

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Shemini
April 26, 2025 *** 28 Nisan 5785

Shemini in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, “Shemini,” means “eighth” and it is found in Leviticus 9:1.

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.”

Shemini Haftarah in a Nutshell: Ii Samuel 6:1-19

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/657618/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week’s *haftarah* mentions how Uzzah was struck dead when he disrespectfully touched the Ark of the Covenant; reminiscent of Nadab and Abihu’s death described in this week’s Torah reading.

The Holy Ark had been in storage in the house of Avinadav for many years, ever since the destruction of the Tabernacle in Shiloh. Recently crowned King David decided to move the Ark to the new

capital, Jerusalem. He had the Ark placed on a cart and it was transported amidst singing and dancing. When the procession reached Goren Nachon, the oxen misstepped and Uzzah, Avinadav's son, took hold of the Ark to steady it—whereupon he was instantly killed.¹ David was devastated, and he temporarily placed the Ark in the home of Oved-edom the Edomite, where it remained for three months. "And it was told to King David saying: 'G-d has blessed the house of Oved-edom, and all that belongs to him, because of the Ark of G-d.' And David went and brought up the ark of G-d from the house of Oved-edom into the City of David with joy." The Ark was brought up to the city of David with great singing and dancing. David then blessed and distributed presents to all the assembled Israelites.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Food for Thought by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l \(5770\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemini/food-for-thought/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemini/food-for-thought/>

The second half of Exodus and the first part of Leviticus form a carefully structured narrative. The Israelites are commanded to construct a Sanctuary. They carry out the command. This is followed by an account of sacrifices to be offered there. Then, in the first part of this week's Parsha, the Kohanim - the Priests - are inducted into office.

What happens next, though, is unexpected: the dietary laws are presented, a list of permitted and forbidden species, animals, fish and birds. What is the logic of these laws? And why are they placed here? What is their connection with the Sanctuary?

The late R. Elie Munk offered a fascinating suggestion.[1] As we have mentioned before in these studies, the Sanctuary was a human counterpart of the cosmos. Several key words in the biblical account of its construction are also key words in the narrative of creation at the beginning of Genesis. The Talmud (Megillah 10b) says about the completion of the Sanctuary, that "On that day there was joy before the Holy One blessed be He as on the day when Heaven and Earth were created." The universe is the home God made for humanity. The

Sanctuary was the home human beings made for God.

R. Munk reminds us that the first command God gave the first human was a dietary law. “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” The dietary laws in Shemini parallel the prohibition given to Adam. As then, so now, a new era in the spiritual history of humankind, preceded by an act of creation, is marked by laws about what one may and may not eat.

Why? As with sex, so with eating: these are the most primal activities, shared with many other forms of life. Without sex there is no continuation of the species. Without food, even the individual cannot survive. These, therefore, have been the focus of radically different cultures. On the one hand there are hedonistic cultures in which food and sex are seen as pleasures and pursued as such. On the other are ascetic cultures – marked by monastic seclusion – in which sex is avoided and eating kept to a minimum. The former emphasise the body, the latter the soul.

Judaism, by contrast, sees the human situation in terms of integration and balance. We are body and soul. Hence the Judaic imperative, neither hedonistic nor ascetic, but transformative. We are commanded to sanctify the activities of eating and sex. From this flow the dietary laws and the laws of family purity (niddah and mikveh), two key elements of kedushah, the life of holiness.

However, we can go further. Genesis 1 is not the only account of Creation in Tanach, the Hebrew Bible. There are several others. One is contained in the last chapters of the Book of Job. It is this that deserves close attention.

Job is the paradigm of the righteous individual who suffers. He loses all he has, for no apparent reason. His companions tell him that he must have sinned. Only this can reconcile his fate with justice. Job maintains his innocence and demands a hearing in the heavenly tribunal. For some 37 chapters the argument rages, then in chapter 38 God addresses Job “out of the whirlwind”. God offers no answers. Instead, for four chapters, He asks questions of His own, rhetorical questions that have no answer:

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?... Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of

the deep?... Does the rain have a father?... From whose womb comes the ice?"

God shows Job the whole panoply of creation, but it is a very different view of the universe than that set out in Genesis 1-2. There the centre of the narrative is the human person, the last to be created; made in God's image; given dominion over all that lives. In Job 38-41 we see not an anthropocentric, but a theocentric, universe. Job is the only person in Tanach who sees the world, as it were, from God's point of view.

Particularly striking is the way these chapters deal with the animal kingdom. What Job sees are not domestic animals, but wild, untameable creatures, magnificent in their strength and beauty, living far from and utterly indifferent to humankind:

Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane?

Do you make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud snorting?...

Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread his wings toward the south?

Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high?...

Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope?

Can you put a cord through his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook?...

Nothing on Earth is His equal - a creature without fear.

