

BS”D

Blood

In light of Postmodernism

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Today we are living in a what philosophers refer to as the postmodern era. This is as opposed to the modern era (from the 18th c. to the 20th c.) which, starting with the Enlightenment, proposed that man can understand everything there is in the world by applying his reason – man can get to the truth via his reason. This approach stands in direct opposition to that of postmodernism that says there is no truth! No one really knows anything and thus no one has the right to tell anyone about truth, about morality, about what is really right or really wrong (certainly not on a societal level, it being up to each culture to define for itself what is right and wrong).

So what does the Torah have to say about this? The answer is in our blood. Or more specifically, in the prohibition to eat blood. The prohibition appears in this week’s parsha as follows:

דברים פרשת ראה פרק יב פסוק כג - כו

(כג) רק חֵזֶק לְבַלְתִּי אֶכֶל הַדָּם כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַחַיִּים וְלֹא תֹאכַל הַחַיִּים עִם הַבֶּשֶׂר : (כד) לֹא תֹאכְלוּ עַל הָאָרֶץ תִּשְׁפְּכוּ פָּנִים : (כה) לֹא תֹאכְלוּ לְמַעַן יֵיטֵב לְךָ וּלְבְנֵיךָ אַחֲרַיִךְ כִּי תַעֲשֶׂה הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינֵי יְקוֹק :

Why so wordy? What is the meaning of “rak hazak”; why does this mitzvah have the special addition “lemaan yitav lecha”; what does this have to do with one’s children; why is this mitzvah followed up with doing the “yashar be’eini hashem”?

Before we answer all those questions, it is interesting to note that this prohibition is so important that it is mentioned no less than 6 times in the Torah (Vay. 3:17, Vay. 7:26, Vay. 7:27, Vay. 17:10-14, Dev. 12:16, Dev. 12:23-25). Furthermore the prohibition is one of only three dietary laws (hukei kashrut) for which one gets karet: eating hametz on pesah, eating helev, eating blood (Mishna Kritut 1:1).¹ And it is the ONLY prohibition in the Torah that is equated with Idol Worship – Molech (Vay 20:3,5), Ovot and Yidonim (Vay 20:6) – in the use of the terminology of God’s setting his face against the person [though parshat behukotai uses this terminology when we neglect the Torah *in toto* – Vay 26:17]. Rambam explains it as follows:

Guide III:46

“The Law, ..., forbade the eating of blood, and emphasized the prohibition exactly in the same terms as it emphasizes idolatry :” I will set my face against that soul that eateth blood” (Lev. xvii. 10). The same language is employed in

¹ So writes Dayan Grunfeld, The Dietary Laws, Vol. 1, p.64. The intent is that there are only three dietary prohibitions that entail karet. But there are another three eating related laws that entail karet: eating pigul and notar – which are sacrificial related, and eating on yom kippur – which is ritual related.

reference to him" who giveth of his seed unto Molech" : " then I will set my face against that man" (ibid. xx. 5). **There is, besides idolatry and eating blood, no other sin in reference to which these words are used."**

ספר מורה הנבוכים חלק ג פרק מו

ובאה התורה ... ואסרה אכילת הדם, ועשתה חיזוק באיסורו כמו שעשתה בע"ז בשווה, אמר ית' "וְנִתְּתִי פָנַי בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאֹכֵלֶת אֶת הַדָּם (ויקרא יז:ל), " כמ"ש בנותן מזרעו למלך ונתתי את פני באיש ההוא, ולא בא זה הלשון במצוה שלישית מלבד ע"ז ואכילת דם.

So the question is: what is so terrible about eating blood, that it is compared to Idol Worship?

The classic answer runs along the lines of "you are what you eat" – so, if you eat the blood of an animal you will take on animalistic tendencies. So explains the RMBN, the Sefer HaHinuch, the Ohr HaHayim and others.

