of a millennium.]

In fact, the Talmud explains that, on the contrary, God originally wanted ritual sacrifices to begin only when the Jews entered the Holy Land and built the Holy Temple—although He did ultimately allow the services to begin beforehand at the Tabernacle, while the Jews still wandered the wilderness. This suggests that ritual sacrifices are not simply intended to help the Jews break off from idolatry, but serve a greater purpose.

Furthermore, Maharit offers a variant way of asking about sacrifices in the Messianic period: He argues that if the Evil Inclination for idolatry was eliminated from the world,⁷⁰ then ritual sacrifice would no longer be needed. This implies that animal sacrifices would be obsolete in the Messianic Third Temple era, when the gentiles are no longer pagan and idolatrous. However, notes Maharit, this cannot be, because a host of prophecies concerning the Messianic Era indicate that ritual sacrifice will be restored then.

2.4. Negating the Law

Like Nachmanides and Maharit noted in different ways, Maimonides' position is problematic in that it can conceptually lead to the possible negation of ritual sacrifices and other commandments. If the whole purpose of sacrifices and other commandments is to counter idolatry, then in a world where idolatry is no longer a significant factor, those parts of the Torah could arguably be discarded.

Indeed, R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook (1865–1935) criticizes Maimonides' approach for focusing too much on the past in conveying the commandments' significance. If many of the commandments are to counter the influence/practices of the idolaters of yore, then they do not have any meaning in the present or future. If they are irrelevant now and will continue to be irrelevant in the future, then why should they be kept?

The quasi-anonymous author of Midrash *Pisron Torah* (which pre-dates Maimonides) seems to have anticipated the Maimonidean approach and criticizes it fiercely. He uses the verse, *And the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be sweet to*

Hashem... (Mal. 3:4) to launch into a homiletic teaching about the value of sacrifices:

“God said to Moses, ‘In This World, the tribal princes’ sacrifices were sweet for Me, and in the future to come, they [i.e., the sacrifices] will also be sweet... Woe unto those who say sacrifices were unbecoming in the time of Moses... In the future, they will see with their eyes, but they will not participate and benefit [from sacrifices]”.

This polemic is clearly aimed at those who say that ritual sacrifices do not have inherent value, as Maimonides’ rationalization of sacrifices in the *Guide* seems to maintain. It essentially asserts that in Messianic times that viewpoint will be disproven by the reinstatement of ritual sacrifice. [Footnote 74: Interestingly, R. Kook writes that in the Messianic Era, all humans and animals will attain the level of intelligence needed to fully recognize God’s dominion over the world. Accordingly, he writes that animal sacrifices will be rendered obsolete and only offerings of flora—i.e., meal—will be reinstated. He finds support for this in the words of Malachi who said, Then shall the meal-offering of Judah and Jerusalem be

pleasant... (Mal. 3:4), mentioning only the meal-offering, and not animal-offerings (Kook 1939, p. 292).

In addition to the manifest linguistic inaccuracy in this explanation (i.e., because the word *minchah* in Biblical Hebrew means “gift” or “offering”, and only in Mishnaic Hebrew refers to a “meal-offering” in specific), there is an even deeper inconsistency. R. Kook’s explanation clearly contradicts Ezekiel’s prophecies, which foretell of animal sacrifices’ reinstatement in the future Temple—even if not exactly in the same way as prescribed by the Torah. Maimonides himself even seems to agree to the future restoration of animal sacrifices by codifying the laws of ritual sacrifices as presented in the Talmud into his Halachic work *Mishneh Torah*. The closest known parallel to R. Kook’s assertion is the Midrashic teaching (Midrash *Tanchuma*, *Emor* §14 and *Vayikra Rabbah* §9:7) that all sacrifices will be discontinued in the future except for the thanksgiving-offering—which is always accompanied by leavened and unleavened loaves of bread (i.e., meal). (R. Yehuda Leib Sirkis (1652–1733) in *Livyas Chein* (*Parashas Vayikra*) offers a detailed analysis of why sin-offerings and guilt-offerings will be

discontinued in the Messianic Era).] This problem is doubly compounded by the fact that in his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides himself codifies the laws of ritual sacrifices, which suggests that he does not relegate them to merely the realm of the historical.

