

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Shmini/Shabbat Parah
March 26 2022 *** 23 Adar II, 5782

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Shemini in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2875/jewish/Shemini-in-a-Nutshell.htm

On the eighth day, following the seven days of their inauguration, Aaron and his sons begin to officiate as kohanim (priests); a fire issues forth from G-d to consume the offerings on the altar, and the divine presence comes to dwell in the Sanctuary.

Aaron's two elder sons, Nadav and Avihu, offer a "strange fire before G-d, which He commanded them not" and die before G-d. Aaron is silent in face of his tragedy. Moses and Aaron subsequently disagree as to a point of law regarding the offerings, but Moses concedes to Aaron that Aaron is in the right.

G-d commands the kosher laws, identifying the animal species permissible and forbidden for consumption. Land animals may be eaten only if they have split hooves and also chew their cud; fish must have fins and scales; a list of non-kosher birds is given, and a list of kosher insects (four types of locusts).

Also in Shemini are some of the laws of ritual purity, including the purifying power of the mikvah (a pool of water meeting specified qualifications) and the wellspring. Thus the people of Israel are enjoined to "differentiate between the impure and the pure."

Parah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/73199/jewish/Parah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

In preparation for the upcoming festival of Passover, when every Jew had to be in a state of ritual purity, the section of Parah (Numbers 19) is added to the weekly reading this week. Parah relates the laws of the Red Heifer with which a person contaminated by contact with a dead body was purified.

Shabbat Parah Haftarah in a Nutshell: Ezekiel 36:16 - 36

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/655981/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's special *haftarah* mentions the "purifying waters" that G-d will sprinkle

upon us with the coming of Moshiach. This follows the theme of this week's additional Torah reading — the purifying qualities of the "Red Heifer." The prophet Ezekiel transmits G-d's message: The Israelites have defiled the Holy Land with their idol-worship and immoral ways. As a result, they will be sent into exile. "And they came to the nations where they came, and they profaned My Holy Name, inasmuch as it was said of them, 'These are the people of G-d, and they have come out of His land.'" So G-d will take them out of their exile — but not by virtue of the Israelites' merits: "Not for your sake do I do this, O house of Israel, but for My Holy Name, which you have profaned among the nations." G-d will bring the Israelites back to the Holy Land and purify them with the waters of the Red Heifer. The people will feel ashamed of their actions, and after they will have undergone the process of purification and repentance, G-d will rebuild the country and bestow upon it prosperity and bounty. "I will resettle the cities, and the ruins shall be built up. And the desolate land shall be worked, instead of its lying desolate in the sight of all that pass by. And they shall say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the Garden of Eden, and the cities that were destroyed and desolate and pulled down have become settled as fortified [cities].'"

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Fire: Holy and Unholy: Parashat Shmini by the Rabbi Sacks z"l Legacy Trust
<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemini/fire-holy-and-unholy/>

The shock is immense. For several weeks and many chapters – the longest prelude in the Torah – we have read of the preparations for the moment at which God would bring His Presence to rest in the midst of the people. Five parshiyot (Terumah, Tetzaveh, Ki Tissa, Vayakhel and Pekudei) describe the instructions for building the Sanctuary. Two further parshiyot (Vayikra, Tzav) detail the sacrificial offerings to be brought there. All is now ready. For seven days the Priests (Aaron and his sons) have been consecrated into office. Now comes the eighth day when the service of the Mishkan will begin. The entire people have played their part in constructing what will become the visible home of the Divine Presence on Earth. With a simple, moving verse the drama reaches its climax:

Moses and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting and when they came out, they blessed the people. God's glory was then revealed to all the people.

Lev. 9:23

Just as we think the narrative has reached closure, a terrifying scene takes place: Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, took their censers, put fire into them and added incense; and they offered unauthorised fire before God, which He had

not instructed them to offer. Fire came forth from before God, and it consumed them so that they died before God. Moses then said to Aaron: "This is what God spoke of when He said: Among those who approach Me, I will show Myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured."

