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Parshat HaShavua sheet

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Parshat Tzav / Parah

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BLOODSPORT

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Blood. At worst, it invokes ghastly images of death and war. At best, it represents life-saving transfusions. On any scale it is not appetizing. It is for that reason that it is difficult to comprehend the repeated warnings and admonitions that the Torah makes concerning the consumption of blood. Beginning this week, there are three warnings in the Torah concerning the prohibition of consuming blood. There is a specific verse that tells parents to admonish their children and discourage any thought they may have of eating or drinking blood.

Leviticus 22:26-27: You shall not consume blood... from fowl or animal. Any soul that consumes blood will be cut off from his people.

Leviticus 17:10-12: Any man of the House of Israel and of the proselyte who dwells among them, consume any blood - I shall concentrate My attention upon the soul consuming blood, and I will cut it off from its people.

Deuteronomy: 12:23: Only be strong as not to eat blood...

Rashi quotes the words of Rav Shimon Ben Azai: "if blood, which is so repulsive, needs such dire warnings surely one must take great precaution not to succumb to sins that are appealing." Rabbi Yehudah explains the repetitive admonitions in the context of history. During that era, many nations would actually indulge in blood-drinking ceremonies. Thus the Torah exhorts the Jewish nation on that matter. In any case, it is quite apparent that both Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Yehudah were bothered by repeated warnings, which should be unnecessary. It is difficult to comprehend why the Torah spends more energy warning, admonishing, and exhorting the Jews against blood-consumption than against most other prohibitions that are much more alluring.

Also, why is this one of only two prohibitions that our sages interpreted an extra verse, as "a warning for parents to admonish their children." Why does this prohibition surpass the norm of parental supervision that is required by any other Mitzvah?

An old Jewish story has a devoutly religious woman running into a Chasidic Rebbe as she was crying uncontrollably. "Rebbe," she cried, "it's my son. He went absolutely meshuga. He started acting totally insane. Even you won't be able to help him. He needs a psychiatrist!" "What's the matter?" asked the Rebbe. "The matter?" She cried. "He's crazy! He's acting like a gentile! He dances with gentile women and began dining on pig!" The Rebbe looked to the poor woman as he tried to put her problems in perspective. "If he would dance with pigs and dine on women, I would say that he is crazy. But the way you describe him he is not crazy at all. I'd just say that he is becoming a very lascivious young man. And I can deal with that."

On a homiletic note, perhaps, we can explain the Torah's passionate admonitions about blood. The Torah understood the test of time. Acts that are considered vile and obscene by today's standard may be accepted as the norm tomorrow. Societies change and attitudes change with them. The ten greatest problems of the 1950's public school class may be considered decent, if not meritorious, behavior today. The Torah understood that society changes. Therefore it admonishes us on the lowest form of behavior with the same intensity as if it would be the normal custom. And it tells us to pass these specific admonitions to our children. We cannot dismiss the warnings by thinking, "drinking blood is bizarre behavior. Why should my children need to worry about it?" The Torah says, even if something may be base and bizarre to our generation, if it's Torah it must be told to our children. It is impossible to know what the next generation will consider repulsive and what it may consider fashionable. Today's revulsion may be tomorrow's bloodsport. Times change and people change, but Torah remains eternal.

The Symbolism of the Sacrifices

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

In this week's Portion, the Torah introduces us to two of the most important kinds of offerings: The *Olah* (elevation) offering and the *Shelamim* (peace) offering. The *Olah* is entirely burnt on the altar, all of it going up to *Shamayim*, (Heaven) whereas the *Shelamim* is only partially burnt, the rest being shared by the animal's owner, his family and the *Kohen* (Priest).