He looks down on all that are haughty;

He is King over all that are proud.

This is the most radically non-anthropocentric passage in the Hebrew Bible. It tells us that man is not the centre of the universe, nor are we the measure of all things. Some of the most glorious aspects of nature have nothing to do with human needs, and everything to do with the Divine creation of diversity. One of the few Jewish thinkers to state this clearly was Moses Maimonides:

I consider the following opinion as most correct according to the

teaching of the Bible and the results of philosophy, namely that the universe does not exist for man's sake, but that each being insists for its own sake, and not because of some other thing. Thus we believe in Creation, and yet need not inquire what purpose is served by each species of existing things, because we assume that God created all parts of the universe by His will; some for their own sake, and some for the sake of other beings... Guide for the Perplexed, III:13

And again:

Consider how vast are the dimensions and how great the number of these corporeal beings. If the whole of the earth would not constitute even the smallest part of the sphere of the fixed stars, what is the relation of the human species to all these created things, and how can any of us imagine that they exist for his sake and that they are instruments for his benefit? Guide for the Perplexed, III:14

We now understand what is at stake in the prohibition of certain species of animals, birds and fish, many of them predators like the creatures described in Job 38-41. They exist for their own sake, not for the sake of humankind. The vast universe, and earth itself with the myriad species it contains, has an integrity of its own. Yes, after the Flood, God gave humans permission to eat meat, but this was a concession, as if to say: Kill if you must, but let it be animals, not other humans, that you kill.

With His covenant with the Israelites, God invites humanity to begin a new chapter in history. This is not yet the Garden of Eden, paradise regained. But, with the construction of the Sanctuary – a symbolic home for the Divine presence on earth – something new has begun. One sign of this is the fact that the Israelites are not permitted to kill any and every life-form for food. Some species must be protected, given their freedom, granted their integrity, left unsubjected to human devices and desires. The new creation – the Sanctuary – marks a new dignity for the old creation, especially its wild, untamed creatures. Not everything in the universe was made for human consumption. [1] Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, vol. 2, p. 99

[Six Takes on a Leader's Attributes: Shemini by Walter Herzberg](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/six-takes-on-a-leaders-attributes-2/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/six-takes-on-a-leaders-attributes-2/>

In chapter eight of Leviticus, Moses is essentially serving as temporary kohen gadol, high priest, during the dedication of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle. On the eighth day, according to Rashi, Aaron and his sons are officially inaugurated into the priesthood. Moses transfers the position to his brother Aaron, who along with his descendants will officially serve as priests and high priest. The transition occurs in Lev. 9:7:

And Moses said unto Aaron: “Draw near unto the altar, and perform the service of your sin-offering and your burnt-offering, and make atonement for yourself, and for the people; and present the offering of the people, and make atonement for them; as the LORD commanded.”

Identifying the textual problem: commentators have noticed that the phrase “draw near unto the altar” seems superfluous. If Aaron is being commanded to “perform the service of the sin offering,” is it not obvious that he will need to approach the altar? This textual issue will serve as the basis for our consideration of the attributes of a leader based on our examination of the comments of the traditional Jewish commentaries.

Examining the Commentators' Solutions to the Problem:

Rashi (Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki, France, 1040–1105) states that Aaron was instructed to approach the altar (in addition to being told to perform the service of the sin offering) because he “was ashamed and afraid to approach. Moses [therefore] said to him: Why are you ashamed? [It was] for this that you were chosen!”

The commentators attempt to explain what Rashi means by “It was for this you were chosen” for a leadership position. What exactly is the valued attribute Aaron possessed deeming him worthy of such an exalted position?

Degel Mahaneh Efraim, in the name of his grandfather the Baal Shem Tov (Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efraim of Sudilkov, Poland, 1742–1800), states that Moshe told Aaron: the very fact that you are bashful/reticent and humble, that you possess fear and reticence before God, and consider

yourself unworthy—for this reason, you were chosen. He highlights the quality of **humility** for a leader.

Minhah Belulah (Rabbi Avraham Rappaport, Italy, 1520–1596) however, cites the midrash that “the altar appeared to him in the image of a [golden] calf; therefore he was frightened. As is known, one’s imagination concretizes that which troubles the mind and resides there constantly. Aaron couldn’t remove his thoughts from his [enabling role] in the matter of the [golden] calf, always remembering that sin . . . he, therefore, perceived the altar in the image of a calf. And Moses’s saying that “**that’s** why you were chosen” means that you were chosen because you constantly remember the sin and are embarrassed on account of it—and were therefore chosen to serve in the role of high priest.

Aaron is chosen not because he is perfect but rather because of his **contrition** and his embarrassment concerning the one sin of his. He does not forget his lapse in judgment. His almost obsessive preoccupation perhaps indicates that he is willing to **take responsibility** for his deeds—both past and present—a worthy trait for a leader.

