

PORTION	DATE	HEB DATE	TORAH	NEVIIM	KETUVIM
Sh'mini	18 Apr 2020	24 Nisan 5780	Lev. 9:1-11:47	2Sam 6:1-7:17	Matt. 3:11-17

This week's Torah portion, Sh'mini which means "eighth" literally begins on 'the eighth day', at the conclusion of the week-long inauguration ceremony of the Tabernacle, at the very climax of the joy. The *parasha* really only deals mainly with two subjects: the events of eighth day, and the laws of kashrut, of what may and may not be eaten from among the living things, according to Hashem's will.

This eighth day is none other than Rosh Chodesh Nisan, the first day of the first month, 2449. In many ways, everything we've been learning, every nuance of every weekly portion, the entire Torah, all of creation has been leading up to this moment. Because this is the day that Hashem Himself has been waiting for, the day that the Nation of Yisrael, representing mankind, welcomed His Presence into this world. This is the day in which Hashem's goal for creation – namely, that He should have an abode in this world – began to be fulfilled, when the Tabernacle became a reality.

The power of this moment, the intensity of the scene, is beyond words. But if mere words really fail to describe the feelings, the experience of the nation, that day that the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, took up residence among the Children of Yisrael, if words can't describe that kind of transcending joy, song can. Thus here is one of the most amazing verses in all of Torah, (9:24): "A fire went forth before Hashem and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fats, the people saw and sang glad song and fell upon their faces. This is an amazing and singular expression, in Hebrew וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם (vai-ya-ron-nu, vai-yip-pe-lu al-pe-nei-hem; they sang glad song). The people, the entire nation, inspired by the reality of the living presence of Hashem among them, in total humility, nullifying their egos completely to Hashem, they fell on their faces, they 'sang glad song,' they heard the music of the universe, and they allowed themselves to become part of it.

So, this was the first day of the priestly service and the priestly blessing, the day upon which the Divine fire descended from Heaven upon the Altar. This uplifting, transcendent, sublime experience is the background to the tragic and untimely death of Nadav and Avihu, who were seemingly transfigured by the sheer ecstasy of the indwelling of Hashem's presence, and wanted to add their own contribution of love to the manifestation of His love, but they erred in their understanding of how to live with that Presence and incorporate it into everyday reality. That's our understanding.

Much has been written about the background, and the intention of these righteous men, and their motivation. It's difficult to talk about the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. It's hard to avoid generalizations, pat answers, judgment calls of these men...it's all too easy to fall into that trap...to pontificate, to draw conclusions, and determine how much better we know, and how much better we would have done, as if we actually know better... Nadav and Avihu thought that they had to do something special, something extraordinary, to keep this feeling of closeness to Hashem going. To keep it constant for them.

But what really is the definition of living a life of holiness? They brought an offering which was not commanded. But isn't the spiritual level of one who is not commanded even greater than one who is commanded? That's maybe what most would think. But in reality, it's hard enough to do what you are told, and that's what Hashem is really asking of us...it's much more difficult to follow instructions...it requires more humility, yet more confidence and sense of purpose.

There are huge life lessons here for us, that Hashem intended for us to learn from this episode. We try to understand how it happened that at the greatest moment, at the apex of this joyous, festive occasion, of the resting of the Shechinah in the Tabernacle, there occurred the most devastating failure. While Moshe and Aharon and the entire nation stand by, Aharon's sons draw near with an offering that they weren't commanded in, and fire comes from heaven and strikes them, consumes them. What a shock! What a disappointment! It's like, from the highest moment, to plummet down to the depths of despair.

What could Aharon have thought? What could his wife, the boys' mother, the righteous Elisheva, what could she have thought? How did this impact their relationship with Hashem? The great tragedy that befell Aharon on the day of the dedication of the Tabernacle and how Torah records his reaction, teaches us a great deal about what it means to cope with this, the most difficult challenge that any human being faces – death. Aharon's response is silence. 'Moshe said to Aharon: Of this Hashem speak, saying, 'I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me, thus I will be honored before the entire people', and Aharon was silent.' (10:3)

There are different types of silence and different reasons for manifesting silence in the face of such tragedy. For example, there is a silence of shock. A person can't process what has happened, and refuses to believe. But Aharon's silence has a different implication: "He was silent from his mourning," as one of the commentators explain; meaning he didn't express mourning; he didn't cry. This was a silence of acceptance and submission to the Divine will; a silence of coming to terms. While generally the *halacha*, Torah law, requires us to mourn over the death of a close relative, Aharon's job description was not that of an ordinary person, and he was expected to continue with the Divine service despite his heavy loss. Aharon summoned Mishael and Eltzafan to carry the bodies of their brethren out, in order to allow the service to continue.

Elazar and Ithamar were commanded to continue the service and refrain from such mourning practices as allowing their hair to grow long and rending their garments. The assignment of mourning was given over to the nation of Yisrael, and removed from the family. Only the eating from the sin offering was kept from the sons of Aharon on account of their mourning.

Aharon's response to the death of his sons gives us great insight. To the mourner, it seems like his whole world, his whole connection to reality, has been destroyed. The vacuum created by his loss fills his entire world until it feels like there is nothing else in the world but this void. With the passing of his loved one it's like the whole world is 'dead', and life has lost its meaning. But this is the illusion of death, and Aharon saw through it.

And this is an aspect of the beautiful and unique connection between our *parasha* of Sh'mini, and the Red Heifer. The Torah's exclusive antidote to the impurity of death is the sprinkling of the ashes of the red heifer, one of the commandments in the category of '*chuk*', mitzvot whose reasoning is beyond the realm of human understanding.

What cause the impurity of death? What does it represent? Rav Kook writes that the impurity of death is its very falsehood, the fact that it is a lie. It casts a debilitating illusion over our eyes and makes us think that this is the end, when in reality it is a graduation, a new stage of existence for the eternal soul, outside the physical confines of the body.

When slapped with a confrontation with death even those of great faith can have a momentary weakness, for it takes a powerful connection to Hashem, whose Shechinah in the Holy Temple is the secret of eternal life, to remember that death is not the end.

Torah teaches us that while the deceased has departed this life, but life does not stop. The life of the soul is neither interrupted nor suspended, but continues its existence on a whole new level. And the world continues to exist, and the responsibility for its continued existence and rectification remains on the shoulders of the living.

The mourning process is very important and the circle with the departed must be closed properly. But those who remain continue to look towards the living and not to the dead; to the future and not the past. The mourning process has to give us the strength to draw renewed energies to accomplish in this life, and it bequeaths to us the sense of responsibility, to continue the life's work of *Vai·ya·ron·nu, vai·yip·pe·lu al·pe·nei·hem* the deceased.