Rav Uziel Milevsky discusses the symbolism of these two offerings. He begins by quoting the Torah commentary, Meshech Chochma who brings a dispute between the two great Rabbinic leaders, Hillel and Shammai with regard to the *Olah* and *Shelamim* offerings. When a person comes to the Temple on the Three Foot Festivals he must bring a *Chagigah* offering, which is from the *Shelamim* category, and the *Re'iyah* offering, which is in the *Olah* category. These particular sacrifices had no upper limit to their value, however they did have a minimum value. According to Shammai, the *Olah*, which was completely offered to God, had to be worth at least two silver coins, whilst the *Shelamim* only had to be one silver coin. Hillel held the opposite - the *Shelamim*'s minimum was two silver coins, whilst that of the *Olah* was one. For some reason Shammai ascribed greater value to the *Olah* whilst Hillel saw the *Shelamim* as being of greater worth.

The Meshech Chochma says that this dispute is indicative of a fundamental difference in outlook between these two schools of thought. The source of this difference is another disagreement between Shammai and Hillel with regard to the creation of the world. The Yalkut Shimoni notes a contradiction between two verses which suggest the order in which the heavens and earth were created: The opening verse of Bereishit states that first, God created the heavens and then the earth. However, the second chapter implies that the earth was created before the heavens. Shammai argued that the heavens were created first, whilst Hillel held that the earth came first. Rav Milevsky, based on the Meshech Chochma, explains that they are arguing as to which is most central in God's creation; heaven or earth. Shammai held that the world remains 'heaven-centric', this means that the cardinal principles guiding it are values that belong in the higher spheres, namely, Torah and *Emet* (truth). Hillel, in contrast believed that the world is 'earth-centric'. This means that its cardinal principles are based on human beings and the imperfections of this world. In order to understand the practical applications of Hillel and Shammai's ideologies and how they manifest themselves in our lives it is instructive to analyze a number of Rabbinic sources that illustrate other disagreements between Shammai and Hillel in both areas of law and *hashkafa* (outlook). We can then explain why Shammai ascribed greater value to the *Olah*, whilst Hillel gave more value to the *Shelamim*.

The Gemara in Sanhedrin discusses a significant difference between Moses and his brother Aaron, with regard to justice. When a legal dispute was brought to court, Aaron's view was that the judge should aim for compromise and try to engender a relationship of peace and harmony between the litigants, even if one party may, on occasion be less deserving than the other. Nonetheless, maintaining peace was a higher priority to Aaron than exacting pure justice. Moses, in contrast, believed that the judge should aim for the complete truth, handing down his verdict in accordance with that truth, regardless of the feelings of the litigants. The Meshech Chochma observes that Hillel relates to Aaron, as is demonstrated in Pirkei Avot, where Hillel directs us to be among the disciples of Aaron in terms of bringing peace between our fellow man. (The implication is that Hillel is telling us to be more like Aaron than Moshe. This is not because there is anything lacking in Moses' approach rather that his level is so high that it is of pure truth. On such a level there is no room for compromising because of people's feelings - the truth is the highest value. Shammai's approach is more in line with Moses's approach: He maintains that whilst we cannot attain Moses' exalted level, nonetheless, we must strive to attain whatever truth we can. In this way, Shammai focuses on heaven more than earth - in heaven, where there is no room for compromise of truth, the truth is unadulterated.

This difference in approach manifests itself in a disagreement with regard to truth and falsehood. The Gemara in Ketubot discusses the case of a just married couple; and the bride is not particularly worthy of praise - Hillel and Shammai argue about what one should say to the groom. Shammai says that you must say the truth as it is, regardless of hurting the feelings of the groom. Hillel argues that this will cause discomfort therefore one should praise her in a vague fashion. Shammai argues that Hillel's approach would constitute a transgression of the prohibition to lie, whilst Hillel holds that in such cases, maintaining peace and harmony between a bride and groom overrides the prohibition not to lie, therefore in such a case the prohibition doesn't apply at all. Hillel's approach is that it is not truthful to cause pain and dissension amongst people. This dispute provides an illuminating example of the ramifications of Hillel and Shammai's divergent world views. Shammai adheres to a strict adherence to truth, whereas Hillel compromises the value of truth with that of peace.

