

## Torah Thoughts Vayikra

5778:

We begin a new book in the Torah this week, Vayikra/Leviticus. As the commentary in our humash points out, the varied topics of the book of Vayikra – sacrifice in the Tabernacle, kashrut, priestly duties – are grouped together here because they share a common theme, holiness.

We have a conceptual problem with the idea of holiness: We don't know what it means. Or, rather, we use it all the time, despite the fact that we rarely think about its implications. 'Holiness' is the English rendering of the Hebrew *kedushah*, which has a very specific meaning. Something which is *kadosh* is distinct, set apart. Shabbat is distinct from the other days of the week; the dietary laws set us apart from other people; God is as distinctive and apart from everything else as we can imagine.

Understanding holiness as distinctiveness illuminates the entire religious program that the Torah sets out for us. The purpose of doing things differently from other people, or of understanding similar acts in distinctive ways, is to create a people apart from others. We need not physically remove ourselves from society, but by engaging in distinctive rituals and behaving in ways that show a distinct sense of God's presence, we mark ourselves off as distinct. Not better than others, not more enlightened, but given special responsibilities that are not incumbent on non-Jews.

Being a Jew means to be different. It is the ultimate expression of non-conformity. By living a life set apart from what others do and believe, we cultivate a sense of holiness. By engaging in special acts, and by endowing regular acts with special significance, we elevate the everyday into the realm of the holy. Recognizing what is special, and consciously making things special, we create holiness.