

Shabbat Shalom During COVID-19
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My favorite childhood memories include bonfires. When I was a child, my mom's family used to gather at a wooden A-Frame home (so named because it looked like a letter A) every summer on Martha's Vineyard. It was camping and primitive, and we loved it. Every night that weather permitted, we lit a bonfire. My uncles and mom would lead us in folk songs and sea chanties. Around the fire, we would discuss our dreams and hopes and offer blessings to each other before it was time for us to go to sleep.

In our Torah portion this week, the first portion from the Book of Leviticus, called *Vayikra*, fire plays an important role in the lives of the Children of Israel. The fire, though, is not used for fun gatherings but for makings sacred sacrifices to God. In *Vayikra*, we are taught about five different kinds of offerings made to God. The name of the book and portion refer to the first verse when God called out to Moses. As it states:

The Eternal One called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying:
"Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When any of you presents an offering of cattle to the Eternal: You shall choose your offering from the herd or from the flock."
(Leviticus 1:1-2)

This first offering is called an *olah* or "burnt offering." It was offered voluntarily and held a high degree of sanctity. The entire animal, except for its hide was burned. The other four offerings discussed are:

- *minchah* or "meal offering"
- *zevach sh'lamim* or "sacrifice of well-being"
- *chatat* or "sin offering"
- *asham* or "penalty offering"¹

Each offering had a different purpose. Each offering was given to the priests to sacrifice/offer to God out of intention and sanctity. Each offering was sacrificed to God with holy fire.

In our modern world, prayers replace physical offerings that were brought to God at the Holy Tabernacle. In the past few weeks, many of our prayers are prayers of healing. We call out to God to end the plague of COVID-19. And, like the Israelites of our ancestors, many community members have made offerings and joined in partnership with God. From our medical personnel to the first responders with healing hands and hearts and to educators trying to provide normalcy to our children in this new reality to neighbors looking for a means to support each other. All are making offerings to God.

Hopefully, soon, the time of social distancing will come to an end, and we will be able to return to in-person Shabbat services and other social gathers. Until then, let us think of the fire of the Shabbat candles that we will light tonight. May those flames bring blessings of healing to all humanity in our world. May we soon be able to gather for bonfires and candle lighting and be able to create warm memories of beautiful times together.

¹ <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/vayikra>