With this understanding of the approaches of Shammai and Hillel we can now understand the underlying reason for their dispute as to which *korban* should be of greater minimum value - the *Olah* or the *Shelamim*. The *Olah*, burnt on the altar entirely for G-d, is a 'heaven-offering' - for Shammai, the main focus is man's service of God and adherence to pure truth. For Hillel, however, the main focus is peace therefore he attributed greater value to the *Shelamim*, which was shared by the animal's owner, his family, and the Priest, thus enhancing peace and harmony amongst people.

We have analyzed the fundamental differences between Hillel and Shammai and how they reflect their conflicting rulings with regard to the *Olah* and *Shelamim*. We have seen that Hillel's view emphasizes compromise in addition to truth, whilst Shammai's focuses on pure adherence to truth. The Gemara in Eruvin states that after three years of debate between the two schools a voice announced, "The words are both words of the Living God, but the law is like Beit Hillel." This means that both views are correct, but they have different approaches. In this world the most fitting approach is that of like Beit Hillel because in this world the value of peace can sometimes appear to conflict with that of truth, and for the level of most people, the outlook of Beit Hillel is the most appropriate. One application of this discussion is that a person may mistakenly feel that it is a quality *always* to strictly adhere to the truth, even when it causes pain to others or can lead to discord. We learn from the fact that we follow Beit Hillel in this world, that there are times when it is impossible to maintain pure truth without causing pain to others. It is highly recommended for each person to learn the laws relating to when one may and may not alter the truth for the sake of peace.

Racing Up the Ramp

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

The beginning of Parshat Tzav describes how every morning in the Temple in Jerusalem, one of the Kohanim would remove the ashes that had built up overnight on the altar.

The Talmud explains that the Kohanim would literally fight for the opportunity to remove the morning ashes. They'd even conduct a foot race up the ramp of the altar to see who'd get to the ashes first!

This illustrates the great desire of the Kohanim to serve God - they were literally fighting to clean up the place! (Now if I could only convince my kids to clean up their room...)

The Talmud goes on to describe how one time, two of the Kohanim were racing up the ramp, when one of them pushed the other, causing him to fall and break his leg. Such incidents became frequent, forcing the court to institute a more peaceful lottery system to decide which Kohen would remove the morning ashes.

On one hand, the Kohanim's enthusiasm is surely commendable. But on the other hand, the way that enthusiasm sometimes expressed itself was a disgrace to God's Holy Temple.

There is a principle in Judaism called *Derech Eretz Kadma L'Torah* - meaning that "kind behavior comes before the Torah." It is incompatible for someone to be rude to others, while claiming to be a devoted servant of God.

So the next time someone cuts you off in traffic, remember: Each human being is created in the image of God, and to respect each other is one of the greatest ways we can show respect for God.

Take Out the Garbage

By Rabbi Ron Jawary

One of the misconceptions people have about Judaism is the Jewish view of guilt. Interestingly, if the guilt motivates us to change and improve, it can play a crucial role in our lives and in our relationship with God. What the Torah does not want is for us to allow the guilt to pull us down or for us to use it as an excuse for not changing.

The Talmud teaches us that we should never view ourselves as "bad". Our self-image should be positive as it is impossible to relate to God if we do not have a sense of self-worth. Interestingly, the first act the priests did at the start of their day in the Temple was to dispose of yesterday's garbage (Lev 6:3). In fact, this was such a popular mitzvah that they actually fought with each other for the privilege. This is because they understood the need to start each day anew with a positive outlook on themselves and their opportunities. So the first action is to discard yesterday's garbage. Only then could they fulfill the role the Almighty had in store for them.

That is one of the reasons a Jew washes his hands first thing in the morning; he should try to wash away the baggage of the day before. We might have excuses for what we are right now, but we should not use those excuses for what we remain. With that realization, we can then say the morning prayer that "the soul given to me by the Almighty is pure".