Ramban (Nahmanides, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, Spain, 1194–1270), on the other hand, quotes the same midrash but concludes that Moses is telling Aaron to embrace an element of haughtiness or overconfidence and not to be so “low-spirited” because God has forgiven him. In other words, Aaron was chosen for the position, indicating that God has forgiven him, and therefore being overly modest or hesitant is inappropriate. An obsessive preoccupation with the past can be paralyzing; the leader must move on and act at times with an almost overly **confident determination and assertiveness**. When chosen for a position, one needs to rise to the occasion.

The Ketav Sofer (Avraham Binyamin Sofer, the son of the Hatam Sofer, Hungary, 1815–1871), like the Minhah Belulah above, notes that a leader is not chosen because he is perfect. He, however, takes it one step further suggesting that a leader should actually be “one who has a box of reptiles hanging from his back,” meaning that he comes with baggage. And this is what Moshe meant when he exhorted Aaron saying—why are you so concerned/reticent; Aaron was concerned lest he become haughty having been elevated to such an exalted position (in contradistinction to

Ramban's interpretation that Aaron was worried that he wasn't worthy). So Moses tells him not to worry—because he was actually chosen on account of his having sinned and thereby would not become haughty.

Perhaps a leader who comes with, and/or is aware of, his challenges will be less likely to become haughty and will be able to empathize with others. The Ketav Sofer then is not extolling the attribute of humility like the Minhah Belulah, but rather cautioning against cultivating an outsized and even **unwarranted sense of humility**.

An unexpected interpretation is offered by **Sheraga Hameir** (Rabbi Sheraga Feivish Schneebalg, 20th century, London / Benei Berak, in a footnote to Be'er Mayim Hayyim, the 16th-century supercommentary on Rashi) who suggests that “why are you embarrassed?” should really be understood as “why are you tarrying?” (based on his understanding the Hebrew ש.ו.ב.). Accordingly, Moses cautions Aaron not to tarry in his offering of the sacrifice since he was chosen on account of his willingness to accede to the call to duty, as demonstrated in Exodus 4 where according to Rashi, “Aaron did not delay [fulfilling] God's mission to go to Egypt and thereby merited the priesthood instead of Moses [who delayed accepting the mission].” Therefore Aaron is reminded by Moses why he was chosen and why “he must immediately offer the sacrifice and not delay.”

The quality of **embracing one's obligation as a leader** and fulfilling it in a timely and highly professional manner seems to be the point of Sheraga Hameir's comment.

Let's look at one last comment and switch the perspective from Aaron's leadership qualities to Moses's. **Be'er Yitzhak** (Rabbi Yitzhak Horowitz, Galicia, 19th century, one of Rashi's most important though less well-known supercommentaries) notes that Aaron did not “consider himself worthy for the position . . . so he walked slowly” becoming immobilized. “And when Moses realized this via Aaron's movements and facial expression,” he encouraged Aaron by speaking the words “approach the altar” in a manner that would inspire and embolden him to continue. As my student Jeremy Fineberg (RS '19) astutely suggested, Moses was able to motivate Aaron precisely because he chose his words carefully. Moses is displaying a developed **intuitive sense** allowing him to motivate

others and facilitate their successful completion of a task or acceptance of an obligation.

According to Be'er Yitzhak, Moses is aware of the tension a leader may encounter when the attribute of humility (which Aaron possessed) comes into conflict with the need to assert oneself in order to complete the task required of one's position.

Having reviewed six commentaries offering various paradigms of leadership, we should reflect on the different attributes that were highlighted:

Being humble. Contrite/remorseful. Confident/determined. Accepting of responsibility. Tried by personal challenges, past and present. Dependable/professional. Intuitive. Empathic. Inspiring/capable of facilitating the success of others. Choosing words carefully.

Which of these resonate most strongly with us? Which are the most and least important in our leaders? (*Walter Herzberg is Assistant Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Bible and Its Interpretation and Professional Pastoral Skills at JTS*)

[Shemini: Eight Days A Week – Time for Miracles by Sal Litvak](https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2024/04/02/shemini-eight-days-a-week/)

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2024/04/02/shemini-eight-days-a-week/>

The name of parsha Shemini means “the 8th.” Following seven days of inauguration, Aaron and his sons begin their work of officiating as Kohanim (priests) on the 8th day. Fire issues forth from God to consume the offerings on the altar, and the Divine Presence comes to dwell in the mishkan, the portable sanctuary in the desert.

What is the significance of the number 8 in Judaism? The Maharal of Prague (d. 1609) teaches that the number 7 represents the natural world. There are seven colors in the rainbow and seven days of the week. But the number 8 represents that which is above nature, such as fire from God appearing in the sanctuary. A baby boy enters the eternal covenant of Abraham on the 8th day of his life, forging a supernatural bond with his Creator. Chanukah is an 8 day holiday because only a Higher Power could inspire the Maccabees to battle a much larger army and make one day's worth of oil last 8 days.