רמב"ן ויקרא פרשת אחרי מות פרק יז פסוק יא

ואלו דברים מיושבים, אבל הכתובים לא יורו כן, שהם יאמרו תמיד בטעם האסור, כי נפש כל בשר דמו בנפשו (פסוק יד), כי נפש הבשר בדם הוא (פסוק יא), והחזיר במשנה תורה (דברים יב כג) רק חזק לבלתי אכול הדם כי הדם הוא הנפש ולא תאכל הנפש עם הבשר: והראוי שנפרש בטעם איסורו, ... מן הידוע עוד, כי הנאכל ישוב בגוף האוכל והיו לבשר אחד, ואם יאכל אדם נפש כל בשר והוא יתחבר בדמו והיו לאחדים בלב תהיה עובי וגסות בנפש האדם, ויתשוב קרוב לטבע הנפש הבהמית אשר בנאכל, כי הדם לא יצטרך עכול כשאר הנאכלים שישתנו בעולם, ויתלה בו נפש האדם בדם בהמה.

Commented [MN1]: The RMBN (Vay 17:11) quotes the RMBM explaining that they are reasonable but do not account for the explanation in the Torah itself that says the blood is the life force, and so RMBN explains that the issue is because man absorbs the animal life force and become animal like himself:

ספר החינוך פרשת צו מצוה קמח

כבר כתבתי מה שאני חושב על צד הפשט באיסורי המאכלות באזהרת טריפה [#73] חלב [#147] [שבאכילת הבהמה האדם קונה מן המידות הבהמה – מ.נ.]. ואפשר לומר בדם עוד כי מלבד רוע מוגז שהוא רע המוגז, יהיה באכילתו קצת קנין במדת אכזריות, שיבלע האדם מבעלי חיים שכמותו בגוף, אותו הדבר שבהם שהחיות ממש תלוי עליו, ונפשם נקשרת בו. כי ידוע שיש לבהמות נפש, יכונה החכמים נפש חיונית, כלומר שאינה שכלית, גם נראה אותם, שיש לנפשם בחינה להשמר מנפול באחת הפחתים, ובקצת דברים אחרים.

Commented [MN2]: Similarly the Sefer HaHinuch (who quotes the Ramban) and expands by saying that man will acquire the brutality of beast:

שיר מעון דברים פרק יב פסוק כה

וידוע מה שכתבו הספרים כי אכילת דם בטבע הוא שהאוכלו מוליד בו אכזריות וטבע קשה רוע, אפילו להעוסקים בו תמיד נטבע בהם מדת אכזריות, עד שאמרו חז"ל (קידושין פ"ב ע"א) הכשר שבטבחים שותפו של עמלק.

Commented [MN3]: Similarly Shir Maon - Spilling in blood is brutal, so eating blood makes you brutal and of a bad disposition.

אור החיים ויקרא פרשת אחרי מות פרק יז פסוק יא

... שיש בדם הנפש והוא נותן בתוכו נפש הבהמית. ...

Commented [MN4]: The idea that the soul of man absorbs the animalistic soul of the animal is also brought by the Ohr HaHaim:

RMBM refers to the idea that blood was part of Idol Worship rituals so that people eating blood did so as part of the idolatrous rituals. It was a sociological thing. Dayan Grunfeld explains that the issue was, accordingly, to "wean" the Jews from the Idol Worship practices of Egypt – as does RambaN (Dev. 12:22).

So these commentators are suggesting a physiological reason for not eating the blood – i.e., it gives rise to animalistic qualities in the individual for which one is presumably led to Idol Worship. The Rambam explained, in what could be called a sociological way,

that blood is used by people in their idol worshipping ceremonies and so one who eats blood, so involving himself in blood, will be drawn to participate in such Idol Worship ceremonies: "For the eating of blood leads to a kind of idolatry, to the worship of spirits."

ספר מורה הנבוכים חלק ג פרק מו

שאכילתו היתה מביאה למין ממיני ע"ז והיא עבודת השדים...

