

For seven days Aaron and his sons were sequestered in the sanctuary as part of its inauguration. The seven days here is an echo of the seven days of creation, and the symbolism is clear: in order to be installed as priests, **Aaron and his sons would be symbolically re-created**. The eighth day signifies a new beginning, and our parasha begins on the eighth day of the ceremonies: **הַשְּׁמִינִי בַיּוֹם** - **Now it was on the eighth day**. Aaron and his sons were instructed to bring an entire menu of offerings comprised of seven animals (Is seven a coincidence? Probably not!). And one offering of flour mixed with oil. Here is a chart of the offerings:

Calf (8:2)	חֲטָאת Hattat: A sin offering.	A personal offering of atonement.	Blood placed on the altar. Skin and flesh burned outside the sanctuary.
Ram (8:2)	עֹלָה Olah: A burnt offering.	A personal offering to demonstrate total devotion.	Totally consumed on the altar.
Goat (8:3)	חֲטָאת Hattat: A sin offering.	A collective offering of atonement for the people.	Skin burned outside the altar. Portions eaten by the priests.
Calf and Sheep (8:3)	עֹלָה Olah: A burnt offering.	A collective offering to demonstrate total devotion.	Totally consumed on the altar.
Ox and Ram (8:4)	שְׁלָמִים Shlamim: A peace offering	A celebratory offering that is shared with everyone.	Select portions eaten by the priests. Main portions eaten by the donor.
(8:4) Fine flour mixed with oil	מִנְחָה Minhah: A grain offering.	A vegetal offering to demonstrate total devotion.	A fistful of fine flour taken by the priests and burned completely.

We have already seen the precision and details required for animal offerings in the early chapters of Leviticus. Why is there such close attention to them? Because we are in a world in which the very life of the people depends on them. **When sacrifices were performed properly, with proper intentionality and attentiveness, God will remain present with the people and that means life. If they are brought to the altar with carelessness, insincerity, or an error occurs, the life of the community is threatened. That means death.**

This was self-evident to our ancestors, not to us. Two analogies can help us understand the seriousness with which Moses and the priesthood related to the sacrificial ritual. **1. When a Sefer Torah Falls**. Nothing is more catastrophic in synagogue life than when a Torah falls to the floor. This could occur for many reasons: perhaps it was too heavy to carry; it rolled off the table by accident; it was not secured properly in the ark. No matter the reason, when this

happens (God forbid), the people who witness it in shul tend to react with horror, shock and gasps. The reason is obvious. The Torah is no ordinary object. It is the holiest object we have. It represents the word of God. For it to fall, even by accident, it is perceived (even by us rational, 21st century humans!) to be a terrible omen and the falling of a sefer Torah triggers an irrational fear of dire consequences, that God is going to punish us. To that end, a whole set of rules has evolved for dealing with a fallen sefer Torah ranging from a period of communal fasting to the imposition of mandatory tzedakah obligation on all those who were present. The fallen sefer Torah is a desecration and a shattering of order. The purpose of these acts to atone for the desecration of the Torah, and to repair the deeply rooted, perhaps irrational perception that the congregation is out of favor with God.

2. The Surgical Operating Room. There is a precise set of rules for surgical suites. Only credentialed people can enter and leave. All people present and all equipment must undergo thorough preparation and sterilization. A designated person is charged with overseeing that nobody contaminates anything accidentally. There are rigorous protocols and checklists for every piece of equipment and every sponge or swab. The purpose of this rigor is obvious. A mistake can result in a deadly infection or can cost the life of the patient. The pressure on Aaron and his sons to perform the rituals of inauguration properly was intense. For the first sacrifices, the Torah goes into minute detail as to what transpired. **Aaron came near the altar and slaughtered the calf of the hattat...they brought the blood...he dipped his finger in the blood and placed it on the horns of the altar, the remaining blood he poured out at the foundation of the altar...** (Lev. 8:8-21). Everything seems to be going fine. Miraculously, **a fire went out from before God, and consumed, on the altar, the olah and the fat parts...** (8:24). Then, from nowhere and totally off-script, Aaron's two eldest sons Nadav and Avihu took their own firepans, place fire-coals and incense on them, and brought a **strange fire before God**. (10:1). Various reasons have been proposed as to why they did so. One speculation is that there were no specific inauguration rituals for the incense altar, and out of their own desire to correct that, they improvised here. Unlike the outer altar used for ordinary animal sacrifices, which was made out of bronze, the incense altar was made out of gold and located at the very heart of the sanctuary, just outside the Holy of Holies, opposite the menorah. While the sprinkling of blood and the burning of animal flesh are extremely powerful ritual acts, **the burning of the special sanctuary blend of incense is indeed more powerful**. In the words of one commentator, **if all the other forms of sacrifice, such as bovine animals, pure birds, fine flour, oil, wine, and water, are conventional forms of sacrifice, like conventional sources of energy, (i.e. fossil fuels, hydroelectricity, solar, wind, geothermal), incense is the unconventional form of sacrifice. Incense is the nuclear energy of the sacrificial system**. Here, Aaron's

