

Blood*In light of Postmodernism*

R. Mois Navon

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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) **רַק חֶזֶק לְבַלְתִּי אֲכַל הַדָּם כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַחַיָּה וְלֹא תֹאכַל הַחַיָּה עִם הַבֶּשֶׂר : (כד) לֹא תֹאכְלוּ עַל הָאָרֶץ תִּשְׁפְּכוּ כַּמַּיִם : (כה) לֹא תֹאכְלוּ לְמַעַן יֵיטֵב לָךְ וּלְבִנְיָדְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ כִּי תַעֲשֶׂה הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינֵי יְקֻזָּק :**

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 uses the terminology of God's setting his face against the person [though parshat behukotai uses the 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' "וְנִתַּתִּי פָנַי בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאֹכֵלֶת אֶת הַדָּם (ויקרא יז:י), " 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 HaHuinuch, 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 יז), 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, ותשוב קרוב לטבע הנפש הבהמית אשר בנאכל, כי הדם לא יצטרך עכול כשאר הנאכלים שישתנו בעולם, ויתלה בו נפש האדם בדם בהמה.

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 מזגו שהוא רע המזג, 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, יכנוה החכמים נפש חיונית, כלומר שאינה שכלית, גם נראה אותם, שיש לנפשם בחינה להשמר מנפול באחת הפחתים, ובקצת דברים אחרים.

שיר מעון דברים פרק יב פסוק כה

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

אור החיים ויקרא פרשת אחרי מות פרק יז פסוק יא

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

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 issur 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 worshiping 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 ממייני 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**: (כז) את הברכה אשר תשמעו אל מצות קוֹקֹק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם: (כח) וְהַקְלָלָה אִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹת קוֹקֹק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְסִרְתֶּם מִן הַדָּרָךְ אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְלֶכֶת אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יְדַעְתֶּם: 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 המות ואת הרע**: (טז) אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶה הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת קוֹקֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלֶכֶת בְּדַרְכָּיו וְלִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחַיִּיתָ וְרַבִּיתָ וּבִרְכָךְ קוֹקֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲתָה בָּא שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: (יז) וְאִם לִפְנֵי לְבַבְךָ וְלֹא תִשְׁמָע וְנִדְחִיתָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לְאֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְעַבַדְתָּם: (יח) הִגְדַּתִּי לְכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲבַד תֵּאבְדוּן לֹא תִאָּרִיכוּ יָמִים עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אֲתָה לְעִבְרָתָהּ לְבֹא שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: (יט) הַעֲדַתִּי בְכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמּוֹת נִתְּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְלָלָה וּבַחֲרַתְּ בַחַיִּים לְמַעַן תַּחֲיֶה אֶתָּה וְזָרַעְךָ: (כ) לְאַהֲבָה אֶת קוֹקֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשִׂמְעָה בְּקוֹלוֹ וּלְדַבְּקָה בּוֹ כִּי הוּא חַיִּיד וְאָרָךְ יָמֶיךָ לְשִׁבְתָּ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְקוֹק לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב לְתֵת לָהֶם: פ

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

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 – **כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַנֶּפֶשׁ** – 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
כָּל תְּרִיב וְכָל אֶדָם לֹא תִכְלוּן עַל גִּבֵי מִדְבָּחָא וְתִקְרִיב לְשִׁמְא דִּי:

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:

רַק חֵזֶק לְבַלְתִּי אֶכֶל הַדָּם

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) רַק חֵזֶק וְאֶמֶץ מְאֹד לְשָׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה מֹשֶׁה עֲבָדִי אֶל תְּסוּר מִמֶּנּוּ יְמִין וּשְׂמֹאל לְמַעַן תִּשְׁכַּיֵּל בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּלְוֶה:

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:29Kid. 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 אחריד כי תעשה הישר בעיני קוק:

Shabbat Shalom.