Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Shmini
April 11, 2026 *** 24 Nisan, 5786

Shmini 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.”

## Haftarah in a Nutshell: 11 Samuel 6:1-19
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/657618/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah 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

### Fire: Holy and Unholy by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l 5773
https://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, self-limitation) 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 humankind. Just as God makes space for humanity by an act of self-limitation, so humanity 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 humankind 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 humankind 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] MidrashTanchuma, ad loc. [6] Aggadah (Buber), Vayikra 10. [7] Leviticus Rabbah 20:10.

## Shmini: Our Leaders Should Not Be Above the Law
## by Rabbi Jeanne Snodgrass
https://truah.org/resources/shmini-jeanne-snodgrass-moral-torah/

For the past five years I have served as an elected non-partisan official, a member of my local school board. As a board member I am part of a team responsible for ensuring our district operates according to the relevant state and federal statutes, but also for considering the good of all those affected by each decision we make. Individual board members have particular priorities, but a majority must vote for any decision to be binding. I can, and do, work to make changes I think are important, but I cannot act unilaterally or ignore the rules just because I want to see something happen differently or faster.

Today in our country we are seeing the results of leadership by those who believe they are above the law — politicians and billionaires ignoring the rules which are designed to protect us and our institutions collectively. When leadership acts for their

own interests, instead of thinking of all of the people they were elected to serve, everyone is put in danger.

In Parshat Shmini, Aaron's sons ignore the rules for offerings and die when "fire came forth from God and consumed them" (Lev. 10:2). What was so terrible about the extra offering Nadab and Abihu made that they needed to die? Perhaps it was done out of ignorance, overzealousness, or a desire to make their own mark? Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Aaron's sons effectively disregarded the needs of the community they were meant to represent and, in ignoring the rules of the Priesthood, damaged their family and risked societal stability.

When Aaron will be acting on behalf of the people, he is told "Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die." (Lev. 10:9) Our leaders need to be making important decisions as they represent us with a sound mind. Later, Moses scolds Aaron's remaining sons for not eating the sin-offering in the sacred area (Lev. 10:17), recognizing the importance of conducting business in its proper place for the safety of the community. As a school board member, I am also held to standards around when and how business may be conducted. Our state and national representatives, however, do not all do the same.

So, what is our obligation now when we see the equivalent of these cautions specifically laid out for us in the text ignored? When our President begins a war during a party from a side room at a resort instead of from a secure space with proper votes and approvals? When law enforcement disregards basic due process? When policy is made via social media statements? When partisanship determines follow through on criminal complaints?

In Parshat Shmini, God gives the rules for the Priesthood, so

perhaps it seems reasonable that God is the one enforcing them. But our democratic institutions were created by people, making it the responsibility of people, of each of us, to ensure they are upheld. When we as a community allow those in positions of power to make decisions based on self-interest or to escape consequences for ignoring rules — whether of insider trading, sexual exploitation, or lack of adherence to basic laws and norms of governance — our societal contract breaks down, and our communal safety is threatened.

Judaism is a religion of text, where we endlessly debate the possibilities and motivations and intentions of each actor, and yet, we are also very much a faith tradition of action, judged not by what we believe, but how we act on that belief. Right now, we must act to protect our democracy, our basic rights, and the rights of our friends and neighbors. This text reminds us there are unintended consequences and dangers when actions are taken impulsively and trust in the systems, which are supposed to serve as safeguards, is broken.

Our tradition warns that our leadership cannot be above the law, or the community will suffer. May we all heed these cautions and commit to protecting our democracy and the constitutional rights of ourselves and others.

*(Rabbi Jeanne Snodgrass has served as the Executive Director of Mizzou Hillel since 2013 and has extensive experience in arts non-profit organizations, Jewish and arts-focused community outreach and education.)*

## The Deathly Power of the Holy by Marcus Mordecai Schwartz
## https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-deathly-power-of-the-holy-2/

Finding the right words after loss is hard, but Moses's comments to Aaron in this week's parashah are unusually

difficult. At the moment that God fills Aaron's hands with abundance, appointing him as high-priest and his descendants as an eternal priesthood, his two eldest die when they attempt to offer incense with a flame brought from outside the newly dedicated sanctuary—a strange, uncommanded offering. "And fire came forth from the LORD and consumed them . . ."

Moses's response is to state that he now understands something God had said in the past:

> Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD meant by saying: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people." And Aaron was silent.(Lev. 10:3)

What is Moses trying to convey to his brother in this moment of sudden tragic loss? Does he mean this to be comforting? Or is he simply musing to himself in the shock of the moment, much as Robert Oppenheimer did on July 16, 1945, in the aftermath of the Trinity nuclear test at the Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range: "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds" (paraphrasing Bhagavad Gita 11:32). Is it not a moment so pregnant with power and potential, triumph and tragedy, that only such words will do?