2.5. Historical Fallout

Another problem with Maimonides' position is the dangers of how the ramifications of his theological position have played out historically. Granted, it is unfair to blame Maimonides for how Christian thinkers may have used his ideas; nonetheless, anti-Semitic leaders of the early Church who predated Maimonides used an early version of his idea to both demonize the Jews and delegitimize the Torah:

“Barnabas, Justin, and Irenaeus believe that the Mosaic laws were given to the Jews because they were not able to follow Natural Law. The Jews, they believe, are hard-hearted idolaters unable to understand either God's will or even the Scriptures, and that is why God had to accommodate His laws to them so that the Jews would be able to respect them. Thus He even invented

sacrifices for them so that they would not need to turn to other idolatries”.

A Christian writer named Master Ciruelo (1476–1548) used a version of Maimonides’ understanding to justify Christian dismissal of the Torah’s laws. He argued that the Decalogue alone represents “Natural Law” which God had to explicitly reveal at Sinai in order to make sure that mankind would never stray from those laws. All other laws given in the Torah—argues Ciruelo—were merely ways of accommodating the human tendency towards idolatry, or tactical concessions that gave into that tendency. According to Ciruelo, those laws have no inherent value and should ideally be jettisoned. This accounts for why Christians acknowledge the Torah’s divinity, yet deliberately do not follow its laws.

Are these the natural conclusions we are to draw from Maimonides’ position? Obviously not! And certainly Maimonides himself would reject such heresies, but his stance on the rationale behind ritual sacrifices nonetheless opens the door for such absurdities to be considered.

2.6. Contradictions in Maimonides’ View

Finally, Maharit finds an inherent contradiction in Maimonides' explanation: On the one hand according to Maimonides the Torah's ritual sacrifices are intended to be similar to idolatry, and thus help wean the Jews away from idolatry, which also called for ritual sacrifice. On the other hand, Maimonides lists several commandments which directly prohibit idolatrous practices and behaviors. So what method does the Torah use: Permitting *kosher* forms of idolatrous practice, or prohibiting idolatrous and quasi-idolatrous behavior entirely?

Others point to another passage in which Maimonides seems to contradict himself. Maimonides writes⁸⁰ that all the laws of ritual sacrifices are considered *chukim* (חוקים), which elsewhere he defines as statutes/commandments whose rationale is hidden from us. How then can Maimonides propose that the purpose of ritual sacrifice is to distance the Jews from idolatry?

Moreover, Maimonides explicitly writes that the future Messiah will reinstitute the sacrifices. However, Maimonides also explains that the Messianic Era will be characterized by the universal recognition of God. Again,

if sacrifices are merely a concession to help wean away from pagan rites, then they should be totally unnecessary at that future time in history.

3. Defending Maimonides

With these questions in hand, we can now visit the different approaches that the rabbis throughout the generations have taken to understanding Maimonides' position. In the coming sub-sections, we will present five different approaches. We do so with the caveat that while none of these approaches will answer *all of the questions* we have raised, each one opens up a different way of viewing Maimonides' comments in the *Guide*.

3.1. Answer #1: Maimonides' Explanation Is Not the Only Valid One

Gersonides follows the Maimonidean view that the Torah's ritual sacrifices are intended to distance man from idolatry. However, he concedes that this is not the *only* reason for those laws. Instead, he explains how the Torah *also* has inherent, primary reasons for the laws of ritual sacrifices. Similarly, Abarbanel concludes that

Maimonides' and Nachmanides' explanations of the reason behind ritual sacrifice are not mutually exclusive, and both are true.

This idea can be used to answer another question posed above, namely that according to Maimonides some elements of the Torah's ritual sacrifices mimic paganism, while other elements and commandments purposely call for the exact opposite.

How do these two approaches jive, and how did God determine which elements of pagan cult the Torah mimics and which it utterly rejects? These questions cannot be answered without appealing to the existence of an unknowable Divine Wisdom from which the Torah draws. In other words, besides considerations related to countering the influence of idolatry, there are *other* reasons behind the commandments of sacrifices. Thus, in Abarbanel's view, Nachmanides' *esoteric* layer of understanding the idea of sacrifice complements Maimonides' *exoteric* meaning of sacrifices (that is, to wean the Jews from idolatry).