sons take the most lethal sacrificial substance, and out of zeal, carelessness, or perhaps even intoxication, they bring that substance, their own mixture of it, in their own fire pans, to inaugurate the innermost altar. And well, the result was catastrophic. A fire came out - a second fire - and not only did it consume their incense, but it consumed them! And everything else that was in any way sacralized and prepared for consumption, most important of which was the people's sin offering, the *Hattat*. The catastrophic event brought the proceedings to a temporary halt. Moses, thinking that life and death was dependent on the proper disposition of the sacrifices, remonstrates Aaron. Desperate to complete them properly he says rather coarsely: **הוא אשר דבר ה' לאמר בקרבי** *It is what God spoke [about], saying: Through those permitted-near to me, I will be-proven-holy, before all the people, I will be-accorded-honor!* (Lev. 10:3) His remark is so oblivious to the shock and horror of what just happened, and Aaron's presumed state of mind, having witnessed the incineration of his two sons right before his eyes, that Aaron does not respond. **וידם אהרן** *Aaron was silent.* He is either too shocked, too overwhelmed, or maybe he was restraining himself from exploding with rage against his brother. Moses, still concerned that everything take place properly, orders the removal of the two corpses lest they contaminate the sacred area, and then instructs the priests to continue with the sacrifices. He goes through the different offerings, and when it comes to the people's *Hattat*-sin offering, he notices that the animal (a goat) was completely burned by the initial fire! According to the strict rules of the sacrifice (see Lev. 6:19) that sacrifice was supposed to have been eaten by Aaron and his sons in the sanctuary! He asks Aaron: **מדוע לא אכלתם את הקדש** *Why did you not eat the hattat-offering in the place of the Holy-Shrine?* (10:17) It is at that point that Aaron responds: *Here, today they brought their hattat and their olah, before God, and such [things] as these have happened to me [they died]! Had I eaten the hattat-offering today, would it have been good in God's eyes?* (10:19) In other words he is saying: *Do you really expect me to eat these things today after witnessing the tragic death of my sons today?* At which point the Torah says, **וישמע משה וייתב** *Moses heard, and it was good in his eyes* (10:20). How is a reader to respond to this story? On the one hand we can appreciate Moses' zeal in the performance of the rituals. Like the surgeon who needs the perfect environment, or the pilot who must regain control of the aircraft, or the leader who must assert leadership in a crisis situation in order to achieve an objective notwithstanding the emotional state of whoever has been affected, Moses urgently wants to regain control of the rituals to dispatch them properly, for God's sake, literally, and for the sake of the life of the people. But here the emotional state of the principal actors is crucial. *We are learning here that the integrity in the performance of a ritual is not as important as the emotional state of the person performing it.* When Aaron replies to Moses, he educates him in a hierarchy of values. When Moses *hears*

the depth of what Aaron is saying, he finally understands that *the integrity of the rituals must yield to Aaron's distraught emotional state.*

Space and Time: Reading the passage closely, we see how Moses is totally focused on **הקדש מקום** *the holy space*. But Aaron's reply is based on **time**: **היום** *today*. *Had I eaten the hattat offering today, would it have been good in God's eyes?*

Aaron	Moses
Concerned about time : this day. היום	Concerned about space : מקום הקדש
The day was ruined.	The space was defiled.
I cannot eat it in the state I am in today.	You must eat it in the space you are in.
Would this be what God wants?	Moses yields to Aaron.

Observations: 1. No divine intervention. God does not intervene in this situation. Here, human beings alone determine what God wants based on how they perceive God. Aaron's question to Moses is based on his perception that God is compassionate and understanding of human pain. Human beings determine, on the basis of their understanding of God that *rigorous observance of ritual yields to human pain*, that we can be lenient in circumstances of overwhelming human pain and unbearable tragedy.

2. Moses is a Learning Leader. Moses comes off initially as a zealot, or at the very least the one who understands his responsibility first and foremost to the rules and the procedures. But in the end he adapts and transforms his goals. *One of the contributing factors to his greatness is that he learns.*

3. Human Imperfection. Here, the dream of a perfect religious ceremony collides with the reality of novice actors who are limited in their skills or understandings of that ceremony. *What makes this a great human story, rather than a great theological story is the imperfection of all the characters.*

4. Holiness of Time over Holiness of Space. This is one of the great themes of Judaism: *Judaism overwhelmingly emphasizes the primacy of sacred time over sacred space.* No one expressed this better than Abraham Joshua Heschel in his small masterpiece, *The Sabbath*, which he called, *a monument of time*. Judaism constructed of monuments in time rather than monuments in space. In this instance, when Aaron refers to **today**, and Moses refers to this **place**, Moses yields. This reflects a deeper idea, *that the needs of sacred space yield to the needs of sacred time.* Shabbat Shalom!

Today is Day 568. We continue to pray for the return of the hostages being held in captivity in Gaza by evil messengers of destruction. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, heal the wounded and shield Israel from continued terror. Amen!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Ann-Sheryl and Steven White to commemorate the yahrzeit of Ann-Sheryl's father, Professor Arnold Kritz, z'l.