But the mystery here is greater than at first glance. Even accepting Moses's reverie as a natural human response, we are still left with the question: What was God's original statement? There is no verse in the Torah that directly corresponds to Moses's statement. So what did God say? And why had Moses been confused by it? How did the death of Aaron's sons clarify it for him? The answer to these questions is the subject of a dispute in the Talmud (B. Zevahim 115b) where two verses are proposed as candidates for

Moses's conundrum. By looking at the Talmud's two suggestions as to what God's confusing statement was, we can gain insight into Moses and Aaron, understanding their reactions to this moment better.

The first possibility the Talmud presents is that Moses is referring to God's commandment in Exodus 19:21–22:

> The LORD said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the LORD to gaze, lest many of them perish. The priests also, who come near the LORD, must stay pure, lest the LORD break out against them."

Here God warns Moses that the people should not ascend Mt. Sinai during God's revelation upon the mountain. The power and presence of Divine glory is so great, and the human form so weak, that the bodies of those who approach will be overwhelmed and destroyed. It does not seem that there is any moral quality to this prohibition, but simply anxiety over uncontrollable danger. God seems unable to hold back the inherent radiating power that Divine presence evokes. Like getting too close to the sun, or perhaps to a source of ionizing radiation, those who get too close to God's immediate presence will inevitably perish because of the tremendous force of the radiating Glory.

This is very much akin to the story of Uzza ben Abinadab recounted in II Samuel 6:3–8 and 1 Chronicles 13:7–11. Uzza and his brother were charged with driving the cart carrying the ark when David first tried to bring it up to Jerusalem. On the way, the animals driving the cart stumbled, leading the ark to slip, and Uzza reached out, catching the ark, and dying instantly on the spot. David was afraid to bring the ark any further and delayed bringing it into Jerusalem for three

months. Uzza committed no moral transgression, only an instinctual error, and died from direct exposure to God's power. If we accept this understanding, Moses means to tell Aaron something like: "Working this close to so much power is dangerous, and those closest (i.e., most physically proximate) to God will be the most exposed to the danger." In other words, God's power cuts both ways. It can grant great benefits, but it can overwhelm us and destroy us as well if we fail to take care.

The second possibility the Talmud presents is Exodus 29:42–43:

> . . . a regular burnt offering throughout the generations, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting before the LORD. For there I will meet with you, and there I will speak with you, and there I will meet with the Israelites, and it shall be sanctified by My Presence (kevodi).

Here God alludes to the Divine glory (kevodi) as the "power source" of the desert sanctuary, namely God's presence. What does Moses find mysterious or confusing about this? Well, even in the desert, God is represented by the kohanim; they make up at least a portion of God's glory. Can humans truly sanctify the Divine, when the Divine is already entirely holy? Here, the Talmud suggests that we read the word kevodi (lit. "My-glory") as mekhubadai ("those who glorify me"). In other words, God's presence is one and the same as the human beings who attempt to approach God. Those who reach out to God can come to represent God so completely that they are equivalent to God's own presence.

With this interpretation, the Talmud links the act of Nadab and Abihu in bringing strange fire with more typical acts of martyrdom. The Talmud seems to be claiming that the two

sons of Aaron chose to serve by dying for God in order to dedicate the sanctuary with their lives. This act of self-sacrifice would show the power contained in the sanctuary and make it a source of awe among the people. While this may be troubling to us, the Talmud's interpretation attempts to fully demonstrate the strength of Moses's words to Aaron: "Your sons did no wrong. They died doing a good thing, sanctifying the Divine name among the people."

The raw, visceral potency of this understanding is undeniable, and I find its call a primal one. Though I know there will be many who find this second interpretation deeply disturbing, its demand that connection with God is worth giving up one's life raises the stakes in religious life. When we fail to see that this power, majesty, and glory is one of the things that consistently attracts people to religion, we put ourselves in a very dangerous position. At some level, the tremendous mystery which awakens within us fear and trembling can be properly taken as the Divine voice calling out to us. On the other hand (and this is the thing that disturbs us so deeply), what we think to be a great mystery can simply be a moment of self-delusion, leading us into acts of nihilistic self-destruction. One of our most central tasks as religious people is to sort out magical thinking and wish-fulfilling fantasy from God's true demands, demands that lead to authentic holy deeds and actual moral imperatives.

I think this last thought is more aligned with the Talmud's first interpretation, that all power, especially religious power, can be overwhelming and dangerous, and it needs to be contained in order to be safely employed for the betterment of the world. This is what happened at Mount Sinai when God told the people they should not ascend the mountain lest they die. Can we understand the purpose of the desert sanctuary similarly?

