

Blood plays a prominent role in our Torah portion. It was an integral part of the sacrificial system, but ingesting it in any form is strictly prohibited. In order to shield the Israelites from the practices of their pagan neighbors, this prohibition specifically includes “the stranger who sojourns among you” (17:12). In the pagan world boundaries between the human and divine realms were fluid, and pagans not only used blood in their rituals, just as we did, they also ate it, precisely because of its ritualistic significance. In many cultures all over the world, consuming an animal’s blood or sitting around a basin of blood while eating was a means of receiving the vitality, courage, fertility, or protective power of an animal or a deity, i.e., to merge with the divine. In the pagan world power flows in all directions, and blood is one of the most powerful means of accessing it. However, in our strictly monotheistic system with its impenetrable boundary between Creator and creation, blood is not a portal; it is a one-way bridge leading from us to HaShem. Because life, and the blood that represents it, belong solely to HaShem, consuming blood would be both blasphemous and illogical. “For the soul of the flesh is in the blood, and I have therefore given it to you [to be placed] upon the altar, to atone for your souls. For it is the blood that atones for the soul.” (17.11) In the sacrificial rites of our ancestors the blood of the animal symbolically traversed the boundary between humanity and HaShem. Before each animal was slaughtered, the donor would lay his hands on its head in a symbolic act of aligning his *nefesh* (soul), which belongs to HaShem, with that of the animal. In other words, blood, the essence of life, was the divinely designated medium through which HaShem, the Creator and Arbiter of life, was called upon to act. On the eve of the Exodus, the Israelites were instructed to slaughter a lamb or a kid and scatter some of its blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses as a signal to HaShem to pass over them during the final plague, the killing of the firstborn. The investiture of priests was completed by daubing the blood of the sacrificial animal on their right ears, right thumbs, and right big toes, and sprinkling it on their vestments and around the altar. And, as we read in the first portion of our parashah, on Yom Kippur the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial bull and goat on the Ark in order to purge himself, his family, and the entire people from any impurities they had acquired through their transgressions. Someone who has recovered from the skin diseases called *tzara’at* may only reenter the sanctuary after the priest has performed the ritual that involves dipping the live bird into the blood of the slaughtered bird. And some of the blood of every animal that is slaughtered is to be daubed on the horns of the altar, and/or sprinkled around it. It is significant that every animal that the people slaughtered from their livestock was to be brought to the sanctuary so that the priests could dedicate its *nefesh* to HaShem. Failure to comply with this commandment was considered tantamount to bloodshed, for which the punishment was banishment (17:3-4). If a wild kosher animal was slaughtered, its blood was to be poured onto the ground and completely covered with soil, both to prevent temptation to imitate the pagans, and to show respect for the animal. From these laws it is easy to infer why someone who ate carrion or “*t’refah* (that which was torn)” was rendered impure, and had to wash both himself and his garments and remain in a state of impurity until evening (17:15-16). Blood quickly coagulates after death, making it impossible to purge it from the animal. Finally, 19:5-8 limits the consumption of peace offerings to the day of slaughter and the following day. After that, eating the leftovers is strictly prohibited. These were the most human-centered of all the offerings, with donor and priest sharing the edible meat, and only the blood and fat going to HaShem. For that reason, they were the most in danger of being treated as a private feast rather than a sacred act. Because this commandment immediately follows the prohibition against idolatry, it is clear that it is not about food safety, but rather, about maintaining that strict boundary between us and HaShem. Slaughtering an animal means that a life is taken, blood is spilled, a *nefesh* departs, and a human being approaches the threshold of divine power. That is why the laws of *kashrut* stipulate that animals be ritually slaughtered (*sechitah*) and the blood completely drained from the meat. The Noachide laws permit us to eat animals, but we may not claim access to the life-force by eating their blood. The underlying lesson in all of the laws and practices surrounding blood is that life is sacred. Sadly, modern supermarkets make it extremely difficult to connect with and appreciate the source of our nourishment. The meat departments offer a large assortment of animal parts with genteel, sanitized names like veal cutlet, brisket, roast, beefsteak, and drumsticks, along with a whole array of creatively packaged sausages and other industrially processed meats. But how many of us see in them the calf, the steer, or the chicken from which they came? Even the animals that have been slaughtered under the laws of *kashrut* or *halal* are usually cut into easily accessible pieces. Animals whose bodies have been packaged and sold to be cooked at home or served up on a restaurant plate are still HaShem’s creatures, deserving of our deep respect and gratitude. Although it is difficult for us to identify with the archaic sacrificial rites of our ancestors, we still can learn much from the Torah’s instructions, laws, and rituals surrounding the blood of the animals that we eat. Think about them the next time you shop for meat.

Shabbat shalom!