Lev. 10:1-3

Celebration turned to tragedy with the death of Aaron's two eldest sons. The Sages and commentators offer many explanations. Nadav and Avihu died because: they entered the Holy of Holies;^[1] they were not wearing the requisite clothes;^[2] they took fire from the kitchen, not the Altar;^[3] they did not consult Moses and Aaron;^[4] nor did they consult one another.^[5] According to some they were guilty of hubris. They were impatient to assume leadership roles themselves;^[6] and they did not marry, considering themselves above such things.^[7] Yet others see their deaths as delayed punishment for an earlier sin, when, at Mount Sinai they "ate and drank" in the Presence of God (Ex. 24:9-11).

These interpretations represent close readings of the four places in the Torah which Nadav and Avihu's death is mentioned (Lev. 10:2, Lev. 16:1, Num. 3:4, Num. 26:61), as well as the reference to their presence on Mount Sinai. Each is a profound meditation on the dangers of over-enthusiasm in the religious life.

However, the simplest explanation is the one explicit in the Torah itself. Nadav and Avihu died because they offered unauthorised, literally "strange," fire, meaning "that which was not commanded." To understand the significance of this, we must go back to first principles and remind ourselves of the meaning of kadosh, "holy", and thus of the Mikdash as the home of the holy.

The holy is that segment of time and space God has reserved for His Presence. Creation involves concealment. The word olam, "universe", is semantically linked to the word ne'elam, "hidden". To give humankind some of His own creative powers – the use of language to think, communicate, understand, imagine alternative futures and choose between them – God must do more than create Homo sapiens. He must efface Himself (what the Kabbalists called tzimtzum) to create space for human action. No single act more profoundly indicates the love and generosity implicit in creation. God as we encounter Him in the Torah is like a parent who knows they must hold back, let go, refrain from intervening, if their children are to become responsible and mature.

But there is a limit. To efface Himself entirely would be equivalent to abandoning the world, deserting His own children. That, God may not and will not do. How then does God leave a trace of His Presence on Earth?

The biblical answer is not philosophical. A philosophical answer (I am thinking here of the mainstream of Western philosophy, beginning in antiquity with Plato, in modernity with Descartes) would be one that applies universally – i.e., at all times, in all places. But there is no answer that applies to all times and places. That is why philosophy cannot and never will understand the apparent contradiction

between Divine creation and human freewill, or between Divine Presence and the empirical world in which we reflect, choose and act.

Jewish thought is counter-philosophical. It insists that truths are embodied precisely in particular times and places. There are holy times (the seventh day, seventh month, seventh year, and the end of seven septennial cycles, the jubilee). There are holy people (the Children of Israel as a whole; within them, the Levi'im, and within them the Kohanim). And there is holy space (eventually, Israel; within that, Jerusalem; within that the Temple; in the desert, they were the Mishkan, the Holy, and the Holy of Holies).

The holy is that point of time and space in which the Presence of God is encountered by tzimtzum – self-renunciation – on the part of mankind. Just as God makes space for man by an act of self-limitation, so man makes space for God by an act of self-limitation. The holy is where God is experienced as absolute Presence. Not accidentally but essentially, this can only take place through the total renunciation of human will and initiative. That is not because God does not value human will and initiative. To the contrary: God has empowered mankind to use them to become His “partners in the work of creation”.

However, to be true to God's purposes, there must be times and places at which humanity experiences the reality of the Divine. Those times and places require absolute obedience. The most fundamental mistake – the mistake of Nadav and Avihu – is to take the powers that belong to man's encounter with the world, and apply them to man's encounter with the Divine. Had Nadav and Avihu used their own initiative to fight evil and injustice they would have been heroes. Because they used their own initiative in the arena of the holy, they erred. They asserted their own presence in the absolute Presence of God. That is a contradiction in terms. That is why they died.