“A permanent fire shall remain aflame on the Altar; it shall not be extinguished” (6:6)

Rashi comments that one who extinguishes the fire on the altar transgresses two negative commandments, as the prohibition is mentioned twice in this section. Rav Kook says that if the physical fire on the altar cannot be extinguished, we certainly cannot allow the spiritual fire that resides in every Jew to be put out. It is forbidden to do anything that will weaken the spark that is in our soul. Our spiritual fire must be burning constantly, at all times, just like the fire on the altar.

“Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying: This is the law of the sin-offering; in the place where the burnt-offering is slaughtered shall the sin-offering be slaughtered, before Hashem - it is most holy” (6:18)

The Talmud Yerushalmi asks: Why is the korban olah (burnt offering) slaughtered in the same place as the korban chatas (sin offering)? The answer is that we try to protect the identity of sinners. We do not want their wrongdoing known to the public, so we slaughter their sacrifices in a location which could also mean that they are voluntarily bringing a sacrifice. By doing this, we protect them from embarrassment. The Gemara in Sotah 32b asks why was a silent Shemone Esrei instituted. The answer given is that sinners should not be embarrassed to confess their sins during their prayer. We do not want people to be embarrassed to express themselves freely before Hashem. The Gemara continues that we see this idea expressed in the fact that the same location is assigned for the slaughtering of both the olah and chatas. The lesson from this is that the Torah is concerned for the dignity of every single person, even a person who sinned, and is intent on not allowing him to be embarrassed. Similarly, there is a mitzva to rebuke a wrongdoer but this should not be done in public. Instead, the rebuke should be delivered in private so that nobody else is aware that he has done something wrong. The posuk concludes that this idea is "kodesh kodashim," most holy. The dignity of people is very important to Hashem and it should be important to us too.

“And if any of the flesh of his peace offering is to be eaten on the third day, it shall not be accepted; it shall not count for the one who offers it; it shall be rejected, and the person who eats of it shall bear his sin” (7:18)

The Torah prohibits the consumption of Pigul, a korban which the officiating kohen had planned to eat at a date later than the limited time window in which the korban is permitted to be eaten. A mere thought of the kohen could interfere with the acceptability of a korban. The Shulchan Aruch says that just as inappropriate intent can invalidate a korban, unrelated thoughts can negatively impact our prayers, which are today's substitute for a korban. If a person is thinking about his business or other mundane matters while praying, he is not doing the job that he is meant to be doing in that moment. Shaking one's body is not the focus of prayer. One must stir up his mind and make sure that his thoughts are engaged and thinking about the words that are emanating from his mouth. There are many other similarities between how korbanos were offered and how we conduct ourselves during Shemone Esrei, the main portion of our prayers. We stand when we pray just as kohanim had to stand when performing their service. A person should have special clothing designated for prayer just as the kohanim wore special garments in the Bais HaMikdash. We stand with our feet together, according to the Tur, because the kohanim walked slowly and respectfully when moving around the Bais HaMikdash, as if their feet were always together. When one prays, he should ideally stand right in front of a wall just as a kohen could not have anything interfering between his feet and the floor or between his hand and the vessels that he held during the service.

“And Aharon and his sons did all the things that Hashem commanded through Moshe” (8:36)

The parsha concludes with the statement that Aharon and his sons performed every part of the dedication of the Mishkan just as Moshe had told them. Rashi comments that the purpose of this posuk is to praise them for not deviating to the left or right of the instructions that Moshe had relayed from Hashem. A person should never feel that he knows better than Hashem. Even when times change, Hashem's word does not. Although we may have our own ideas that we think will enhance what Hashem has asked of us, we should follow the example of Aharon and his sons and do exactly what Hashem has commanded, nothing more and nothing less. This idea is counter-cultural today in a society which says that a person need not follow the dictates of anyone other than himself, but we must remain strong in our commitment to Hashem.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Gratitude Unlimited

By Rabbi Naftali Reich

What do released prisoners, recovering patients, seafarers and caravan travelers all have in common? These people have all been in perilous situations, their very lives endangered, and having come through safely, they are required to express their gratitude to Hashem by bringing a thanksgiving sacrifice to the Temple in Jerusalem. The procedure for the thanksgiving offering, the *korban todah*, is described in this week's portion.

