

VAYIKRA

HUMILITY

The parsha begins with the word vayikra. If you look closely, you will notice that the last letter of this word, the aleph, is smaller than the rest of the letters. Our sages teach us that this is because Moshe was the humblest of all men. He knew God gave him everything that he had, and he was thankful for the many gifts. He did not boast it to others' faces, yet he did not hide his capabilities. He thanked God, and used it all to do what he had to do—lead the Jewish people. Someone who is humble recognizes his talents yet knows that it is all from God.

REPENTANCE

The parsha discusses the many different types of korbanot, sacrifices brought in the times of the Temple. Many of these offerings were brought on the altar to atone for all different kinds of sins. This teaches us a different lesson that is powerful and comforting. We are humans, and humans are not perfect. Even when we mess up and do something against God's will, we still have another chance. It's not like playing arcades, where the moment we make a bad move, it's game over. It's about repenting in the right way: feeling regret, thinking of practical ways to avoid the mess-up in the future. It's never too late; we should always be able to find our way home.

SACRIFICING OURSELVES

We learn from this parsha the many ways to give sacrificial offerings, mainly through animals. However, we can give sacrifices in other ways, too. We can sacrifice our time, our desires, or our talents. We can sacrifice for ourselves, for the benefit of others and for us to come closer to God. What are ways we can sacrifice ourselves?

TZAV

LOVING GOD

The Sanctuary where the Jews served God was with them in the desert, and then later on in Jerusalem. Each Jew also has a small sanctuary inside of him or her. God says that He will personally dwell in the heart of every Jew. There was always a fire burning; so too, every Jew needs to have a fiery love for God. As long as we keep that fire burning in our hearts, God is dwelling inside us. If He is always with us, there is no reason to fear anything at all.

THE DIFFICULTY IN DISCIPLINE

Anything that touches something impure will become impure itself. This shows us just how much we are affected by our surroundings. We have to be careful with the places we go and the situations we place ourselves in. On the other hand, this also shows us the power that we have. We can affect our surroundings for the better. It is in our hands to influence friends, neighbors and family in a positive way. Have you influenced or been influenced by others?

DIFFERING ROLES

This parsha gives the laws of Korbanot (sacrifices). The High Priest plays a big role during this time. However, it is not only the Kohanim! The community and the individual plays certain roles as well. In our lives, we have many roles. As an individual, as a family member, as a friend, as a community member, as a student, etc. In each situation, we must act differently. Have you ever stopped to think about what it takes to succeed in your different roles?

SHEMINI

EATING AND SELF-CARE

We are told very specifically that we can not eat whatever we want whenever we want. This teaches us that food and eating are sacred matters. The food we choose is important to our physical and spiritual health.

THINKING THINGS THROUGH

The parsha lists the signs for a kosher animal; it has to have split hooves and has to chew its cud. Why is chewing its cud a sign of kashrut? When you “chew a thought over,” it means that you think before you act. We are impulsive. A sign of maturity is when one can pause before saying or doing anything, and ask oneself if this plan is the most appropriate one. Slow down and chew it over before you act.

GIVING CONDOLENCES

After Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu, passed away, God addressed Aaron directly. He usually spoke to Aaron through Moshe; it was rare for Aaron to merit a private prophecy. This was actually a divine condolence visit. God could have sent a message of condolence through Moses, but He came Himself to teach us that during times of mourning we must exhibit the greatest degree of compassion and sensitivity. What are some other traits of God that we try to emulate?

TAZRIA/METZORA

ATTITUDE

This parsha is about leprosy. Leprosy is a spiritual illness– it is an external growth that signifies what is amiss inside. Nowadays, people don’t suffer from this illness, nor do people in our culture believe that our appearances are afflicted when we suffer from spiritual illness. But perhaps attitude, as opposed to our appearance, is the external signifier of what’s happening inside. Reflecting on our approach to life and our daily attitude is one way to begin exploring the state of our spiritual health.

THE ABILITY TO PERFECT

God does everything perfect; however, it seems like a lot of things that God made are far from perfect. If He would handle everything to a state of complete perfection, then the only role we would have would be to enjoy. We are capable of more than that. God invites us to be partners in creation; He gives us raw materials and we finish the job. What can we do to make this world a more perfect place?

MUNDANE HOLINESS

These two parshiyot go into great detail about seemingly mundane activities. This Torah is teaching us that these activities can be elevated to holiness. Whether its eating, sleeping, or interpersonal relations, we can transform them all into holy activities. Everything has the ability to be holy, so long as we put it in a certain framework and have a certain mindset.

ACHAREI MOT/KEDOSHIM

FOOD CHOICES

There are many rules about the food we eat; the types of foods we eat, how we prepare those foods, and even when we eat them. This week's parsha connects food to the idea of holiness. There are lots of ways we can change the way we make our decisions around food, but most important is that we raise our awareness about what we consume. Do you "eat to live" or "live to eat"?

HOLINESS IN OUR PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

There is a law against making gashes in one's flesh and tattooing oneself. We are commanded to be holy, and one of the ways to become so is through treating the body sacredly. It is difficult in our society to have a sense of respect and acceptance for our own bodies with all their inherent differences. People are often held to impossible standards when it comes to body weight, leading to eating disorders. Bodily sanctity can be nurtured. We should try to inspire others who struggle with their body image that they are acceptable, even holy, just as they are.

SINCERITY

We are told to leave the corners of our fields unharvested, and we cannot go back to collect any produce that we dropped along the way. We leave this produce in our fields for those less fortunate. There is no minimum size field for leaving this gleanings. The assumption is that any landowner can always spare a little. This lesson from the Torah helps us look at what we have and see the corners we could leave unharvested, whatever it may be. Where do you have a surplus in your life?

EMOR

KINDNESS TO ANIMALS

Gives the laws about properly treating animals. The very fact that these laws exist says a lot about Judaism's appreciation of the role of animals in our lives. Humans and animals both have emotions. The Torah is teaching us to be sensitive to the animals we encounter in our lives. Being kind to animals can make us better humans. The way we treat the world around us reflects on us, and animals are part of that world.

HOLIDAY SPIRIT

This parsha talks about Jewish holidays. We are called upon to celebrate these holidays joyously and always instructed to make sure we are sharing the joy with others – our families as well as guests we can bring into our home. We have so many great gifts, and we should enjoy them fully; however our own enjoyment of the world is incomplete if we cannot share it with others. Make the effort to have an open home and bring others into your world.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

The kohen has to maintain a special level of purity, and may not tend to the body of someone who has passed away. However, the Torah points out that when it comes to family, the kohen can and must be of help. This teaches us that families should always stay together: in hard times, happy times, and every day of our lives! How does your family help you? How can you help your family?

BEHAR/BECHUKOTAI

FALSE IMPRESSIONS

This parsha tells us that we should not “misrepresent” ourselves and create an impression that is false. There are many ways to create a false impression, sometimes through commission and sometimes through omission. This is a very demanding standard when it comes to honesty. Do you ever allow others to believe something about you that isn’t true?

SHARING THE WEALTH

This parsha, we learn about tithing. Tithing is a sensible way to give to those who don’t have enough. It’s important to develop a life-long habit of giving. What do you think our responsibilities are to those who have less than we do? How can you give? How does it make you feel when you help out someone else?

RULES AND REGULATIONS

All Israelites are instructed to follow rules for the betterment of themselves and society. We have all sorts of rules in our lives; some rules make sense and are easy to follow. Others are more difficult to obey. Ultimately, we navigate our way through many decisions each day. No matter what our choices are, it is important to think about why we are making them. Do you think about the consequences of breaking a rule?