We err if we think of God as capricious, jealous, angry: a myth spread by early Christianity in an attempt to define itself as the religion of love, superseding the cruel/harsh/retributive God of the “Old Testament”. When the Torah itself uses such language it “speaks in the language of humanity” ([Brachot 31a](#)) – that is to say, in terms people will understand.

In truth, Tanach is a love story through and through – the passionate love of the Creator for His creatures that survives all the disappointments and betrayals of human history. God needs us to encounter Him, not because He needs mankind but because we need Him. If civilisation is to be guided by love, justice, and respect for the integrity of creation, there must be moments in which we leave the “I” behind and encounter the fullness of being in all its glory.

That is the function of the holy – the point at which “I am” is silent in the overwhelming presence of “There is”. That is what Nadav and Avihu forgot – that to enter holy space or time requires ontological humility, the total renunciation of human initiative and desire.

The significance of this fact cannot be over-estimated. When we confuse God's will with our will, we turn the holy – the source of life – into something unholy and a source of death. The classic example of this is “holy war,” jihad, crusade – investing imperialism (the desire to rule over other people) with the cloak of sanctity as if conquest and forced conversion were God's will.

The story of Nadav and Avihu reminds us yet again of the warning first spelled out in the days of Cain and Abel. The first act of worship led to the first murder. Like nuclear fission, worship generates power, which can be benign but can also be profoundly dangerous.

The episode of Nadav and Avihu is written in three kinds of fire. First there is the fire from Heaven:

Fire came forth from before God and consumed the burnt offering.

Lev. 9:24

This was the fire of favour, consummating the service of the Sanctuary. Then came the “unauthorised fire” offered by the two sons.

Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorised fire before God, which He had not instructed them [to offer].

Lev. 10:1

Then there was the counter-fire from Heaven:

Fire came forth from before God, and it consumed them so that they died before God.

Lev. 10:2

The message is simple and intensely serious: Religion is not what the European Enlightenment thought it would become: mute, marginal and mild. It is fire – and like fire, it warms but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame.

[1] Midrash Tanchuma (Buber), parshat Acharei Mot 7. [2] Leviticus Rabbah 20:9. [3] Midrash Tanchuma, ad loc. [4] Yalkut Shimoni, I:524. [5] Midrash Tanchuma, ad loc. [6] Aggadah (Buber), Vayikra10. [7] Leviticus Rabbah 20:10.

[How Ritual Grounds Us For Activism by Rabbi Jessica Shimberg](https://truah.org/resources/parshat-shmini-jessica-shimber-moraltorah/)

<https://truah.org/resources/parshat-shmini-jessica-shimber-moraltorah/>

Last week, I found and re-read the d'var Torah I offered when I became a bat mitzvah. In the 40-plus years since reading from Leviticus on that day, I have continued to wrestle with the relevance of its ancient rituals to our modern experience. This year, I am moved by the opening chapter of Parshat Shmini and the value of slow, deliberate, carefully orchestrated ritual. I am sensitive to the fact that we peer at this value through the distractingly vivid details of the sacred service of animal sacrifice. My teenage brain was too grossed out by the blood, fat, kidneys, and liver, flesh, and fire to appreciate the precision of the ritual and the

seven days of preparation for performing holy service on behalf of a community. However, my lens for reading scripture has now been shaped by 40 additional years of lived experience, many of those as a communal leader and ritualist, and an extraordinarily meaningful rabbinical school class, brilliantly titled “Learning to Love Leviticus.” (Thank you, Rabbi Dr. Laura Duhan-Kaplan.)

Living in increasingly chaotic and uncertain times, I notice how grounding ritual is each time I immerse in it. Even so, it is tempting to turn away from that which is slow and deliberate to engage in the more rapid-fire and never-ending firehose of information, work, entertainment, and general distraction. In Parshat Shmini, the ritual is methodical, purposeful, and collaborative. Aaron and his sons work together, called to specific and delineated tasks, to perform a rite on behalf of the community. They are not doing this for themselves; rather, they are performing a service for societal expiation and well-being. In addition, they have spent seven days preparing themselves for this service to the collective. They are grounded when they rise to their calling.

