

Shabbat Parah, which always occurs on the Shabbat before the Shabbat that announces the month of Nisan, is the third of the four special Shabbatot before Pesach. As we begin our own Pesach preparations, it reminds us that in Temple times Israelites had to be ritually pure in order to partake in the *pesach* sacrifice. The reading from Numbers concerns the law of the red heifer, whose ashes mixed in living water are used to purify those who have come into contact with a corpse. Contact with a human corpse causes impurity similar to that caused by contact with someone having a skin disease or a discharge. But despite the obvious danger of physical contamination posed by the latter, touching even the tiniest bit of human remains is considered far more perilous. Our sages teach that the soul, the holy spark that connects us to HaShem, departs when a person dies. The body then becomes an inanimate object that cannot return to a state of ritual purity. Whereas the Egyptians went to great lengths to preserve and provide for their dead, we do the opposite, allowing the body to disintegrate and return to the matter from which it grew. In other words, because only HaShem is immortal and able to create life *ex nihilo* (from nothingness), inanimate objects are not intrinsically holy, even though we do treat certain ones, such as our scrolls and holy books, with utmost respect. The ritual of the red heifer disappeared shortly after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, but traces of it remain in our practices. Just as our ancestors purified themselves before making the Pesach pilgrimage to Jerusalem, many of us thoroughly clean our homes before Pesach, paying special attention to kitchens and pantries in preparation for removing all traces of *chametz*. For some of us, this is a deeply spiritual act, similar to *taschlich* on Rosh HaShanah, when we throw pieces of bread into living water to symbolically cast off our sins and shortcomings. Both represent the transformation we desire to achieve. Our parashah repeats much of the material in the two parashiot preceding last week's parashah, but in greater detail, and prefaced by an urgent appeal to strictly abstain from work on Shabbat, especially from kindling any kind of fire. Before the invention of matches kindling was hard work. Furthermore, even today, it still can give the appearance of creating something from nothing. In addition, fire is a highly evocative image. Fire creates light and warmth, but it also destroys. Fire is also a metaphor for both positive and negative emotions. We burn with love and motivation, and also with rage and jealousy. And as we saw last week with the golden calf debacle, misdirected emotion can lead to tragic outcomes. Our sages teach that the red heifer was meant to atone for that sin. In Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 19, Rabbi Aivu's students ask why a female animal is specified when all other offerings are male. He answers "This is analogous to the son of a maidservant who defecated in a king's palace. The king said: Let his mother come and wipe the excrement clean. So the Holy One of Blessing said: Let the heifer come and atone for the act of the calf." It is noteworthy that the root קהל (to gather, convene) is used both last week when the people gather around Aaron to demand that he make them a new god to lead them, and in our parashah when Moses convenes them to repeat and elaborate on HaShem's commandments regarding the *mishkan*. Beginning by reiterating the commandment to cease working on Shabbat along with the dire warnings against disobeying, and adding the explicit prohibition against kindling, Moses is setting the stage for something we will encounter six weeks from now in Parashah Kedoshim: "You shall be holy, because I, your God, am holy." (Leviticus 19) Significantly, both times, *kol edut b'ney Yisrael* (the entire congregation of the children of Israel) is being addressed. The *mishkan* is our miniature, human version of HaShem's Creation. To be holy as HaShem is holy means imitating HaShem to the best of our human ability, and that begins with honoring the *mitzvah* of Shabbat. If HaShem rested after six days of creation, so too, must we rest after six days of work. Shabbat is the worldly sign of our eternal covenant, and by observing Shabbat we are upholding our part of it, and showing that we appreciate this unique and priceless gift. The 39 categories of work that are prohibited on Shabbat parallel the various labors involved in creating the *mishkan* and maintaining its holiness. However, because Judaism is intrinsically life-affirming, we are commanded to transgress all Shabbat laws in order to save a life. Talmud Tractate Yoma 85b teaches that Shabbat is given to us, and we are not given to it, [to die on its account]. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that after the second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, we replaced sacred space with sacred time. We do have sacred spaces in our places of worship and in our homes, and we have our sacred books and objects, but it is not where, but rather, how we observe Shabbat that is important. Even though many of us do not keep Shabbat in strictly orthodox fashion, we all have the opportunity to make it special by not doing what we do during our six workdays. For one day a week we can really be human beings, disconnected from our everyday life to just be. In his book "Jewish With Feeling" Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi z"l teaches that we may do things we enjoy, but for which we have no time during our workweek, even if they are prohibited by strict law – like working in the garden or talking with loved ones who live far away – as long as we do them in the spirit of Shabbat. He says, "Shabbats are like periods inserted into an otherwise endless run-on sentence." How true, especially in this stressful time, when so many people are experiencing burnout. So carve out some holy time each week to enjoy a refreshing Shabbat rest.

Shabbat shalom!