I would like to suggest a philosophical reason.

I believe that simply eating the blood is as bad as idolatry, not because one will become an idolator as a result of physiological processes resulting from the ingestion of the blood nor due to the sociological process of being involved with blood used in Idol Worship rituals; but rather, one is already an idolator in the very act of coming to eat the blood. By eating blood you are rejecting the rules of God, you are rejecting the fact that God is in charge of life, of your life, your nefesh – as we read in the parsha: "Because the blood is the nefesh – is the life force itself."

כי הדם הוא הנפש

This mitzvah is really the quintessential commandment – it typifies the whole mitzvah system: either you do God's will or you do your will – i.e., you worship the idols you have set up to guide you according to your desires – essentially saying, there is no truth, there is no moral authority outside of myself.

God sets out before us a simple choice – either His will or your will. This is the choice brought at the beginning of the parsha:

דברים פרשת ראה פרק יא פסוק כו - כח

(כו) **ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה**: (כו) את הברכה אשר תשמעו אל מצות קוֹק אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מִצְוֶה אֲתֶם הַיּוֹם: (כח) וְהַקְלָלָה אִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹת קוֹק אֱלֹהִים וְסָרְתֶם מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מִצְוֶה אֲתֶם הַיּוֹם לְלַקֵּת אֲחֵרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעֶתֶם: ס

And there are consequences, ultimate consequences. This choice isn't just about blessing and curse. It is about life and death, as Moshe explains in almost the same opening words in his final speech:

דברים פרשת נצבים פרק ל פסוק טו - כ, טו-כ

(טו) **ראה נתתי לפניך היום** את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המוות ואת הרע: (טו) אשר אנכי מצוה היום לאהבה את קוֹק אֱלֹהִים לְלַקֵּת בְּדַרְכֵי וּלְשַׁמֵּר מִצְוֹתַי וְחֻקֹּתַי וּמִשְׁפָּטַי וְחַיֵּית וְרַבִּית וּבְרַכָּה קוֹק אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶתֶּה בָּא שְׁמָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: (יז) וְאִם יִפְּנֶה לְבָבְךָ וְלֹא תִשְׁמָע וְנִדְחִיתָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לְאֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְעַבַדְתָּם: (יח) הַגְדַּתִּי לְכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲבַד תֵּאבְדוּן לֹא תֵאָרִיכוּ יָמַי עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אֶתֶּה עִבְרָתָהּ הַיּוֹם לְבֹאָה שְׁמָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: (יט) הַעֲדַתִּי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת הַשְּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמּוֹת נִתְּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְלָלָה וּבַחֲרִית בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תַּחֲיֶה אֶתֶּה וְזָרַעְךָ: (כ) לְאֶהְבָה אֶת קוֹק אֱלֹהִים לְשִׁמּוֹעַ בְּקוֹלוֹ וּלְדַבְּרָהּ בּוֹ כִּי הוּא חַיִּים וְאֶרֶץ קְמִיָּה לְשִׁבֹת עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁפַע קוֹק לְאַבְתָּיִךְ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב לְתַת לָהֶם: פ

We see here the connections between – Mitzva and Good, Blessing and Life versus No Mitzva and Evil, Curse and Death.

Commented [MN5]: והתורה טהרה הדם ושמה אותו מטהר מה שיגיע בו, והזית על אהרן ועל בגדיו וקדש הוא ובגדיו, וצוה להזותו על המזבח, ושמה העבודה כלה לשופכו שם לא לאספו, ואמר ואני נתתיו לכם על המזבח לכפר, ושם ישפך, וכמו שאמר ואת כל הדם ישפך וגו'

This is really the test of man since his very creation. Will he listen to God and not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, or will he follow his heart's desires? Here the same test is placed before us in the form of eating blood. But the question can be asked, isn't that the same test with *all* the mitzvot? Aren't we confronted by that same dilemma every time we need to decide to eat anything? Or do anything? What then is so special about blood that it is singled out?

