

PARASHAT SHEMINI

Leviticus 9:1–11:47

Parashat Shemini opens with Moses' instructions to Aaron and his sons for bringing offerings to the sanctuary as atonement for any sins that they or the people may have committed. Aaron follows Moses' instructions carefully and places the offerings on the sanctuary altar. Afterwards two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, decide to bring fire offerings of their own. Because they have brought offerings not commanded by God, they are punished by death. Moses tells Aaron and his other sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, not to mourn for them. Later God tells Moses and Aaron which foods are permitted for eating and which are forbidden to the people of Israel.

OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

Moses tells his brother, Aaron, and Aaron's sons to bring a calf, a ram, a he-goat, and a lamb to the sanctuary for sacrifices. They are to be sin and burnt offerings and an offering of well-being. In offering them, Aaron, his sons, and the entire people are to be forgiven by God for any wrongs they may have done.

Aaron and his sons carefully follow the instructions for offering sacrifices. They slaughter the animals, burn the fat of the sacrifice on the altar, and spill the blood at the base of the altar. Then Aaron lifts his hands toward the people and blesses

them. Afterwards God sends a fire to burn everything they have placed on the altars. When the people see the fire, they fall to the ground in prayer.

• 2 •

Acting independently, without a command from God, two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, take pans, place fire and incense upon them, and offer them upon the altar. God sends a fire and destroys Nadab and Abihu, telling Aaron, "Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and assert My authority before all the people." Hearing God's judgment, Aaron is silent.

Moses commands Aaron and his other sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, neither to bare their heads



nor tear their clothing as signs of mourning for Nadab and Abihu. "The people of Israel will mourn their deaths," he counsels. He also tells them they must drink neither wine nor any other intoxicant when entering the sanctuary. Their task is to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, the clean and the unclean and to teach the people all the laws that have been given by God to Moses.

Later Moses criticizes Eleazar and Ithamar for not eating the sin offering inside the sanctuary as they had been commanded. Aaron answers his brother by pointing out that the sin offering had been presented as he commanded, and the result had been the death of his two sons, Nadab and Abihu. "Would it have been different today? Would such things have happened?" Aaron asks Moses. Hearing Aaron's painful words and rec-

ognizing the truth of his argument, Moses approves what had been done.

• 3 •

Moses and Aaron are told by God to instruct the Israelites about which foods they are permitted to eat and which foods are forbidden to them.

They present the following list of permitted foods: all animals with split hoofs that chew their cud; all that live in water that have fins and scales; all locusts, bald locusts, crickets, and grasshoppers.

The following are forbidden foods: camel, daman, hare, and swine; the eagle, vulture, black vulture, kite, falcon, raven, ostrich, nighthawk, sea gull, hawk, little owl, cormorant, great owl, white owl, pelican, bustard, stork, heron, hoopoe, and bat; all animals that walk on their paws; the mole, mouse, great lizards of every variety, the gecko,

land crocodile, lizard, sand lizard, and chameleon; anything that crawls on its belly or has many legs.

One may not eat or touch the body of an animal that has died of natural causes. If one has such contact, all clothing shall be washed, and the person shall be considered unclean until sundown. If a dead carcass touches any article of wood, cloth, or skin, sack, or any implement, it shall be dipped in water and remain there until sundown. If the implement is made of pottery, it shall be broken.

Any water or food in such an implement is unfit for eating or drinking. Should the carcass be found near a spring or cistern, the water there shall be considered fit for drinking; if it is found on seed grain, the seed is considered fit for planting.

Moses tells the people that all these rules concerning permitted and forbidden foods and what is clean and unclean have been given to them that they might be holy before God.

THEMES

Parashat Shemini contains two important themes:

1. The dangers of excess.
2. Eating as a function of "holiness" in Jewish tradition.

PEREK ALEF: *What Did Nadab and Abihu Do Wrong?*

According to the Torah, Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, each took a fire pan, placed incense upon it, and brought it to the sanctuary altar for an offering. The fire they offered had not been authorized by God nor had they been commanded to bring it to the sanctuary. As a result, they were both put to death.