Must we not keep Divine power contained in the midst of the people? If we are able to do so, becoming a community both containing and embodying holiness, we can approach God without fear. My blessing for us all is that we have access to God's power, but safely and beneficially, not as a mighty storm, but as a gentle rain. *(Marcus Mordecai Schwartz is the Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections and Assistant Professor for Talmud and Rabbinics at JTS)*

## Shemini: The Sound of Silence by Rabbi Yali Szulanski (2025)
## https://yeshivatmaharat.org/shemini-the-sound-of-silence-2/

Parshat Shemini is nestled into the section of the Torah that delves into themes of purity, holiness, and the consequences of defying divine commandments. However, within its verses lies a poignant narrative that often evokes contemplation—the role of silence after a tragedy.

The parsha begins with the culmination of the consecration of the Mishkan, a sacred space where the Israelites could commune with God. Amidst the celebration and offerings, tragedy strikes. Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, offer unauthorized incense before God, resulting in their sudden and untimely deaths. The abruptness and severity of this loss leave the community reeling in shock and grief.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, a significant silence descends. The Torah tells us that Aharon, upon witnessing the death of his sons, falls quiet. The verse in Vayikra 10:3, states: "vayidom Aharon", which translates to "And Aharon was silent." His response, devoid of words yet undoubtedly laden with profound meaning, invites us to explore the role of silence in the face of overwhelming sorrow.

The agony of a parent mourning the tragic loss of a child, even when the child was in the wrong, is devastating and complex. Despite any mistakes or missteps the child may have made, the bond between parent and child runs deep, and is intertwined with a parent's hopes, dreams, and unconditional love. The pain of losing a child, regardless of the circumstances, is a crushing weight that envelops the parent's heart and soul.

Grief becomes a constant companion, mingled with regret, anguish, maybe anger, and a profound sense of loss. In the midst of this turmoil, the parent may find solace in memories of happier times, clinging to moments of joy and connection amidst the overwhelming sorrow.

Silence in the wake of tragedy can serve as a sanctuary for the soul. It can provide a space for introspection, allowing individuals to grapple with complex emotions and to make sense of the incomprehensible. It can also create a well within the person, in which they can easily sink, their silent screams bouncing within an echochamber. In Aharon's silence, we witness the depths of his anguish and the magnitude of his loss. It is a silence born not of apathy or resignation but of reverence and solemnity—a recognition of the profound mystery and fragility of life.

Interestingly, our own mourning practices offer opportunities to find healing in silence and to build resilience in the face of the silence of others. Aharon and his remaining sons model that.

The process of sitting shiva embodies the transformative power of silence within the grieving process. During the seven days of mourning following a loved one's passing, mourners refrain from engaging in mundane activities, instead immersing themselves in a sacred silence punctuated by

prayer, reflection, and communal support. Through this practice, mourners honor the memory of the departed, finding solace in the embrace of their community. In the intricate tapestry of communal mourning, silence serves as a profound thread that binds individuals together in shared grief and reverence.

In Jewish tradition, being silent in the home of a mourner stems from the principle of respecting the grieving process and providing comfort to the bereaved. Visitors to a house of mourning are often encouraged to offer their presence and support through wordless companionship.

This silence allows the mourner space to express their emotions, memories, and thoughts without interruption. It demonstrates sensitivity to their pain and offers them the opportunity to share as much or as little as they wish, knowing that they are surrounded by a supportive and understanding community. This practice reflects the Jewish value of empathy and solidarity during times of loss and grief. As the community joins Aharon in his silence, they bear witness to his pain and offer silent solidarity, affirming that he is not alone in his grief.

Silence allows for the passage of time, a necessary ingredient for healing and reconciliation. In the immediate aftermath of a tragedy, words may ring hollow, unable to assuage the pain or offer comfort. Silence also honors the sacredness of the present moment, allowing individuals the space to mourn, remember, and eventually, move forward. As time passes, the sharp edges of grief may soften, and the healing balm of quiet paves the way for the emergence of hope and resilience.

In moments of tragedy and loss, silence can be a vessel for the expression of profound emotion, a conduit for communal solidarity, and a catalyst for transformation and renewal.

Hence the lasting power of “vayidom Aharon.” *(Rabbi Yali Szulanski’s journey to Maharat was shaped by her commitment to emotional wellness, spiritual growth, and community resilience. She founded The “I Am” Project/The Neshima Initiative, bringing trauma-informed wellness practices to classrooms and Jewish spaces. R’ Yali is the Youth and Family Engagement Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and continues her work educating and tending to emotional wellness at SAR Academy and beyond. )*

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## Yahrtzeits

Burt Solomon remembers his natural mother Lillian Ginsburg Solomon and his mother Gertrude Nadler Solomon both on Saturday April 11th

Len Grossman remembers his mother Charlotte Grossman on Friday April 17th