R. Shnayor Z. Burton offers a slightly different take on this problem: Maimonides (*Guide* 2:18) argues that

God's knowledge is inseparable from His unknowable Self; His wisdom is thus fundamentally different in kind from human wisdom. Yet, elsewhere (*Guide* 3:26), Maimonides explains that the Torah's commandments stem from God's knowledge. Putting these two sources together suggests that because humans cannot comprehend the nature of His wisdom, they cannot truly understand the reasons behind the commandments. How then can Maimonides endeavor to give reasons for the commandments?

Burton argues that even Maimonides would admit that while the immutable Divine reasons behind the commandments are incomprehensible to mere mortals, human beings can still partially understand their rationale/purpose using their limited ability to understand. Consequently, Maimonides can justifiably write that the discernable reason behind the sacrifices that humans can grasp is its usefulness in aiding with the rejection of idolatry. However, the rationales given cannot explain what motivated God to give these particular commandments, because His inscrutable wisdom is beyond human understanding. Ergo, the entire

enterprise of seeking out the reasons for the commandments tries to find the meeting point between God's wisdom and human wisdom (see *Guide* 1:1) but dares not claim anything beyond that.

According to Abarbanel and Burton, Maimonides' explanation cannot account for all details of the laws of sacrifices, because his rationale is not the only factor in play. From this perspective, the aforementioned "inconsistency" in Maimonides' view (i.e., whether the Torah mimics or outright rejects idolatrous rites) simply reflects the fact that even Maimonides might agree that there is more to the story than he otherwise leads us to think.

3.2. Answer #2: Maimonides Only Wrote for the Perplexed

R. Yom Tov ben Avraham of Seville (1260–1330), better known as Ritva, writes that Maimonides never meant for his explanation to be taken as the main reason for ritual sacrifices in the Torah. Rather, Maimonides meant to offer a rational conceptualization of ritual sacrifices so that even a layperson would be able to offer a

logical/rational defense of the practice, if pressed to do so.

R. Moshe Sofer (1762–1830) writes that although Maimonides presented a rationalization of ritual sacrifices in the Torah (i.e., they serve to offset idolatry), he only wrote this for “perplexed” individuals who demand a logical explanation of the phenomenon. However, R. Sofer opines that Maimonides himself understood that the Torah’s entire concept of ritual sacrifice defies human logic and rationalization, while its deepest Kabbalistic reasons are not necessarily revealed to us.

3.3. Answer #3: Maimonides Only Addresses Private Altars and/or Voluntary Sacrifices

R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843–1926) lessens the impact of the questions posed above by limiting the scope of Maimonides’ explanation.

He argues that Maimonides’ statement that the purpose of ritual sacrifice is to wean the Jews from idolatry applies exclusively to sacrifices offered on private altars, known as *bamos* (במות). However,

Maimonides never said or meant this regarding sacrifices offered at public altars in the Tabernacle and Holy Temples, and would freely acknowledge that sacrifices at these public fora serve a higher purpose.

R. Dr. Yechezkel Epstein offers a similar distinction, proposing that when Maimonides writes that the reason behind ritual sacrifices is to wean the Jews from idolatry, this refers only to voluntary votive sacrifices, while the reasons for obligatory sacrifices remain unknown.

3.4. Answer #4: Idolatrous Practices Are Gateways to Impurity

R. Aviad Sar-Shalom Bascilla (1680–1749) writes that Maimonides' premise that the Torah forbids that which the idolaters practiced is correct, but the reason Maimonides gives is incomplete.

Instead of explaining that the Torah forbade idolatrous practices in order to distance the Jews from idolatry, R. Aviad Sar-Shalom takes a different approach: Idolatrous practices were deliberate and genuine ways of tapping into the world of impure spirituality by defiling one's body

and soul. While idolaters would purposely engage in such behavior so as to channel the evil powers of idolatry, the Torah forbids such actions because of the defiling elements involved. Although in many instances idolaters are neither cognizant nor aware that their rites are means of connecting with the powers of evil, that is nonetheless their entire *raison d'être*. The Torah eschews ritual impurity and other unclean things (e.g., human excrement) partially because they are conducive to impurity and “give strength” to the powers of evil. Idolaters believed that if they could somehow strengthen the powers of their favored deity, then they could circumvent the need for God’s influence in the world. They denied the fact that God is the Source of Everything and even ultimately powers those perceived other forces.