In recent years, our socio-political climate has become so polarized and toxic, and the list of issues that are “on fire” – in need of immediate attention – are overwhelmingly numerous. It is easy to become enraged, unfocused, distracted, distraught. Exactly two years ago this week, as the pandemic began, I moved to Nashville, Tennessee, to marry my beloved. Though overjoyed to be with my *b’sheret*, I left a community where I knew my place and how to deploy my calling. In the South, issues that have been central to my recent work as a faith leader, like abortion access and reproductive justice, are even more threatened and urgent. There have been days when I have been so incensed or overwhelmed that it has felt as if I am being consumed by a “strange fire,” as were Nadav and Avihu, Aaron’s sons who die in this week’s parshah. Without the structure of community and the grounding of ritual, my action, based on the heat of my emotions, would be like a wildfire rather than a well-tended altar.

Ritual and orchestrated communal action are an antidote to the hubris that causes us to act alone or the anger that can cause us to behave impulsively. They also can provide us with the strength and conviction to act when we might, alone, feel powerless or overwhelmed. I am grateful that my years of advocacy work with *T’ruah*, the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#), [Ohio Faith in Public Life](#), and Faith Choice Ohio taught me that rushing in to do things my way is not leadership. Addressing injustice and creating conditions for change requires deliberate action, and deliberate action requires thoughtful planning and collaboration and learning how to be an appropriate ally.

Being selected to perform holy tasks on behalf of a community is both a great honor and a weighty responsibility. How we go about performing holy tasks is well served by humility, precision, dedication, and careful consideration. Ritual is a container that grounds and uplifts us. (*Rabbi Jessica Shimberg is a tradition-appreciating, non-*

traditional spiritual guide and ritual artist who delights in working at the sacred fringes where she finds Jewish seekers and skeptics, allies and the Jew-curious, and many soulful activists. Her ritual practice, and that of many others, has been nourished by the 100% natural beeswax Havdalah candles (holdingthefringes.com) she braids in the sunshine of Tennessee, where she is cultivating community, appreciating love, and working on growing grace.)

Keeping Our Cool by Ilan Kurshan

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/14KxBX66JjgX84v2MJat53MGPoEwkm9DT/view>

In this week's parashah, Moshe reprimands Aaron's sons Elazar and Itamar for the sacrifice they offer: "Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred precinct?" (10:17). Moshe tells them that they should have eaten of the sacrifice, rather than burn it entirely on the altar. This incident takes place immediately following the death of Aaron's other two sons, Nadav and Avihu, who are consumed by fire when they offer an inappropriate sacrifice to God. Are Elazar and Itamar equally at fault for improper ritual conduct? The Talmud and midrash, in expanding upon Moshe's response, offer us a lesson in anger management that applies both to the sacred precinct and to the more quotidian settings and situations in which we find ourselves.

According to the account in our parashah, Elazar and Itamar keep silent in response to Moshe's rebuke. Perhaps they are reluctant to defend their behavior to their uncle, whom they regard with tremendous respect. Aaron, as Moshe's brother, feels more comfortable about talking back to his brother, and so it is he who explains that it would not have been right to eat the sacrifices while in a state of mourning for Nadav and Avihu. Moshe approves of Aaron's explanation—"it was good in his eyes" (10:20)—and this time no fires break out.

What seems like a relatively straightforward account in our parashah becomes complicated by the ancient rabbis' struggle to understand how Moshe could have been unfamiliar with the law that one who has recently lost a close relative does not eat of the sacrificial offerings. Why didn't Moshe understand immediately why Elazar and Itamar didn't partake of the sacrifice? Why did Aaron have to remind Moshe of this law? In the midrash (Leviticus Rabbah 13:1) Rav Huna explains that when Moshe saw the offerings burning on the altar, he grew angry, and on account of his anger, he forgot the law. Presumably he was so overpowered by his emotion that his rational brain—the part that knew the law—was unable to function properly.

