

Blood plays a prominent role in our parashah, both as an integral part of the sacrificial offerings, and as something we are strictly prohibited from eating. This injunction is so important, that it is mentioned eight times in the Torah: The first time is in Parashah Noach, when HaShem allows humans to eat meat: “But flesh with its soul, its blood, you shall not eat. (Genesis 9:4). It is reiterated five times in Leviticus, and twice in Deuteronomy. Our sages grappled with the prohibition against eating blood, offering a number of salient reasons for its existence, the simplest of which is that the soul and life itself were manifested in the blood. Eating blood is therefore equivalent to eating life itself, which transgresses the strict boundary between HaShem and creation. Because in the pagan world boundaries between the human and the divine were fluid, pagans not only used blood in their rituals, just as we did, but they also ate blood, precisely because of its ritualistic significance. In many cultures all over the world, eating an animal’s blood or sitting around a basin of blood while eating were powerful spiritual acts meant to transfer certain animal properties to humans or invoke the deities or demons associated with those animals. Our covenant with HaShem is explicitly and unequivocally monotheistic, but as the frequent mention of this prohibition and the dire consequences of disregarding it attest, establishing and upholding it was a long and arduous process. In the world in which the Israelites lived, the temptation to eat blood was obviously powerful; therefore, in order to widen the distance between them and their pagan neighbors, the laws concerning blood specifically include “the stranger who sojourns among you” (17:12). As we can see, the ritual use of blood and the prohibition against eating it are related. “For the soul of the flesh is in the blood, and I have therefore given it to you [to be placed] upon the altar, to atone for your souls. For it is the blood that atones for the soul.” (17.11) In other words, in sacrificial rites it is precisely the blood of the animal that performs the act of traversing the boundary between humanity and HaShem. Before each animal is slaughtered, the donor lays his hands on its head in a symbolic act of merging his *nefesh*, his soul, which belongs to HaShem, with that of the animal. Because only HaShem is able to create life, blood, which is the essence of life, is the medium through which HaShem is called upon to act. On the eve of the Exodus, the Israelites are instructed to slaughter a lamb or a kid and scatter some of its blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses as an signal to HaShem to skip over them during the final plague, the killing of the firstborn. The investiture of priests is completed by daubing the blood of the sacrificial animal on their right ears, right thumbs, and right big toes, and sprinkling it on their vestments and around the altar. And, as we read in the first portion of our parashah, on Yom Kippur the high priest enters the Holy of Holies and sprinkles the blood of the sacrificial bull and goat on the Ark in order to purge himself, his family, and the entire people from any impurities they had acquired through their transgressions. Someone who has recovered from the skin diseases called *tzara’at* may only reenter the sanctuary after the priest has performed the ritual that involves dipping the live bird into the blood of the slaughtered bird. (See the Dvar Torah on Parashah Metzora, April 8.) And some of the blood of every animal that is slaughtered is to be daubed on the horns of the altar, and/or sprinkled around it. It is significant that every animal that the people slaughtered from their livestock was to be brought to the sanctuary so that the priests could dedicate its *nefesh* to HaShem. Failure to comply with this commandment was considered to be bloodshed, for which the punishment was banishment (17:3-4). If a wild kosher animal was slaughtered, its blood was to be poured onto the ground and covered over completely with soil, both to prevent the temptation to imitate the pagans, and to show respect for the animal. From these laws it is easy to infer why someone who ate carrion or “*t’refah* (that which was torn)” was rendered impure, and had to wash both himself and his garments and remain in a state of impurity until evening (17:15-16). Blood quickly coagulates after death, making it impossible to purge it from the animal. The underlying lesson in all of the laws and practices concerning blood is that life is sacred. Sadly, modern supermarkets, however convenient and abundantly stocked with food from all over the world, make it extremely difficult to connect with and appreciate the source of our nourishment. The meat departments offer things with polite, sanitized names like veal and brisket, rolled roast, white meat and dark meat, and a whole cleverly packaged array of sausages and other industrially processed animal parts. But how many of us see in them the calf, the steer, or the chicken from which they came? Even the animals that have been slaughtered under the laws of *kashrut* or *halal* are usually cut into easily accessible pieces. Animals whose parts have been packaged and sold to be cooked at home or served up on a restaurant plate are still HaShem’s creatures, deserving of our deep respect and gratitude. Of course, we no longer identify with the archaic sacrificial rituals of our ancestors, but we can learn much from the Torah’s instructions, laws, and rituals surrounding the blood of the animals that we eat. Think about them the next time you visit your meat market.

Shabbat shalom!