Thus, the Torah commands Jews to act in counter-idolatrous ways to “weaken” the powers of evil. For example, those who worship the dual gods Gad/Meni do so by setting a table of food and pouring ritual libations (Isa. 65:11). In order to counteract such idolatrous practices, the Torah’s rituals require Jews to eat bread

and drink wine under positive, pure conditions (e.g., the Sabbath meals). While Maimonides assumes that the point of these commandment is *to not do* what the idolaters did, R. Aviad goes a step further and explains that the performance of *mitzvos* actually *undo* what the idolaters did.

With this idea in mind, R. Aviad Sar-Shalom explains the rationale of the latter Kings of Judah, who plunged into the depths of idolatry, and also engaged in other morally-depraved sins. These two concurrent developments were not coincidental: The abominable sins committed by the evil Kings of Judah were deliberate means of connecting to the forces of evil and served to strengthen their attachment to idolatry.

3.5. Answer #5: Maharit—Ritual Sacrifice Is Not a Concession to Idolatry

Maharit offers a new interpretation of Maimonides' position, which he uses to address Nachmanides' objections, as well as his own (see above).

Maharit explains that when Maimonides wrote that God did not abolish ritual sacrifice because people cannot

move from one extreme to the opposite, he could not have possibly meant that people cannot move from idolatrous ritual sacrifice to no ritual sacrifice at all. On the contrary, Maimonides understands that the key to ridding oneself of undesirable character traits and behavior is to temporarily move to the opposite extreme in order to “balance oneself out” so that one can embrace a middle of the road approach. Thus, if Maimonides would have written a guide to vanquishing idolatry, presumably he would tell people to stop ritual sacrifice “cold turkey”, instead of allowing them to continue indulging in a “*kosher*” version.

Based on this, Maharit understands that when Maimonides writes that one cannot move from one extreme to another, he means that the Jews would not have been able to move from the extreme of worshipping *God* through physical/sensory expressions (i.e., ritual sacrifice) to worshipping Him without physical expression (i.e., totally in abstract thought). Because of that, He allowed for them to continue worshipping Him in their former way.

In short, Maharit understands that according to Maimonides, the Torah's ritual sacrifices were not a concession to the Jews' idolatrous proclivities; rather, they were a means to allow the Jews to continue worshipping *Him* in more concrete ways, as they had been doing until then.

3.6. Ritual Sacrifice Began as a Legit Practice

If so, we are left with the question of what Maimonides believes regarding the relationship between ritual sacrifice and idolatry. Maharit explains this by taking a step back and describing the history of ritual sacrifice.

Maharit explains that God chose the Jewish nation to be the bearers of His flag and serve as the fulcrum for the global recognition of God's existence and role in the universe. In truth, this objective can be fulfilled by worshipping God in thought alone. Through prayer, one can use his thoughts to solidify his belief and awareness of God's role in the world. In fact, prayer—which is mostly an exercise in thought—is considered a form of worship equal to sacrifice.

However, since humans are physical beings, they are drawn [Footnote 111: R. Yosef Leib Bloch (1860–1929) writes that Maimonides did not “God forbid” think that displacing idolatry was the only reason for the commandments of ritual sacrifices. Rather, in R. Bloch’s estimation, Maimonides sought to offer a rational explanation for ritual sacrifices. Even though Maimonides himself may have believed that the entire concept of ritual sacrifices cannot be explained, he notes that such sacrifices do have this added benefit which may be part of God’s reason for making such commandments. Nonetheless, R. Bloch concedes that pagan idolaters offered ritual sacrifices in order to feed a very human drive to offer sacrifices to a higher cause. By instituting the Torah’s system of sacrifices, God sought to replace idolatry’s role in filling this need with an acceptable outlet (Bloch 1949, pp. 199–201). Even contemporary philosophy recognizes this internal drive for sacrifice. For example, the late Dr. Roger Scruton (1944–2020) opens his book with an undisputed truism, “The desire for sacrifice is rooted deep in all of us” (Scruton 2014, p. 1).] to physical forms of expression, so

worship via thought alone does not suffice. For this reason, the early monotheists like Cain, Abel, and Noah devised (either through their own advanced intellect or through divine inspiration) physical ways of worshipping God, i.e., the services of ritual sacrifices. When these men and their descendants offered ritual sacrifices, they were doing so as a way of serving God and strengthening their own internal devotion to Him.

