

This week we begin reading Leviticus, that book of complicated rules and regulations, many of which lost their original relevance after the destruction of the second Temple in 70CE, but nonetheless have been continually discussed and adapted, and which also offer us valuable insight into the minds and world of our ancient ancestors. The Hebrew name of this book is Vayikra, which means, And He (HaShem) Called. Like the names of all five books of the Torah, it derives from its opening words, whereas the Greek and Latin names describe the contents of each book. Indeed, the Book of Leviticus deals primarily with the law codes of the Levites, the priestly clan. The *mishkan* is ready, the priests have been outfitted, and now, HaShem instructs Moses on the intricacies of the sacrificial offerings, which he in turn, must impart to the people. Our sages called Leviticus *Torat Kohanim*, Torah of the Priests, whose duties include teaching and upholding the laws governing community life. It is important to understand that although the priests perform the sacrifices, they are not intermediaries, but simply connectors between the people and HaShem. Their primary function is to educate, as Moses emphasizes when he addresses the Tribe of Levi during his farewell blessings in Deuteronomy 33:10: “They shall teach Your ordinances to Jacob, and Your Torah to Israel; they shall place incense before You, and burnt offerings upon Your altar.” Note the order in which Moses mentions their duties. They are first and foremost teachers, and their work in the *mishkan* simply completes the work of the people. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook likens the priests to a string that sews two pieces of cloth together. In other words, performing the sacrifices helps to connect the people to HaShem. It is enormously difficult for us to fathom this long extinct world of animal and grain offerings, which entails creating some rather strange mixtures involving oil, spices, and salt with the latter and a profusion of blood and body parts with the former. There is no adequate way to express the fullness of what the word *korban*, usually translated as sacrifice or offering, meant in the ancient world. It derives from the root קרב, which means to approach/to bring closer to and is related to words meaning interior/innards. No wonder our parashah gives such detailed instructions on how to offer the innermost parts of the sacrificial animals! It is noteworthy that in mammals, the kidneys, liver, and intestinal fat, which process and store the body’s waste, are precisely the innards designated for burning on the altar to provide a “pleasing fragrance to the Lord.” This suggests that our ancient ancestors understood that the kidneys, liver, and visceral fat are involved with separating impurities from the body during the digestion process, and concluded that burning them completely would signify that the person making the offering has acknowledged and dealt with their own “impurities,” i.e. transgressions, which would please HaShem. The kidneys are particularly important, since they have always been associated with emotions, conscience, desires, and wisdom, forming along with the heart, the innermost core of a person. (*Auf Herz und Nieren prüfen* is a German expression for probing and checking someone or something thoroughly.) The kidneys are mentioned many times in the TaNaKh and in our liturgy as a metaphor for conscience. The word for kidneys כליות is plural, and is likely related to words for longing, or vessel. Talmud Tractate Berakhot 61a teaches: “A person has two kidneys; one advises him to do good, and one advises him to do evil. ... The kidneys advise, the heart understands, the tongue shapes the sounds that emerge from the mouth, the mouth completes the shaping of the voice, the esophagus takes in and lets out all kinds of food, the trachea produces the voice, and the lungs draw all kinds of liquids, the liver becomes angry, the gall bladder injects a drop of gall into the liver and allays anger, the spleen laughs, the maw grinds the food, and the stomach brings sleep, the nose awakens.” Considering how our sages (mis)understood reproduction, this is one of their least fanciful descriptions of how the body functions. In the words of Rabbi Jacob Milgrom z”l, “The quintessential act of sacrifice is the transference of property from the common to the sacred realm, thus making it a gift for God.” Indeed, the word *sacrifice* comes from the Latin word *sacer* (holy), and *mincha*, which refers to the grain (meal) offerings, means tribute or gift, as in Psalm 96:8 “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; carry an offering and come to His courtyards. (*se’u mincha uvo’u l’chatzrotav*)” Although the Israelites utterly rejected the pagan practice of offering physical sustenance to the gods to gain their favor, its vestiges still resonated in their sacrificial system. In the Torah, HaShem describes *korbanot* as “My bread, My food-gift, My sweet odor,” etc., and the prophet Ezekiel calls the altar HaShem’s “table.” As incongruous as it seems to us today, feeding and appeasing our incorporeal, totally otherworldly God was simply the only way our ancient ancestors understood how to relate on a personal level. The cycle of prayers our sages instituted after the destruction of the Temple is based on the daily sacrificial rituals, which is why we have morning, afternoon, and evening prayers. The prayers they conceived evoke the entire range of human emotions, and perhaps when we pray we may catch a glimpse of the awe our ancient ancestors felt when they approached HaShem with their carefully chosen offerings.

Shabbat shalom!