Shmini: Vayikra (Leviticus)

What's it all about?



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After spending seven days in seclusion being inaugurated into the priesthood, Aaron and his sons emerge on the eighth day and begin serving as priests. A divine fire appears to consume the offerings on the altar, and the divine presence begins to dwell in the Sanctuary.

Aaron's elder sons, Nadav and Avihu, offer "a strange fire before God," and both die. Aaron remains silent. **God gives us the laws of *kashrut***, identifying the animals we're permitted to eat in great detail. The parsha also delivers the laws of purity.

> "Fire went forth from before God and consumed them, and they died before God."

Take a deeper dive

Our parsha's very name suggests that something mysterious is afoot: it is Shemini, or the eighth, after the eighth day following the weeklong period in which Aaron and his sons were inducted into the priesthood.

And eight is a weird number: Seven, we know, represents the natural order of things, which is why there are seven days in a week, and why the world was created in seven days. And so, drumming up the mystery, our parsha begins not with a bang but with a whimper: "And Moses said to Aaron, 'Approach the altar and perform your sin offering and your burnt offering, atoning for yourself and for the people, and perform the people's sacrifice, atoning for them, as the Lord has commanded.'"

The call, Rashi explains, was necessary because Aaron "was bashful and afraid to approach the altar," an emotional state that sent the rabbis into a frenzy of interpretation. The 19th century German rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, for example, noted that the animal Aaron is commanded to sacrifice is an *egel ben bakar*, a cow which is neither a baby nor an adult bull. It is, in other words, an adolescent animal, a beast in the process of maturing, **the perfect embodiment of Aaron's moment of transition**—it's now time for the High Priest to grow up into the role he was always meant to play.

And Aaron's emotional state of mind—a little bit afraid of change, hesitant to step in and take responsibility, unsure if he's up for this very big task—is one with which we can all empathize. This psychological drama, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook observed, is one we all share. We all, he wrote in his *Orot HaTeshuvah*, are gripped by the weight of our failures, real or imagined. We all struggle with anxiety. And we all have the choice to turn our past missteps into future inspiration. **"Despair itself," Rav Kook wrote, "should encourage a person not to fear and to repent from every sin, full of tranquility and spiritual courage."**

When we find ourselves, like Aaron, not quite able to overcome our burdens, we could use a reminder, like the one delivered by Moses, that ecstasy awaits: "When thoughts of fear and repentance arise out of sadness, one should avert his attention from them until he can gain hold of his consciousness, and accept on himself the entire complement of holiness and fear of Heaven with delight and happiness."

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