As the generations progressed, people deviated from this ideal and perverted the institution of ritual sacrifice for use in idolatry. They switched the object of ritual sacrifice from God to something else they called “god”.

Given this turn of events, we would expect God to spurn the entire notion of sacrifice which had hitherto been a noble act, but was now more closely associated with deviance. Meaning, once sacrifices became associated with deviance, we would have expected God to forbid it entirely, just as (according to Maimonides) the Torah has many commandments that forbid other elements standard to idol worship.

About this, Maimonides writes that because ritual sacrifice had already been ingrained in the psyche of the

Jews and their forbearers, He did not wish to completely abandon the concept. Therefore, God incorporated a legitimate form of ritual sacrifice within the Torah's framework, despite the fact that ritual sacrifice in general had already been hijacked for other, unholy, uses.

However, the illegitimate elements of ritual sacrifice found in idolatrous cults are so utterly rejected by God that the Torah contains certain positive and negative commandments which directly preclude their introduction to Jewish ritual. Those modalities were never legitimate in the first place and have no place in the true worship of God. This explains why the Torah seems to adopt/permit some elements of idolatrous rituals and rejects others. In other words, the Torah permits those elements that were always permitted, legitimate practices, and forbids those idolatrous "add-ons" that were invented later on.

Thus, according to Maharit, Maimonides never meant to say that countering idolatry is the reason for the institution of ritual sacrifice. Rather, he simply meant to explain why ritual sacrifice was allowed to continue after it became commonly used for idol worship.

3.7. Precedent for Rejecting Once-Beloved Forms of Worship

Maharit strengthens his view by citing precedent for the notion that the Torah might reject a modality that was once used for honorable purposes simply because it was later misappropriated for ungodly uses.

The Torah says, *You shall not erect for yourselves a single-stone altar, which Hashem, your God, hates* (Deut. 16:22). How can the Torah say that God hates single-stone altars, if we find that in the time of the forefathers, God was pleased with such worship, such as when Jacob (Gen. 28:18–22) erected such an altar at Beth El? God even identified Himself to Jacob later on as the One to whom the single-stone altar at Beth El was erected (Gen. 31:45), which shows that Jacob's actions were laudatory.

Tradition explains that although God had cherished single-stone altars in the times of the forefathers, by the time the Jews exited Egypt, He abhorred such constructions because they had been formally adopted by the Canaanites as a medium of idol worship. Once the idolatrous Canaanites began to use single-stone altars

for their perverted rituals, God was no longer fond of such tributes and, in fact, forbade them in the Torah.

Thus, according to Maharit, in the *Guide*, Maimonides sought to explain why this paradigm did not apply to ritual sacrifice in general. To this end, Maimonides explained that since ritual sacrifice had already gained such a strong foothold, God did not wish to discard it completely. Instead, He simply incorporated this concept into the Torah's framework.

4. Potential Midrashic Proof to Maimonides' Position

Before we conclude this essay, we will discuss a possible Midrashic proof-text that appears to support Maimonides' position. This Midrash was said concerning the prohibition of offering sacrifices outside of the central place of worship. The Torah itself explicitly says that the purpose of this prohibition is to stop the Jews from offering sacrifices to demonic satyrs instead of to God (Lev. 17:1–7). In this context, the Midrash relates:

“Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rabbi Levi: To what is this comparable? To the son of a king who became arrogant and accustomed himself to eating the meat of

unslaughtered and moribund animals. The king said, 'This [son] should always be at my table, so that he will refrain [from eating such abominations] on his own.'

Such is the matter with the Jews who were passionately following idolatry in Egypt and they brought sacrifices to the satyrs, as it says, ... *and they shall no longer slaughter their sacrifices to the satyrs...* (Lev. 17:7). These 'satyrs' are naught but 'demons,' as it says, *And they slaughtered to demons* (Deut. 32:17); and these 'demons' are naught but 'satyrs,' as it says, ...*And satyrs dance there* (Isa. 13:21).

And they would offer their sacrifices in violation (of the prohibition) of *bamos* and punishments would come upon them. So the Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'they should bring their sacrifices before Me at all times to the Tent of Meeting and they will [thus] abstain from idolatry and they will be saved.'"