The Midrash provides us with a rather surprising bit of information about the thanksgiving offering. In the End of Days, when the Presence of the Creator will fill the world with holiness and people will live in eternal bliss and serenity, all sacrifices will be discontinued – except for the thanksgiving sacrifice. This immediately leads us to ask: How can this be? If, as the prophets repeatedly assure us, people will be safe and secure, protected from all physical harm and danger, from sickness and imprisonment, how will it be possible for a thanksgiving sacrifice to be brought? The conditions that necessitate such an offering will simply not exist!

Let us think for a moment about a phrase most polite people use very often and very casually. What exactly do we mean when we say “thank you” to someone who has done us a good turn? What have we actually given him by thanking him? And why is he gratified? The answers lie in a deeper understanding of gratitude and thanksgiving. In essence, an expression of gratitude is an acknowledgment. By saying “thank you,” we declare that we recognize what the other person has done for us, that we value it and that we do not take him for granted. This is all he needs in return for what he has done – recognition, no more, no less. But a sincere expression of gratitude can only result from a genuine appreciation of the value of what we have received. Without this appreciation, the words “thank you” are but an empty, meaningless formality.

If this holds true in our relationships with other human beings, how much more so in our relationship with our Creator. We are endlessly beholden to Him for all the good He does for us, and as a result, we should be endlessly grateful. Unfortunately, however, we live in a benighted world of illusions and delusions, and we often fail to recognize the innumerable gifts and bounty that flow to us from Hashem's generous hand. And even when we pay lip service to it, how deeply do we actually feel it? How real is it to us? The only things we face with stark reality are life-threatening situations. In the face of danger, our affectations and pretensions quickly dissipate, and we realize how dependent we are on our Creator for our safety. As the old adage goes, “There are no atheists in a foxhole.” It is only when we are ultimately delivered from danger that we are capable of expressing genuine gratitude.

In the End of Days, however, the Presence of the Creator will illuminate the entire world and dispel all the foolish delusions which so becloud our vision and befuddle our minds. Then we will see Hashem's hand with perfect clarity, and our acknowledgments of His guidance and benevolence will carry the ring of true conviction. At that point, we will no longer have to face life-threatening situation to inspire genuine gratitude in our hearts. We will thank Him endlessly for every minute detail of our lives and bring thanksgiving sacrifices to give expression to the transcendent feelings of gratitude that will permeate our souls.

A great sage once ordered a cup of coffee in an elegant restaurant. When the bill came, he saw he had been charged an exorbitant sum. “So much for a cup of coffee?” he asked the waiter. “Oh no, sir,” the waiter replied. “The coffee cost only a few cents. But the paintings and tapestries on the walls, the crystal chandeliers, the Persian carpets, the luxurious gardens, the marble fountain, these cost a lot of money, and every patron must pay his share.” “Aha!” said the sage. “You have taught me an important lesson. When I recite a blessing over a glass of water, I must thank the Creator for the ground on which I stand, the air I breathe, the blue sky over my head, the beauty and scent of the flowers, the twittering of birds, the company of other people. Thank you.”

In our own lives, we all too often take for granted all the blessings we enjoy, and we forget to express our gratitude to our Creator, the Source of all this bounty. Indeed, when we experience hardship, we are inclined to confront Hashem, saying, Oh, why do we deserve this? But when we experience good fortune, are we as inclined to thank Him? Common courtesy, of course, requires that we acknowledge Hashem's bounty, but if we offer words of gratitude to Hashem in all situations, we will also discover a deeper dimension to our appreciation and enjoyment of the blessings of life.

