

Short Comments on Shmini
Rabbi Eliot Malomet March 26, 2022 23 Adar II 5782 Shabbat Parah

ויקרא ט:א' ויהי ביום השמיני קרא משה לאהרן ולבניו ולזקני ישראל:

Leviticus 9:1 *On the eighth day Moses called Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel.* It's always important to point out that seven days is a unit of time that reminds us of creation. The eighth day signals the beginning of a new period. Shmini Atzeret signals the beginning of the post-festival time. Hanukah, which echoes Sukkot, culminates on the eighth day also signals the post-festival time. A brit milah takes place on the eighth day, signaling the beginning of a new life, now marked by the covenant. Wedding celebrations last for seven days. The eighth day marks the boundary between the wedding week and the couple's new life. We get up from Shiva on the morning of the seventh day, an expression of leniency towards the mourner that they should not be obligated to sit any more than necessary. And as any mourner will tell you, the eighth day, which does not involve any specific commemoration (other than perhaps re-joining the daily minyan) signals the return of the mourner to the normal rhythms of life.

ט:ב' ויאמר אל-אהרן קח-לך עגל בור-בקר להטאת ואיל לעלה תמימים וקרב לפני ה':

9:2 *He said to Aaron: "Take a calf of the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, without blemish, and bring them before ה'.* Each step of the inauguration ceremony is laid out in detail. There is a reason for this precision. Proximity to the "Holy" is dangerous. God is a consuming fire. If you do something outside the rules, it will have catastrophic consequences. Consider a nuclear technician who makes a mistake relating to the reactor core: you get a Chernobyl. The functioning of the sanctuary is kind of like that. When it functions properly, the power of the universe bestows its blessing. If you make a mistake operating it, it can be lethal.

ט:כ"ב וישא אהרן את-יָדוֹ אֶל-הָעָם וַיְבָרְכֵם וַיֵּרֶד מֵעֵשֶׂת הַחֲטָאֹת וְהֵעֵלָה וְהִשְׁלֵמִים:

9:22 *Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being.* This is a great moment in the ceremony. The people are assembled outside the sanctuary. They are not privy to what

is going on inside, and it is important to note that everything that takes place inside the sanctuary, transpires in silence. Not a word is uttered, not a note sung, not a peep. Why? "This silence is an expression of the priests' particular conception of God. According to Priestly theology...God is above and beyond any form and any personality...within this conceptual framework, there is no room for hymns of praise to God..." (Israel Knohl). In other words, within the zone of total holiness, words are inadequate, and song is impossible. Outside that zone however, because people have no means other than speech and song, there is sound. Thus, Aaron's blessing takes place on the boundary between the holy and the non-holy which is also the boundary between silence and sound. There is a debate among commentators as to what the content of his blessing is. Some say that it is the Priestly Blessing, and some say that the content is unknown. Why didn't the Torah include a text of the blessing here? The tension between concealed and revealed details is the hallmark of Torah and opens us to the possibility of endless speculation as to what that blessing was. For the sake of digression, if it was the priestly blessing, it may have looked like this. Leonard Nimoy often recounted that he came up with the Vulcan



greeting because he looked at the hands of the kohanim during a "duchanning" service. He mentions that the hand sign is the letter

ו

Shin which is the first letter of God's name. Interestingly, the ancient form of the Hebrew letter Shin looks like a "w".

W

In the Book of Numbers, the account of the priestly blessing concludes with the words:

So are they to put my name upon the Children of Israel, that I myself may bless them. Some speculate that in configuring God's name in this form, the kohanim are literally placing God's name on the people as they bless the people.

ט:כ"ג וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל-אֱהֱלֵ מוֹעֵד וַיִּצְאֹוּ וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת-הָעָם וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד-ה' אֶל-כָּל-הָעָם:

9:23 *Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent*

of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of ה' appeared to all the people. Now, having been joined by Moses, they bless the people together. This is the penultimate moment of the ceremony.

ט"ז:כ"ד ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל עליה מזבח אֶת־הַעֹלָה וְאֶת־הַקֹּבִיִּים וַיֵּרָא כָל־הָעָם וַיִּזְנוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם:

9:24 Fire came forth from before ה' and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces. And this is the ultimate moment. "We have ignition, we have lift off!" that is, of the cultic life of ancient Israel. From this point onward, there will be a permanent fire on the altar. All sacrifices that will ever be offered on the altar will be consumed by the fire that was ignited at this moment. This is the perpetual fire. The reaction of the people is an eruption of noise. Thus, we have a juxtaposition of the Sanctuary of Silence which was reserved for the kohanim, and the Congregation of Cacophony which is for everybody else. Moses and Aaron are standing at the boundary of those zones.