Abarbanel was the first one to adduce this Midrash as proof to Maimonides' position that the purpose of the Torah's ritual sacrifices is to wean the Jews from idolatry. He understands that the Midrash explains

that God instituted the laws of ritual sacrifices so that the Jews will channel their sacrifices towards Him instead of to alternate deities.

Nonetheless, this proof-text is not as clear-cut as Abarbanel makes it out to be. R. Aviad Sar-Shalom of Bascilla writes that this Midrash does mean to offer a rationale for the concept of ritual in general. Rather, the Midrash only means to explain why God forbade all non-sacrificial meats while the Jews were in the wilderness and/or private altars thereafter.

God forbade the Jews from eating any non-sacrificial meat during their stay in the wilderness and even forbade them from offering sacrifices outside of the central place of worship in order to prevent creating a slippery slope towards idolatry. He wanted them to only eat from His meat (i.e., legitimate sacrificial meat), just like the king in the parable wanted his son to only eat at “his table”.

R. Chanoch Zundel of Bialystok (a 19th century Polish commentator)[120](#) explains that this Midrash seeks to explain why forbidding non-sacrificial meat in the desert would help permanently distance the Jews from idolatry,

if they would resume eating regular meat once they entered the Holy Land. The Midrash answers that unspoken question by comparing the matter to a king's son who ate improper things. The king insisted that the prince always eat at his table. After a period of doing so, the prince will acquire more refined culinary tastes and habits, and from then on will refrain from eating improper things even when left to his own devices. So too, by forbidding the Jews from eating non-sacrificial meat in the desert, the Jews would always "eat at God's table" and focus their ritual service exclusively on Him for their forty year sojourn in the desert. By doing so, they will become more refined and will not revert to their idolatrous ways when they later enter the Holy Land.

Either way, the Midrash never intended to provide a general rationale for ritual sacrifice. Instead, it was offering a localized insight into the prohibition of eating non-sacrificial meat in the desert or the prohibition of offering sacrifices outside of the central place of worship. While Chazal may have said that these prohibitions were intended to counter idolatrous practice, they said nothing about ritual sacrifices in general.

5...Conclusions

...In recent times, Maimonides' position has led to calls for examining/understanding the Torah by looking at parallel Ancient Near Eastern texts. However, the scope of idolatry in the Ancient World was so vast, that it is likely that there would be some idolatrous cult that would either prohibit or prescribe virtually any sort of act. There were an awful lot of idolaters over the course of history, and collectively they would purposely do or not just about everything imaginable. [Footnote 123: A popular internet meme known as "Rule 34" jokes that contemporary pornography has fetishized every possible act that one can think of; the same could be said of the cultic rites in the ancient world in which pagans granted omnisignificance to everything and incorporated every aspect of life into their idolatrous worldview. Life and religion were so intertwined in the ancient world, that Jan Assmann wrote of ancient Egypt, "It is virtually impossible to draw a clear-cut distinction between culture in general and religion in particular" because everything possible became part of religion (Assmann 2008, p. 10).] Thus, if some of the Torah's commandments or

prohibitions would either line up with or come in direct conflict with idolaters' practices, this should have no statistical significance. Accordingly, simply studying Ancient Near Eastern cults to understand how the Torah's laws negate those rites does not provide us with the whole picture. [Footnote 124: In his *Nineteen Letters*, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch criticizes Maimonides' approach to the reasons behind the commandments by chiding him for looking outwards to Greco-Arabic philosophy, instead of inwards to Judaism itself. This controversial passage was understandably censored in later Hebrew translations of R. Hirsch's work (Shapiro 2015, pp. 122–28).]

Taken altogether, one sees that there are serious holes in Maimonides' explanation, even after his rationalizing is all said and done. These gaping lacuna indicate that perhaps even Maimonides himself would agree that simply saying that the Torah intends to counter idolatrous practice or gradually wean the Jews away from such practices is not enough. Most importantly, Maimonides' approach fails to offer a systematic way of explaining which elements of idolatrous practice the Torah mimics,

which ones it outright prohibits, and which ones it simply ignores. Thus, there has to be more to it than just weaning the Jews away from idolatry. There must be more considerations behind the Torah's decisions and studying Ancient Near Eastern texts will almost certainly not help us discover those reasons.

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