Rav Huna goes on to relate that this was one of three incidents in which Moshe forgot the law on account of his anger. It happened as well when the manna fell for the first time and the people ignored Moshe's injunction not to leave any manna over until the next day; as a result of his anger at the people's disregard, Moshe forgot to teach the people to gather two portions of manna before Shabbat (Exodus 16). And it happened again during the war against the Midianites, when

Moshe grew angry at the Israelites for sparing all the enemy women (Numbers 31); as a result of his anger, Moshe forgot the laws about purifying metal vessels which he was supposed to teach the people, and Elazar the priest had to teach them in his stead. Although Rav Huna does not cite any other incidents in which Moshe's anger caused him to forget the law, we might also note that when Moshe descended Mount Sinai for the first time, his anger upon witnessing the people worshipping the golden calf caused him to shatter the tablets. The Talmud (Eruvin 54a) comments that "If the first set of tablets had not been broken, Torah would not have been forgotten from Israel," again linking anger with forgetting.

The Talmud (Pesachim 66a) expands on the association between anger and forgetting in an extended midrash about Hillel the Elder, then a newcomer from Babylonia, who was appointed head of the Sanhedrin because of his ability to remember a law the rest of the people had forgotten. Hillel grew angry at the people for failing to remember this particular law, and he reprimanded them harshly: "What caused this to happen to you, that I should come up from Babylonia and become leader over you? It was the laziness in you!" The people then went on to ask Hillel about another point of law, and this time, Hillel forgot the answer. The Talmud, in commenting on this incident, teaches, "Any person who becomes angry, if he is a Torah scholar, his wisdom departs from him; if he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him." Since Hillel rebuked the people angrily, he forgot the law, just as Moshe forgot the law upon growing angry at Elazar and Itamar.

Why are anger and forgetting so intimately bound up in one another? Elsewhere in the Talmud (Shabbat 105b) we learn that anger was not just regarded as a moral failing, but a spiritual one as well. The issue comes up in the context of ripping one's clothing on Shabbat – may a person rip his clothes in a fit of anger? The Talmud explains that one who engages in destructive behavior in a fit of rage should be viewed as an idolator: "Because this is the craft of the evil inclination. Today it tells him to do this, and tomorrow it tells him to do that, until eventually, when he no longer controls himself, it tells him to worship idols and he goes and worships idols." A person who succumbs to anger will inevitably succumb to more sinister forces as well, including idol worship. When we grow angry, we cannot control our behavior and we cannot think straight, and so the evil inclination is able to gain a foothold.

Rabbi Avin continues with a close reading of the biblical command, "There shall be no strange God within you, and you shall not bow down to a foreign god" (Psalms 81:10). What is the strange god within a person's body, asks Rabbi Avin? This is the evil inclination, he explains. According to this more psychological understanding, anger does not just lead to idolatry; it also becomes idolatry. We become so enslaved to our anger that it controls us, and we lose the ability to act of our own free will. When we are angry, we are all the more likely to speak and act in ways that we will regret.

Unlike Moshe, who grows angry at Elazar and Itamar and reprimands them harshly for their behavior, Aaron has a more measured response. When Aaron learns that his sons Nadav and Avihu have been consumed by divine fire, he does not cry out in anger or outrage; the Torah merely tells us, “And Aaron was silent” (10:3). If Aaron is angry at his son’s behavior or at the harsh divine response, he does not allow his anger to overcome him as Moshe did just a few verses later. Ironically it is Moshe, who identified himself as “slow of speech and slow of tongue,” who is all too quick to snap at Aaron’s sons; and it is Aaron, who is identified as the more fluent speaker, who knows when to hold his tongue.

