

Shabbat Parashat VaYikra
Mark Your Words

This week, we begin the reading of the third book of the Torah: *Sefer VaYikra*/The Book of Leviticus. As its Greek name implies, it contains the detailed laws concerning the Levite service in the *Mishkan*/Desert Tabernacle, which would serve as the foundation for the laws of their later service in the two Holy Temples in Jerusalem. On the surface, the content of this book is dry, detailed, complex, and difficult to connect to a modern Jewish life in the modern world. However, one of the many over-arching themes to this material is being diligent to maintain spiritual connectedness to and readiness for God. This is a theme that is deeply meaningful in a world in which it is often difficult to find spirituality and easy to slip into behaviors that push us further away from our spiritual pursuits. There is a wealth of material to provide us with guidance in this week's Torah reading. However, I will focus on only one in this week's column.

In this week's *parasha*, we are taught about a particular sin/transgression that causes an individual to become *tamei*/ritually unclean: the utterance of an oath – for good or for bad. The cleansing process for such violations of the law includes bringing a sin offering to the Temple. Keep in mind that this was no small requirement, being that the price of an animal could be very costly to the average citizen. As we can see from this particular very early Torah law, Jewish tradition has taken one's words very seriously. In fact, two of the *aseret ha'd'varim* (the Ten Commandments) are prohibitions involving speech: not taking God's name in vain and not speaking false testimony. The Rabbis pick up on this level of gravity with regard to one's words through the Mishna, Talmud, and beyond in their discussions of the laws of oaths, testimony, and who is eligible to serve as witnesses. *LaShon ha'ra* (evil speech) and *r'khalut* (gossip) are treated very harshly by the authorities as well, to the point where they are seen as causes for some of the calamitous events in Jewish history. Therefore, what emerges from one of the many messages in this week's *parasha*, and the entire corpus of Jewish law, is that what we say can cause individuals to become unclean. When we do not take care with our words: speaking behind the backs of others, cavalierly making promises or oaths, falsifying information, it has an affect on who we are, most notably our reputations, and our spiritual connectedness to God and the community.

Our tradition's wisdom has been aware for centuries that words are empty if they do not lead to action and that they are powerful in terms of their impact on others. In our own society and community, we have seen just how tragic the spread and evil speech, even (or perhaps particularly) by means of digital media, can be. It is so easy to give into the urge to gossip about others, but what is the real benefit? It is worth pausing to consider before we send that text or make that comment. Getting back to the specifics of this week's *parasha*, how many times have we spoken or heard promises that were never fulfilled, either in our personal relationships or on a larger scale? Pretty frequently, I could imagine. Judaism, therefore, demands of us that we act, not talk, as it is said "say little, do much." May we all take this advice to heart as we show care and are guarded with our words, making our intentions known through actions that come from the heart instead of words so easily spoken.

Shabbat Shalom.