

What a strange conclusion to Sefer Vayikra, the Book of Leviticus! The litany of blessings and curses in Chapter 26 ends with HaShem's promise to uphold our covenant and never forsake us, even when we fail to reciprocate. How, then, are we to understand Chapter 27 with its discussion of vows, consecrations, and tithes? Far from being an anomalous afterthought, it actually summarizes a vital aspect of holiness, the main topic of the Book of Leviticus. To better understand, let's go back to Chapter 26, verse 21, which introduces a unique little word that appears seven times in this chapter, and nowhere else in the entire TaNaKh: *keri* (קרי). It has a whole range of meanings: indifference, stubbornness, aversion, unwillingness, carelessness, insensitivity. The word קרי means cold, chilly, which can be seen as the root of these negative reactions. *Keri* refers to our attitude toward HaShem, and ultimately, toward HaShem's *mitzvot*. And it is reciprocal. In other words, if we are indifferent toward the *mitzvot*, HaShem reserves the right to be indifferent toward us. In one of his commentaries on this parashah, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z'l teaches: "To be a Jew is to have faith that our individual lives and our collective history have meaning. God is there even if we cannot feel Him. He hears us even when we do not hear Him. That is the blessing. It gave our people the courage to survive some of the worst blows ever to befall a people. ... Lose that faith and we lose that strength. We are 'left to chance.' That is the curse. Chance is not kind, but blind. The curse is not a punishment, but a consequence." This does not mean that there is only one way to observe the commandments. But not even the most liberal interpretation condones behaving in the spirit of *keri*. Chapter 27 deals with vows, dedications, and donations. Vows of any kind are always binding, with strict conditions for enactment as well as for nullification. The vows discussed here have to do with dedicated offerings to HaShem, beginning with "... When a man expresses a vow [pledging the] value of lives to the Lord, the value of a male shall be thus: From 20 until 60 years old, fifty silver shekels, according to the holy shekel; and if she is a female, the value is 30 shekels; and if [the person] is from 5 to 20 years old, the value of a male shall be 20 shekels, while that of a female shall be 10 shekels; and if from one month until 5 years old, the value of a male shall be 5 silver shekels, while the value of a female shall be 3 silver shekels; and if the person is 60 years old or over, the value of a male shall be 15 shekels, while for a female it shall be 10 shekels." (27:2-7) How dare we put a value on human life? Talmud Tractate Arakhin, which is largely based on this chapter, discusses vows concerning donations for Temple maintenance. These are monetary vows expressing gratitude or atonement, and the money pledged for the value of human lives may never be diverted toward purchasing a sacrificial animal. Using it for a sacrificial offering would imply human sacrifice, which is strictly forbidden. It is noteworthy that the word for lives is *nefashot*. All creatures, including us, have a *nefesh*, the most basic form of what we call *soul*. This means that all creatures have value. For that reason, certain animals may be sacrificed, but never human beings, because we also have a *neshamah*, the spirit of intellect. But why this sliding scale of valuation that only considers age and gender, with overtones of misogyny? Arakhin 19a offers an interesting perspective: "And what is different regarding a female, that when she ages past 60 years she stands valued at 10 shekels, 1/3 of her previous valuation, and what is different regarding a male, that when he ages past 60, he is not even valued at 1/3 of his previous valuation. Rav Chizkiya said that people have a saying: An elderly man is a burden in the home, as he does not help with anything; an elderly woman in the home is a treasure, for she assists with various domestic labors." Until very recently, men were the primary breadwinners, hence their higher value during their working years, and their declining value after their working lives have ended. As many comical as well as tragic stories relate, men who have nothing with which to occupy themselves after retirement can truly be a burden. Conversely, younger women were valued less due to the risks of childbirth, while older women who managed to survive were not only an extra domestic hand, their wisdom was also highly prized. Reading the daily Talmud page today (Bava Metziah 91a), I was astounded to find a reference to Tractate Temurah (Substitution), that shed light on this puzzling verse: "He shall not exchange it or offer a substitute for it, whether it be a good one for a bad one, or a bad one for a good one. But if he does substitute one animal for another, both that one and its replacement shall be holy." (27:10), which is echoed in the penultimate verse of Leviticus: "... And if he does replace it [a tithed animal], then both that one and its replacement are holy; it cannot be redeemed." (27:33) Temurah 2a: "This is not to say that it is permitted for a person to effect substitution, rather, if one substituted a non-sacred animal for a consecrated animal, the substitution takes effect, and the non-sacred animal becomes consecrated and the consecrated animal remains sacred. And the one who substituted the non-sacred animal incurs 40 lashes." In other words, promises are binding, and there are always consequences for breaking them. We are created in HaShem's image, with the power of speech through which we may either reflect or disregard HaShem's creative power of speech. It is up to us to choose wisely, but however we choose and whatever consequences we suffer for our poor choices, the words of our covenant are eternal. The Book of Leviticus is our instruction manual for upholding them.

Shabbat shalom!