Well, as already noted, the blood is the life force – **כי הדם הוא הנפש** – so when we eat it we symbolically say that we are in charge of our blood, of our nefesh, our life. And this is just the opposite of what God asks of us – i.e., that we defer to His moral authority. We are to sanctify our lives, our blood, to God. This notion is symbolically demonstrated in the demand to dedicate the blood on the altar. So explains the Kuzari and Ibn Ezra (who were preceded by Targum Yonatan – so explains D. Grunfeld, The Jewish Dietary Laws, p216) on blood:

ספר הכוזרי [1070-1141] מאמר ג אות יא
ולהשמר מהדם והחלב מפני **שהם חלק אשי ה'**

אבן עזרא [1089-1164] ויקרא פרשת ויקרא פרק ג פסוק טז
(טז) כל חלב לה' זה הכלל, ואחר שהחלב והדם **לגבוה הם** אסורים לכם, ...

תרגום המיוחס ליונתן - תורה ויקרא פרשת ויקרא פרק ג פסוק יז
כל תריב וכל אדם לא תיכלון על גבי מדבחה יתקריב לשמא די? :

The helev and blood are sanctified to God and thus forbidden. And while helev represents the material goals of one's life, the blood represents the very essence of one's being, one's very life (see the Jewish Dietary Laws, Vol. 1, p.71,75). By dedicating the blood to God we accept His authority over our lives, we make our desires subservient to His. By eating the blood, in contradistinction, we reject God, we reject His moral authority; we say our blood, our life, is in our hands – i.e., we will say what is right/moral to do with our life.

The choice is simple: eat blood or sanctify blood; remain earthly, dedicated to fulfilling our own base desires, or elevate ourselves, dedicated l'gavoha.

And this then answers the RMBN's quandary over why the verse starts with the words:

רק חזק לבלתי אכל הדם

The RMBN asks how this language is relevant to the single commandment of eating blood when such language is employed only in reference to *all* the commandments, as in Joshua 1:7:

יהושע פרק א פסוק ז, ז

(ז) **רק חזק וְאָמַץ מְאֹד לְשָׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוְּךָ מֹשֶׁה עַבְדִּי אֶל תִּסּוּר מִמֶּנּוּ מִיּוֹם וּשְׂמֹאוֹל לְמַעַן תִּשְׁכַּח לְכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּלְדָּה :**

Commented [MN6] : ויקרא פרשת ויקרא פרק ג פסוק טז - יז, טז-יז

(טז) וְהִקְטִירָם הַכֹּהֵן הַמְזַבְּחָה לְחֶם אִשָּׁה לְרִיחַ נִיחֹחַ כֹּל חֵלֶב לִיקְנוֹק : (יז) חֲקֹת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּכֹל מוֹשְׁבֵיתֵיכֶם כֹּל חֵלֶב וְכֹל דָּם לֹא תֹאכְלוּ : פ

The answer, after all this, is now clear: eating blood is the symbolic rejection of *all* the commandments. And that is why it is compared to Idol Worship, because, as the Rambam/Gem. explains (Guide III:29, Kid. 40a), Idol Worship is the rejection of *all* the Torah.

And this brings us back to postmodernism. Man has rejected the possibility of a divine truth. That is, man has rejected that there is a God, and with that, he has rejected that there is an absolute truth to be found. He has rejected that there is any moral truth. Postmodernism, as we said, states that everyone is free to do what is right and good in his eyes – certainly at the level of particular society – there is no overarching moral truth. As a result, society is floundering – there is complete confusion about who we are and how we are to behave.