This week, in addition to the regular Parsha, we read the section known as Parah. The additional sections of Shekalim, Zachor, Parah, and Chodesh are read prior to Pesach for both commemorative and practical reasons. Shekalim, the first additional section, dealt with the 1/2 Shekel and the public sacrifices. The reading of the second section, Zachor, facilitated our fulfillment of the Mitzvah to remember the evil of Amalek. The two sections of Parah and Chodesh are directed toward our preparations for Pesach.

For Parshas Parah, we read the section found in the beginning of Chukas known as Parah. It discusses the necessary steps that had to be followed for the removal of impurity caused by contact with a dead body. The process involved a seven day period during which the impure - Tameh person underwent a process involving the ashes of the Red Heifer. The process was facilitated by a Kohain, and had to take place in Yerushalayim.

Being Tameh restricted a person from entering the Temple compound and / or participating in certain select activities. Although the restrictions are less applicable today because we do not have the Bais Hamikdash; nevertheless, it is incumbent upon all people, male and female, to keep these laws to the degree that they do apply.

In the time of the Bais Hamikdash it was required of every male adult to visit the Bais Hamikdash and offer a sacrifice a minimum of three times a year: Pesach, Shevout, and Succoth. However, it was even more important to be there on Erev Pesach to sacrifice the Korban Pesach - Pascal Lamb. Anyone Tameh from contact with a dead body had to undergo the process of the Parah Adumah - the Red Heifer, to remove the Tumah and be permitted to bring his Pascal Lamb to the Bais Hamikdash.

The Talmud tells us that the furthest point in Israel to Yerushalayim was a two weeks travel. If so, a Tameh person living two weeks travel time away from Yerushalayim required a minimum of three weeks to travel to Yerushalayim and go through the one week process of the Red Heifer enabling him to bring the Korban Pesach. Therefore, Chazal ordained the reading of Parah on the week before the reading of Chodesh (approx. 3 to 4 weeks before Pesach) as a public reminder to those who are Tameh that they must immediately arrange to get to Yerushalayim so that they can purify themselves in time to bring the Korban Pesach.

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

What the Red Heifer Teaches Us

By Rabbi Yitzi Hurwitz

This week in Parshat Parah we are taught the law of the Red Heifer. If someone comes in contact with a dead body, they have to be purified by being sprinkled with water mixed with the ashes of the Red Heifer. Regarding this mitzvah, the Torah says, *Zot chukat haTorah* ("This is the decree of the Torah"), which tell us that there is something about this mitzvah that is central to Torah and its observance.

This mitzvah is a *chok*, a commandment with a rational beyond human comprehension, done just because it is G-d's will. What then, are some of the lessons that we can take from this mitzvah?

The first is that we must be alive. Our attitude, outlook and focus must be positive and forward-thinking. Some see Torah as a bunch of rules telling them what they can't do. To them, it becomes a miserable ball and chain they lug around. Some even take pride in this form of misery: "Look at how much I suffer for G-d!"

This is not living. The Torah wants us to purify ourselves from even contact with death. To live with Torah is to see the positive purpose and mission that G-d has given us. Instead of a ball and chain, Torah becomes wings with which to soar. Mitzvahs become a joy.

Another thing we can learn from the Red Heifer is that its reason is beyond human comprehension. We only do it because it is G-d's will. The same could be true about all the mitzvahs. Even the ones we do understand, we can and should do for a higher purpose because it is G-d's will. This makes our seemingly mundane actions meaningful, too.

Being unable to do anything for myself, I see more than ever how simple actions can be meaningful and G-dly. Just others sitting nearby, keeping me company, is so precious to me.

This perhaps is the most important lesson of all. It is easy to see prayer, Torah study, *tefillin*, Shabbat candles, etc., as sacred. Yet to G-d, our most mundane acts can be holy. This is especially true when we show kindness to one another, the most G-dly act of all.