What did they do to deserve such severe punishment? Were they put to death for offering the wrong kind of fire on the sanctuary altar?

The story of Nadab and Abihu raises issues with which interpreters have struggled for many centuries. Early rabbinical commentators, for example, claim that the two brothers were not punished for offering the wrong kinds of incense or fire. They were condemned for the evil intent that motivated them. Nadab and Abihu, say the rabbis, were ruthlessly ambitious.

Supporting their interpretation, the rabbis creatively invent an imaginary conversation between Nadab and Abihu as they stand with Moses and Aaron at Mount Sinai. "Look at those two old men," they say to each other. "Soon, they will be gone, and we will be the leaders of this community."

According to the rabbis, God warns Nadab and Abihu about the consequences of such ambitions

by asking them: "Who will bury whom? Will it be you who will outlive them, or will they outlive you?" The two young men are stunned. After a moment of silence, God tells them: "Your fathers will bury you and go on to lead My people." (*Sifra* on Leviticus 10:1; also *Leviticus Rabbah* 20:10)

From the point of view of the early rabbis, Nadab and Abihu were punished because they plotted to remove Moses and Aaron from their positions of leadership. They appeared at the sanctuary with their own offerings, hoping that the people would be impressed and bring pressure upon Moses and Aaron to transfer their authority to them. Envy and impatience fueled their scheme, say the rabbis, and, in the end, they were punished because of their lust for position and power.

By contrast, Rabbi Levi argues that it was not ambition but arrogance that motivated Nadab and Abihu. Again employing creative imagination, he claims that the two set themselves off from all their peers and bragged that no woman was good enough for them to marry. In fact, says Rabbi Levi, they insensitively took advantage of women's feelings, raising their expectations and hopes for a serious relationship when they had no intention of marriage.

Rabbi Levi claims that they publicly declared: "Our father's brother is king, our mother's brother is a prince, our father is High Priest, and we are both deputy High Priests. What woman is good

enough for us?" Because they arrogantly demeaned others, they were punished. (*Leviticus Rabbah* 20:10)



Rashi

Rashi agrees but cites other evidence. Basing his interpretation of the behavior of Nadab and Abihu upon a discussion of it in the Talmud, Rashi points out that, rather than following the carefully detailed directions for offering a sacrifice or bringing fire to the sanctuary, they took upon themselves the power of deciding what to offer, how to bring the offering, and when. For disregarding the process and failing to consult with Aaron and Moses about what they planned to do, Nadab and Abihu were punished. Rashi argues that their arrogance led them to believe that they were accountable to no one.

They failed to consult . . .

Not only did Nadab and Abihu fail to consult Moses and Aaron about their plan to bring a "foreign fire" into the sanctuary, they also failed to communicate with each other. Instead of discussing the matter in a way that might have led them to speak with the fathers, or others in authority, they acted quickly, without carefully subjecting their ideas to criticism. For not consulting, they suffered serious consequences. (Leviticus Rabbah 20:8)

RASHBAM

Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, bases his view of what Nadab and Abihu did wrong upon the Torah text. He points out that the Torah states "each took his fire pan, put fire in it . . . and they offered before God alien fire, which God had not commanded them." Their sin, Rashbam explains, is that they offered a kind of fire that had not been commanded. That is why the Torah calls it *esh zarah*,

or "alien or foreign fire." In other words, Nadab and Abihu took the law into their own hands.

Rashbam also speculates on why they did so. He explains that Nadab and Abihu were deeply impressed when God appeared in the midst of the fire on the altar after Moses and Aaron offered their sacrifices. Afterwards, he concludes, they assumed that, if they offered "fire," God would once again appear, and they would be given credit by the people for their special powers—powers equal to those of even Moses and Aaron. They, therefore, were willing to take the law into their own hands to improve their reputations and their chances for deposing Moses and Aaron.

