

This week we finish Leviticus, the book of laws governing all aspects of religious, communal, and personal life. The overarching theme of this oft maligned and misunderstood collection of ordinances and statutes is holiness, expressed in the first word, which gives Leviticus its Hebrew name: *Vayikra* – and He called: “And He [HaShem] called to Moses, and the Lord spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them ...’” (Leviticus 1:1-2) We read this phrase countless times in the Torah, in various permutations, but always with the same message: Hear and observe HaShem’s *mitzvot*, the commandments that have defined us and ensured our existence through the ages. Our sages divided the *mitzvot* into two basic categories: *mishpatim* (ordinances) and *chukim* (statutes). Babylonian Talmud Tractate Yoma 67b defines *mishpatim* as “matters that, even had they not been written, it would have been logical that they be written. They are the prohibitions against idol worship, prohibited sexual relations, bloodshed, theft, and blasphemy.” In other words, basic civil law. It defines *chukim* as, “matters that Satan and the nations of the world challenge because the reason for these *mitzvot* is not known. ... therefore, the verse states, ‘I am the Lord’ to indicate, ‘I am the Lord, I decreed these statutes and you have no right to doubt them.’” This most certainly does not imply blind obedience, something intrinsically foreign to Judaism. *Chukim* are simply commandments that are beyond the grasp of our human intellect, which we should nonetheless strive to understand enough to respect and follow. The literal translation of the opening verse of our parashah is, “If you walk in My statutes (*bechukotai*) and hear (observe) My commandments and perform them,” (26:3-4) HaShem promises a healthy land that will sustain the people, peace and freedom from danger, military success, and a strong population grounded in our eternal covenant. The set of admonitions that follows lays out the dire consequences for failing to observe the commandments. Near the end of the Torah, in Parashah Ki Tavo, Moses spells it out again in even more graphic terms, and the second paragraph of the *shema Yisrael* offers us a daily concise version. We see the inherent truths playing out today in multiple variations all over the world. The timeless implications of these warnings are contained in the word *chok* itself, which derives from a root meaning to engrave. In essence, *chok* is any fixed law, but not necessarily one of the *mitzvot*. Because they are celebrated regularly according to the calendar Shabbat and holidays are *chukim*. But the quota of bricks Pharaoh set for the Israelites to produce is also a *chok* (Exodus 5:14), as are the laws of nature. “Thus said the Lord: As surely as I have established My covenant with day and night – the laws (*chukot*) of heaven and earth ...” (Jeremiah 33:25) It is noteworthy that some form of the last half of Chapter 19, verse 18: “... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” is found in nearly every culture. If only we truly understood how to put its message into practice, HaShem’s blessings would be enjoyed by all. But alas, for most people it remains an unfathomable *chok*. We humans have never managed to forge the sort of lasting peace necessary to ensure the health and wellbeing of the earth and its inhabitants. The devastation caused by our countless wars includes crop failure, famine, illness, exile, and variations of all the rest of the horrors enumerated in our parashah. Today’s climate change is just one more indication of our inability to understand and heed HaShem’s commandments. Two words in the warnings illustrate why we continue to fail. They begin with “... and if you despise (literally are fed up with) My statutes and reject My ordinances ...” (26:15). These verbs imply action and movement. When we are fed up with something, we reject it. This includes everything from laws that we think infringe on our freedom to the baseless hatred some people have for those who are not like them. The implied action often culminates in murder and genocide, accompanied by wholesale devastation. Then, 26:21 introduces the word *keri* (קר), a unique word that appears seven times in this chapter and nowhere else in the TaNaKh. It has a whole range of meanings: indifference, stubbornness, aversion, unwillingness, carelessness, insensitivity. This is inaction, both deliberate and unintentional, which stems from a multitude of reasons such as fear, self-interest, and ignorance, and it can be just as lethal. Ignoring disaster warnings is obviously foolhardy, and if fewer people had looked away during the rise of the Nazi regime, perhaps the Shoah may have been prevented. *Yesod* dominates the 6th week of Omer counting, which we are about to end. It is the attribute of foundation, the supporting structure that underlies everything from buildings to contracts to our spiritual lives. It also represents male sexual energy – essential, and beautiful if used wisely, but devastating if used *b’keri* – with careless wantonness. *Yesod* also stands for righteousness. Righteous people lead with prudent, considerate, life-affirming behavior grounded in the *mitzvot* whose ideals they actively strive to uphold. *Pirkei Avot*, which we study during this time, advises: “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.” (2:16) No one person can heal the world alone, but we all can contribute in our own way toward countering hatred and indifference with acts of love and compassion.

Shabbat shalom!