ויקרא י"א-ב ויקחו בני־אֶהֱרֹן קִיבֹב וְאֶבִי־הוּא אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בְהֵן אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֶת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֲתֶם: וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי ה':

10:1 Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before ה' alien fire, which had not been enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from ה' and consumed them; thus, they died at the instance of ה'. And thus, the event culminates in tragedy. Nadav and Avihu act improperly. With zeal, excessive piety, or a kind of thrill-seeking that took them right to the edge of danger, they present their unauthorized incense, and they end up incinerated. Rather than see this is a punishment, this is what happens when you do not abide by the rules in a place of holy danger.

י"ח-י"א וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל־אֶהֱרֹן לֵאמֹר: גֵּינוּ וְשִׁכְרֵם אֶל־תִּשְׂתּוּן אֲתֶם וּבְנֵיכֶם בְּבִאֲכֶם אֶל־אֱהֹל מוֹעֵד וְלֹא תִמְתּוּ חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם: וְלֹהֲבִיל גֵּינוּ הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּגְבִינוּ הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּגְבִינוּ הַטָּמֵא וּגְבִינוּ הַטְּהוֹר: וְלֹהֲוֹרֹת אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת כָּל־הַחֻקִּים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' אֲלֵיכֶם בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה:

10:8-11 And ה' spoke to Aaron, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages, for you must distinguish between the sacred and

the profane, and between the impure and the pure; and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which ה' has imparted to them through Moses. Why the emphasis on intoxicants? Well, it's obvious. If you are inebriated when you offer a sacrifice, you can incur the same consequences that Aaron's sons incurred. That's not to say, as some commentators perceive, that Nadav and Avihu were OWI (officiating while intoxicated). It simply means that you have to be in total control when you are near the holy areas and that you have to be fully present when you are differentiating between the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure.

י"ט-ז-כ' וְאֵת שְׂעִיר הַחַטָּאת דָּרַשׁ דָּרַשׁ מִשֶּׁה וְהִגִּה שְׂרָף וַיִּקְצֹף עַל־אֶלְעָזָר וְעַל־אִיתָמָר בְּנֵי אֶהֱרֹן הַנוֹתְרִים לֵאמֹר: מִדּוּעַ לֹא־אָכַלְתֶּם אֶת־הַחַטָּאת בַּמָּקוֹם הַקֹּדֶשׁ כִּי קֹדֶשׁ קֹדְשִׁים הוּא וְאֵתָהּ וְנָתַן לָכֶם לִשְׂאֵת אֶת־עֵינֵי הַעֲדָה לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה': הֲנִי לֹא־הוֹבֵא אֶת־דָּמָה אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ פְּגִימָה אֲכֹל תֹּאכְלוּ אֹתָהּ בַּקֹּדֶשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי: וַיַּדְבֵּר אֶהֱרֹן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הֲנִי הָיִים הַקְרִיבוּ אֶת־חַטָּאתְכֶם וְאֶת־עֹלֹתְכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' וַתִּקְרָאנָה אֹתִי פְּאֹלָה וְאֶכְלָתִי חַטָּאת הַיּוֹם הַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינַי ה': וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינָיו:

10:16-20 Then Moses inquired about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and said, "Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and it is what was given to you to remove the guilt of the community and to make expiation for them before ה'. Since its blood was not brought inside the sanctuary, you should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded." And Aaron spoke to Moses, "See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before ה', and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would ה' have approved?" And when Moses heard this, he approved. What's going on here? In order to purge Israel of sin, the sin offering has to be ingested by the kohanim. The problem here is that the zone in which they were to consume it was polluted by the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. When Moses found out that the eating didn't take place the way it was supposed to, he got angry. But he didn't take into account that the zone was polluted. So focused on the correct performance of the procedure, he lost sight of the implications of the death, not to mention, the grief and bewilderment that this would have caused Aaron. Moses relented. Sometimes being so zealous can blind you to the realities that are in front of you.

SHABBAT SHALOM! MAYBE YOU COULD SPONSOR A PARASHA SHEET? IT WOULDN'T KILL YOU!