Rabbi Morris Adler believes that the story of Nadab and Abihu is filled with symbolism. The "fire" that they brought, says Adler, "burned within them." It was the "fire of ambition," and their death was "the kind of death people bring upon themselves."

Adler writes: "It was a fire of willfulness and hostility. It was a fire of impulse and desire. As they ministered at the altar, they were the victims of their own appetites and greed, whims and ambitions. No fire came from on high to consume them; they were consumed by their own fierce and false ambitions." (*The Voice Still Speaks*, Bloch Publishing Co., New York, 1969, p. 218)

On ambition

Ambition is bondage. (Solomon ibn Gabirol)

Look for cake, and you lose your bread. (Yiddish proverb)

Ambition destroys its possessor. (Yoma 86b)

Do not seek greatness for yourself . . . do not crave a seat at royal tables. (Avot 6:4)

Requirement for success

This is the indispensable requirement for success: you have to want it and want it badly. "You have to have a will to accomplish whatever it is you're setting out to accomplish," says Rita Hauser, who had to overcome formidable barriers of sex discrimination to become one of the leading female attorneys of her generation. "I believe in

will. I think the will to succeed, the will to win, the will to overcome adversity is an absolute major force in the success of anybody.” (Lester Korn, The Success Profile, Fireside, New York, 1988, p. 39)

In his reflections on Nadab and Abihu, Naphtali Hertz Wessely is much less critical than other commentators. Wessely calls Nadab and Abihu “religious personalities of the highest order,” who did not act out of selfish ambition or any other mean purpose. Quite the opposite, says Wessely. The two sons of Aaron were deeply moved by the beauty and meaning of the ritual sacrifices offered by Moses and Aaron. In their enthusiasm and joy “they lost their heads and entered the Holy of Holies to burn incense, something that they had not been commanded to do by Moses.”

Their wrongdoing, Wessely argues, was not the deliberate breaking of the law but rather their failure to control their religious enthusiasms. They should not have gone beyond what Moses had commanded. They should have been more humble instead of blindly assuming that whatever they did in the sanctuary would be acceptable. They were punished, says Wessely, because they occupied positions of importance, which they misused in their misguided excitement and zeal. (*Biur*, comment on Leviticus 10)



Hirsch

Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch criticizes Nadab and Abihu for similar reasons. He explains that Judaism is a tradition of laws and commandments given to bond the community together as a sacred people. When individuals act out of their own zeal to change or break the law, they end up disrupting community expectations and unity. Nadab and Abihu may have been dedicated priests, as Wessely argues, but they endangered community discipline and trust with their new and “alien” fire.

Hirsch goes on to identify the actions of Nadab and Abihu with modern Reform and Conservative rabbis who make changes in Jewish tradition. He comments: “We can understand that the death of

the priestly youths . . . is the most solemn warning for all future priests (rabbis) . . . against . . . every expression of caprice and every subjective idea of what is right and becoming! Not by fresh inventions, even of God-serving novices (students), but by carrying out that which is ordained by God has the Jewish priest (rabbi) to establish the authenticity of his activities.” (Commentary on Leviticus 10:1)

Disturbed by the rising tide of Reform leaders, who called for more flexibility in interpreting the meaning of Torah and Jewish law and for changes in the law to make it more relevant to modern Jewish experience, Hirsch condemns “reformers” for bringing “alien fire” into the sanctuary. He identifies them as the Nadabs and Abihus of his time.

Most Reform and Conservative Jewish leaders would defend themselves by pointing out that Jewish law has never been static, inflexible, or resistant to change. In every generation, Jews have sought to shape the laws of Torah to meet contemporary needs. Jewish practice is dynamic, always evolving to meet new circumstances and situations. Instead of being Nadabs and Abihus, “reformers” view themselves as carrying on the Torah traditions of Akiba, Hillel, Maimonides, and Rashi by reverently reinterpreting and expanding the meanings and relevance of Torah.