And this confusion affects not only us but our children, not only our generation, but the generations that follow us. We are witness to this phenomenon of each new generation floundering further in morality. When we eat the blood instead of dedicating it to God, we confuse ourselves and we confuse our children – it is as if we sacrifice them to the Molech of our own desires, our own idol worship. This is why the Torah begs us:

(כה) לא תאכלנו למען ייטב לך ולבניך אחריו כי תעשה הישר בעיני יְקוֹק:

Shabbat Shalom.

EXTRA

This past week I participated in an Technology Ethics Forum (it was supposed to be a 2-week meeting in the US, turned into a 3 day meeting on Zoom). In any case, as you can understand from the title, it was a meeting of ethicists/moral philosophers from around the world to discuss the ethics of technology. That is, ethics of course is the discussion of what is right and what is wrong – here we are discussing this in the context of technology, for example what

Guide III:29 – [Destroy Idol Worship is central to Torah – indeed equal to ALL Torah!]

All these books which I have mentioned are works on idolatry translated into Arabic; there is no doubt that they form a very small portion in comparison to that which has not been translated, and that which is no longer extant, but has been lost in the course of time. But those works which are at present extant, include most of the opinions of the Sabeans and their practices, which are to some degree still in vogue in the world.

They describe how temples are built and images of metal and stone placed in them, altars erected and sacrifices and various kinds of food are offered thereon, festivals celebrated, meetings held in the temples for prayer and other kinds of service: how they select certain very distinguished places and call them temples of Intellectual Images (or Forms); how they make images on the high mountains" (Dent. xii. 2), rear asherot, erect pillars, and do many other things which you can learn from the books mentioned by us. The knowledge of these theories and practices is of great importance in explaining the reasons of the precepts. For it is the principal object of the Law and the axis round which it turns, to blot out these opinions from man's heart and make the existence of idolatry impossible. As regards the former Scripture says: "Lest your heart be persuaded," etc. (Deut. xi. 16)," whose heart turneth away to-day," etc. (ibid. xxix. 17). The actual abolition of idolatry is expressed in the following passage - "Ye shall destroy their altars, and burn their groves in fire" (Dent. vii. 5)," and ye shall destroy their name," etc. (xii. 3). These two things are frequently repeated; they form the principal and first object of the whole Law, as our Sages distinctly told us in their traditional explanation of the words" all that God commanded you by the hand of Moses" (Num. xv. 25); for they say," Hence we learn that those who follow idolatry deny as it were their adhesion to the whole Law, and those who reject idolatry follow as it were the whole Law." (B.T. Kidd, 40a.) Note it.

Rejecting divine morality leads to a world of moral chaos – people think accepting transgressor people is good. No. It is as if you have killed them, brought them to Molech. That is why the verse says that if you do the yashar (follow God's will), it will be good with your kids – you will grant them a world of morality and they will follow it to

their own good and harmony. Otherwise they will make up their own morality and descend to the abyss.

So, if it is a natural outcome of eating blood that we become idolatrous, why then does God need to set his face against the one eating the blood – anyway he sets His face against the idolator – so if eating blood makes one an idolator, the result is already guaranteed. No need to make a separate warning.

Moshe (Dev. 32:17) warns that if we drop God's ways we “sacrifice to no gods” which can be understood that we simply make up our own religion, our own morality.

אלשיך על דברים פרשת ראה פרק יב פסוק כה

לא תאכלנו למען ייטב לך ולבניך אחריו כי תעשה הישר בעיני יי (כה):
אמר, הנה אפשר תמנע מלאכול הדם על כי נפשך תקוץ בו, אמר לא תעשה כן כי אם לא תאכלנו למען ייטב לך ולבניך אחריו, ולא שתכוין לכך שתמנע מלאוכלו כדי שייטב לך, כי אם כי תעשה הישר בעיני ה' כי תמנע מלאוכלו, למה? שהוא ישר בעיני ה', לא לשום כונה זולתה, ועל ידי עשותך בכונה זו ייטב לך:

Here we see that the REASON to not eat blood is to DO what GOD says is RIGHT.
And when we do that, then all will be good.