Perhaps the Torah is trying to teach us that it is never wise to react out of anger. When we lash out angrily at others, it is not really we who are speaking, but the evil inclination that takes control of us from within. Far better, in moments of anger, to keep silent until our distress is not as acute and we can react more calmly and clear-headedly. By keeping our cool, we can keep our perspective.

On the Haftarah: Unwanted Offerings by Bex Stern Rosenblatt

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/14KxBX66JjgX84v2MJat53MGPoEwkm9DT/view>

Shame is a powerful motivator. It is one of the early emotions that children experience, serving as a milestone that they are starting to understand they are part of a larger community. In the beginning, in the garden of Eden, we first encounter a word for shame. We read that although Adam and Eve were naked, they did not feel shame. They felt as if they had nothing to hide and no one to hide from. It is only after gaining knowledge that they do feel shame and very quickly spring into action. They sew clothing, become afraid, and hide themselves. According to the text, the actions come not from guilt over having disobeyed God, but rather from shame because they are naked. They are ashamed of the state they are in.

It is important to differentiate between shame, guilt, and embarrassment. All three are powerful, present, and intensely human emotions. But it is only shame that binds us to our communities, that leads us to take action. We can define guilt as the feeling of having done something wrong while shame is the failure to have done something right. Shame is a state of being, whereas guilt arises from certain actions. We feel guilty when we judge ourselves. Shame comes from the anticipated judgment of other people; it implies our ability to imagine ourselves through other people’s eyes. Embarrassment is also different from shame. Embarrassment is a temporary feeling of something being amiss. Shame is bigger, it’s our recognizing that we have a moral failing.

In our haftarah, Ezekiel 36, we encounter shame as a tool of transformation. The haftarah begins with God speaking of God’s concern that God’s name has been desecrated through the actions of Israel. Using the powerful and terrible metaphor

of Israel causing pollution to the land and to God just as a menstruating woman does, God explains why God punished us. Luckily for us, God chooses to take Israel back for the sake of God's name. Israel has polluted God's name and so God is restoring it.

However, this restoration will not work if Israel continues to pollute and this is where shame comes in. God first transforms Israel, giving us a new heart, and breathing spirit back into us. We are restored and all seems right with the world; we live once again in harmony with the land and with God. Yet it is at this point that God tells us to feel shame. It is only once we have reestablished a community and bought into God's systems that we are able to recognize that we had failed morally and that we are at risk of doing it again. By inviting us to feel shame, God calls us to see ourselves through God's eyes. God allows us back into a community of morality such that we can feel shame that we once were not able to be a part of. It's a tricky thing to allow ourselves to be transformed by shame without the accompanying feelings of guilt and embarrassment, which can lead us to think that we cannot or do not deserve to change. But shame can be a roadmap for us back into our chosen communities, an acknowledgment that we belong.



Yahrtzeits

Lenny Levin remembers his bother Joseph Levin on Sat. Mar 26 (Adar II 23)

Coming Up at Kol Rina

Brunch-and-Learn on Zoom: Celebrating Passover in an Age of Mass Incarceration: Toward a Jewish Liberation Theology

On Sunday, April 3, beginning at 10:30 am, join Rabbi Hilly Haber and the Rev. George Chochos as they examine the Exodus Story through the lens of mass incarceration and the liberation theology.

As Director of Social Justice Organizing and Education at Central Synagogue in New York City, Rabbi Hilly Haber advocates with Central community on systemic justice issues such as criminal justice reform, climate justice, and immigration, as well as on other areas of social justice programming.

The Rev. George T. Chochos is a senior program associate at the Vera Institute of Justice, where he helps build college-in-prison programs in the mid-Atlantic region. He joined Vera in 2020 as a senior federal policy associate to work on Pell reinstatement for incarcerated students.

Register via the following Eventbrite link (and read full CVs for our presenters) for what promises to be a fascinating and compelling pre-Passover program:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/how-can-we-celebrate-passover-in-an-age-of-mass-incarceration-tickets-296720167007>