Having surveyed a variety of observations, we are left to decide why Nadab and Abihu were punished. Was it ruthless ambition, arrogance, insensitivity, or the failure to consult others and to honor elders? Was it youthful zeal, blind faith, or the failure to realize the dangers in changing rituals and practices of a community? As we have seen, Jewish commentators see in this sad tale significant ethical and social lessons that continue to challenge Torah interpreters today.

PEREK BET: *Different Views on Kashrut—the Jewish Art of Eating*

As we have already noted in our discussion of the Torah’s laws against the eating of blood (see *Parashat Tzav, Perek Bet*), Jewish tradition links “holiness” with “diet.” *Parashat Shemini* presents a list of foods that are permitted for eating and a

list of foods that are forbidden. These lists, together with the prohibition against eating blood, form the basis for *kashrut*, or “laws relating to approved Jewish diet.”

When we refer to a food as *kosher* (from the Hebrew *kasher*, meaning “proper” or “fit”), we mean any food fit for eating according to Jewish law. The term *terefah* (from the Hebrew *toraf*, meaning “torn to pieces”) describes any food unfit for consumption or any utensil that may have become contaminated and is, therefore, unfit for use in the preparation or eating of food.

The Torah permits the eating of all animals with cloven hoofs that chew the cud. The pig is not permitted because it does not chew the cud. All fish with fins and scales may be eaten. Shark and shrimp are not permitted because they have no scales. Some rabbinic authorities permit the eating of sturgeon and swordfish while others do not. There are twenty-four kinds of fowl permitted for eating. They are not birds of prey; all of them have one toe larger than the others; they have a crop and a gizzard with an inner lining that can easily be removed. The Torah also permits the eating of locusts as long as they have four wings, feet, and jointed legs.

All “creeping things,” including the weasel, mouse, “great lizard,” gecko, land crocodile, lizard, sand lizard, and chameleon, are forbidden foods. So are snakes, scorpions, worms, and insects. The Torah also forbids the eating of any foods that have been contaminated by contact with prohibited animals, carcasses, or decomposed foods. (See Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot*, pp. 173–180.)

Kashrut also includes the separation of all milk and meat products as well as utensils used in their preparation or serving. The Torah forbids “boiling a kid in its mother’s milk.” (See Exodus 23:19; 34:26; and Deuteronomy 14:21.) To make certain that this prohibition was observed, the rabbis of the *Mishnah* forbade the mixing of all milk and meat. They also designated a waiting period of six hours between eating meat and milk and a waiting period of three hours between milk and meat. (Some authorities say that one hour between milk and meat is permissible.) (See Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot*, pp. 113–115.)

Kosher terms

What is referred to as milchik in Yiddish, de’lehe in Ladino, and chalavi in Hebrew is any food containing a dairy product. Fleishik in Yiddish, de’carne in Ladino, and besari in Hebrew is any food product derived from a meat substance. Pareve is a neutral food, containing neither meat nor milk products, which can be eaten with either meat or milk foods.

What explanation is given for this emphasis upon diet in Jewish tradition? Why does the Torah, and subsequent Jewish law, place such importance upon *kashrut* or the art of eating?

Rabbi Bernard J. Bamberger notes in his commentary to Leviticus that “most peoples have some food taboos.” Americans, for example, do not eat horse meat. Buddhists avoid all animal food. Hindus look upon the cow as sacred and do not eat beef. Studies of ancient cultures in Syria and Mesopotamia also reveal dietary codes reflecting an understanding of what might be considered “unhealthy” and “healthy” foods. (See *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, New York, 1981, pp. 808–813.)