Eight represents miracles because only God can subvert the order of the natural world – but we have a role to play too. When we follow God’s laws all week – like Aaron and the Kohanim – we partner with our Creator and that’s when miracles can happen!

Yom HaShoah: When Human Rights Become “Too Political”

by Cantor Michael Zoosman

https://truah.org/resources/michael-zoosman-yom-hashoah-moraltorah_2025_/

On April 24, 2025, Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) will compel the Jewish world to consider the full impact of remaining silent in the face of injustice and oppression. Ahead of that solemn day, I feel sickened that messages and concerns about upholding human rights are deemed “too political.”

The latest occurrence for me came after my recent viewing of the documentary film “No Other Land.” I sent an email recommending the Academy Award-winning film to various Jewish listservs. In response, I received a message from one progressive synagogue stating that the documentary was deemed “too political” to mention in that community. Such censorship reminds me of when synagogues have previously informed me that it would spark too much controversy to invite me to speak to their congregations about the work of the group I co-founded, L’chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty. One clerical colleague has affectionately called me “a political guy.”

If this accusation is true, I am compelled to consider what other violations of human rights in history might have been dismissed as “too political” for me to have publicly addressed: Would I have been silenced for writing op-eds in the 1930s speaking out against Hitler’s inauguration of his infamous Aktion T4 protocol — the forerunner of today’s lethal injections — to kill people deemed “unworthy of life”? Would I have been muted were I to have advocated against the Trail of Tears or Japanese internment camps, just as I am vilified for supporting Palestinian human rights?

Pastor Martin Niemoller’s timeless warning in his 1946 poem “First They Came” offers an enduring response to the kind of logic that inhibits voices from expressing their deeply held social concerns:

First they came for the Communists and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the Socialists and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak out
for me.

The danger of remaining silent in the face of any injustice is one of the most essential lessons of the Holocaust. A telling illustration of this point is how Adolf Hitler justified one genocide by citing international silence over a previous one. On August 22, 1939, in preparation for the impending invasion of Poland, Hitler stated:

I have placed my death-head formations in readiness — for the present only in the East — with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (lebensraum) which we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?

The ultimate result of Hitler's application of this reasoning was the very destruction of European Jewry that is memorialized on Yom HaShoah.

We don't need to look far this year for confirmation of the lethal relationship upon which Hitler relied. It so happens that April 24 is also Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. On April 24, 1915 — which Armenians refer to as "Armenian Martyrs' Day" — Turkish soldiers rounded up the Armenian intelligentsia, priests, and other community leaders, murdered them, and posted heads on spikes throughout Constantinople. This was their signal for massacres and forced-march deportations to start everywhere. In response, the world was deafeningly silent. Human rights icon Elie Wiesel vividly comprehended the connection between such historical events, poignantly writing: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the

oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” (1986 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech) Wiesel’s charge reminds us of the danger of silence in the face of all human rights violations.

So I shall continue to sound the human rights alarm for all peoples — Israelis, Palestinians, Americans, and all others. This includes speaking out against all executions. I feel this especially when the horrific synchronicity occurs when lethal injections, gassings, and firing squads put to death incarcerated human beings on Yom HaShoah or International Holocaust Remembrance Day. It is set to happen again this year when Alabama employs the Aktion T4 lethal injection on my penpal James Osgood. I shall respectfully disagree with other Jews and non-Jews who feel that by amplifying this reality, I desecrate the memories of Holocaust victims and survivors, among them my own family members. Rather than remaining silent when the most fundamental right to life itself is flouted, I feel I owe my victimized ancestors the honor of calling this reality exactly what it is.

This is precisely why I will continue with this practice, even when executions occur on what should be joyous occasions. Case in point, it happens that Texas has scheduled the state killing of Matthew Johnson on the evening of May 20, the exact hour of the 2025 Gala for T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. On that celebratory day, too, my fellow Jewish activists and I will not be silenced as we hold by T’ruah’s very name and once again stand solemnly for human rights. I pledge to continue this call to recognize the sanctity of life for all human beings. I vow never to be silent in the face of oppression — no matter how “political” it may seem to some. Over time, I hope that many others will join me in putting human rights first.

(Cantor Michael Zoosman is a certified spiritual care practitioner with the Canadian Association for Spiritual Care/Association(CASC) and received his cantorial ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 2008. He sits as an advisory committee member at Death Penalty Action and is the co-founder of “L’chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty.” Michael is a former Jewish prison chaplain and psychiatric hospital chaplain.)

Yahrtzeits

Len Grossman remembers his mother Charlotte Grossman on Monday
April 28th

Motti Benisty remembers his father Rabbi Shimon David Benisty on
Thursday May 1st