

We have arrived at Leviticus, that book of complicated rules and regulations, many of which have lost their original relevance since the destruction of the second Temple in 70CE. 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 priestly clan, i.e., the Levites. The *mishkan* is ready for use, the priests have their special vestments, and now, HaShem instructs Moses on the intricacies of performing the sacrificial offerings, which he in turn, must impart to the people. It is challenging for us to even begin to fathom this long extinct world of animal and grain sacrifices, which includes creating some rather strange mixtures with the latter and a profusion of blood and entrails with the former. To our ancient ancestors, the *mishkan* was the link between the people and HaShem, with the priests serving as conduits. There is no adequate way to express the spiritual and emotional fullness of what the act of *korban*, usually translated as sacrifice or offering, represented in the ancient world. The word derives from the root קרב, which means to approach/to bring closer to, interior/innards, and battle/combat (as in the self-defense technique krav maga, which means contact combat). Although the Israelites rejected the pagan concept of offering the gods food in exchange for their benevolence, it still resonated in their sacrificial system. In the Torah, HaShem says “My bread, My food-gift, My sweet odor,” etc., and the prophet Ezekiel calls the altar HaShem’s “table.” No wonder our parashah contains 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.” Our ancient ancestors may have understood that the kidneys, liver, and visceral fat filter 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. Along with the heart, they are at 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 derives from the root כל, which forms words such as longing, vessel, totality, and universality. 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 most anatomically accurate 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*).” Feeding and appeasing our incorporeal, totally otherworldly God was simply the only way our ancient ancestors understood how to relate on a personal level. It is important to remember, however, that animal offerings were performed in the courtyard of the *mishkan*, and the incense and showbread were offered on altars in the anteroom. No sacrifices were offered in the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber containing the ark with its covering out of which were formed the *cherubim*. The *mishkan*, the symbol of our renewed covenant after the sin of the golden calf, strictly eliminated any possibility of idol worship. This is emphasized in our Haftarah reading, when Isaiah reiterates the futility of mortal beings making idols out of material things whose elements they did not produce (Isaiah 44:6-20). In the parashiot that discuss the *mishkan* it is obvious that the Israelites never believed that HaShem resided in tangible objects – HaShem was present in the empty spaces above the ark and in the cloud and fire that guided them. The cycle of prayers instituted after the destruction of the Temple is based on the daily sacrificial rituals, which is why we have morning, afternoon (called Mincha), and evening prayers. These prayers evoke the entire range of human emotions, and when we pray, we may catch a glimpse of the awe our ancient ancestors felt when they approached HaShem with their carefully chosen offerings. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi z”l pointed out that *adam ki yakriv mikem korban* (1:2) literally means, when one offers a sacrifice of you. In other words, we offer ourselves, through prayers, hospitality, financial contributions, along with the time, talents, and energy we invest to help others and participate in acts of *tikkun olam*, of healing the world.

Shabbat Shalom!