Rambam (*Maimonides*)

Physician and commentator Moses Maimonides believed that “food that is forbidden by the laws of Torah is unfit for human consumption.” Quoting the rabbis of the Talmud, he writes, “The mouth of the pig is as dirty as dung itself.” Regarding the prohibited fat of the intestine, Maimonides comments that “it makes us full, interrupts the digestion, and produces cold and thick blood.” As for mixing meat and milk, he says that the result “is undoubtedly gross food and makes the person overfull.” (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:48)

The author of *Sefer ha-Hinuch* (possibly Aharon Halevi) agrees with Maimonides’ medical approach. He argues that “our perfect Torah sep-

arated us from harmful factors. This is the common-sense reason for the Torah's dietary prohibitions. If the harmful character of some of these forbidden foods is unknown to us or to medical science, do not be puzzled since the True Physician (God) who warned us regarding them is wiser than us about them." (#73)

Many interpreters of Torah disagree with Maimonides and the author of *Sefer ha-Hinuch*. Speaking for them, Isaac Arama strongly denounces any hygienic justifications of the Torah's laws. "We would do well," he warns, "to bear in mind that the dietary laws are not, as some have asserted, motivated by medical considerations. God forbid! Were that so, the Torah would be denigrated to the status of a minor medical study and worse than that."

Arama feared that, if the Torah's laws about forbidden foods were reduced to medical suggestions, with the discovery of a medical cure for the harm caused by a particular food, there would be no further reason for the Torah prohibition to be observed. The effect would make the Torah "superfluous." Afraid of such a conclusion, Arama argues that the Torah is not a medical text. Its purpose, he says, is to teach us how to live a life of "holiness."

Most interpreters would agree with Arama, pointing out that a medical or dietary justification for the laws of *kashrut* is indefensible. While some laws make sense in terms of hygiene, the Torah also forbids the eating of many foods that present no danger at all to human beings. (Crab, scallops, shrimp, catfish, shark, swordfish, pork, to mention a few.) Furthermore, the separation of milk and meat products does not seem to be justified by any dietary or medical consideration.



Abravanel

For these reasons, Abravanel, agreeing with Arama, concludes that "the Torah did not come to take the place of a medical handbook but to protect

our spiritual health." He declares that foods forbidden by the Torah and by the rabbis who developed the dietary laws of Jewish tradition "poison the pure and intellectual soul, clogging the human temperament, demoralizing the character, promoting an unclean spirit, defiling in thought and deed, driving out the pure and holy spirit. . . ." In other words, they bring spiritual trouble—disaster—to those who consume them!

Unfortunately, Abravanel never explains how the forbidden foods of the Torah lead to such moral and intellectual corruption. However, other interpreters make a connection between the dietary laws and "spiritual health."

The philosopher Philo explains that the dietary laws teach human beings to control their bodily appetites. For instance, the law permitting the eating only of animals that have divided hoofs and chew their cud contains a special message: It teaches that a person will reach true wisdom only by learning to divide and distinguish various ideas from one another and by "chewing over" the facts and concepts that may have been gained through study. (*The Special Laws*, IV, 97f.)

A chasidic teacher, Levi Isaac of Berdichev, also offers an interpretation for the laws of *kashrut* that pertains to "spiritual health." He points out that the laws concerning permitted and forbidden foods have to do with what one allows to enter the mouth. If there is no discipline concerning what one eats, if one is careless about consuming forbidden foods, it is likely that one may also be insensitive and careless about what one says, about slandering and lying, about what comes out of the mouth. *Kashrut*, for Levi Isaac, is not only about food; it is also meant to help us keep our mouths clean and pure from harmful talk.

David Blumenthal elaborates on Levi Isaac's observation. "Keeping kosher is a way of preparing oneself to receive the word of God. It is a way of cultivating the bodily habits that will make one a fit receptacle for the Divine Presence." In other words, observing the dietary laws sensitizes one to all the other laws of Torah. It leads to the observance of them, and [it] leads one to be more open to the spiritual message of Judaism. (*God at the Center*, Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., San Francisco, 1987, pp. 60–82)



Steinsaltz

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz makes a similar observation. He argues that all the laws pertaining to *kashrut* "are based on the principle that a man cannot live a higher, nobler life of the spirit without having the body undergo some suitable preparation for it." For Steinsaltz body and soul are connected. What a person eats influences feelings, responses, and readiness to unite with influences of good or evil in the world. Observing the dietary laws, says Steinsaltz, makes one more sensitive to holiness and to the tasks of bringing "all things in the world to the state of *Tikkun* or perfection. . . ." (*The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, Basic Books, New York, 1980, pp. 163–165)



Luzzatto

In contrast to those who argue that the laws of *kashrut* protect and promote "spiritual health," other commentators argue that they are a means of separating Jews from non-Jews. Samuel David Luzzatto observes that "every Jew must be set apart in laws and ways of life from other nations so as not to imitate their behavior . . . the laws we observe make us remember at every moment the God who commanded them. . . . The numerous mitzvot and laws of our Torah accustom human beings to exercise self-control. . . ." Luzzatto's point is clear. The dietary laws are a way of preventing Jews from abandoning their faith by falling into the imitation of non-Jewish customs. Since eating is a constant activity, a natural process, observing *kashrut* will become a constant reminder of the unique values, traditions, and obligations of Jewish living.

Mordecai M. Kaplan agrees with Luzzatto but extends his conclusions about the power of the dietary laws to the preservation of the Jewish people. Kaplan explains that the purpose of *kashrut* is to make "the people of Israel aware of its dedication to God as a priestly or holy people." How-

ever, argues Kaplan, that purpose has expanded over the centuries. "*Kashrut* has contributed to the perpetuation of the Jewish people and the retention of its way of life."

In other words, the dietary laws regulating what a Jew shall and shall not eat are a means of preserving Jewish identity and Jewish loyalty. *Kashrut*, Kaplan concludes, "is particularly effective in lending Jewish atmosphere to the home, which, in the Diaspora, is our last-ditch defense against the inroads of assimilation." In Kaplan's view, the benefit of *kashrut* is neither medical nor symbolic. *Kashrut* is an effective means of guaranteeing Jewish survival.

Milton Steinberg expands Kaplan's argument. The dietary laws, he says, have "high survival-value for the Jewish group, serving as a reminder to Jews of their identity and as a deterrent to their being swallowed up by the non-Jewish world. Judaism, like all minority faiths, stands constantly in the peril of being absorbed into oblivion. Only on a foundation of preservative group practices can it persevere in its higher aims." The dietary laws of Judaism are, therefore, a means to an end. Observance of them preserves the Jewish people against assimilation so that it can pursue its task of enriching the world through its ethical and spiritual values. (*Basic Judaism*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1947, pp. 117–118)

As we have seen, the Jewish view of diet differs from that of other cultures. While the Torah forbids some foods and allows others, the dietary laws are not based upon hygienic or medical considerations. Many of the foods that are considered "abominable," or *terefah*, in the Jewish diet are not only considered safe for eating but are even considered staples in other peoples' diets. The laws of *kashrut*, according to most of our commentators, excepting Maimonides, are meant not to guard Jews from poisonous foods but to serve as a means through which the Jewish people attains *kedushah*, or "holiness," "separation," and "uniqueness."

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Aaron's reaction to the death of his sons, Nadab and Abihu, is silence. What do you sup-

- pose he was thinking? Which of the interpretations we have noted would be closest to his? Why?
2. Rashi and other commentators fault Nadab and Abihu for not consulting before bringing their offering to the sanctuary. Why are they so harsh on the sons of Aaron for not seeking the approval of Moses? What is so wrong about acting independently, spontaneously, and enthusiastically?
 3. Author Gail Sheehy observes: "The new young men do not want to work hard. They demand more time for personal growth than for any other purpose in life. They dream of achieving the perfectly balanced life in which there is time for love and leisure and children and personal expression and playing lots of tennis. Their new happiness formula is expressed in a startling shift of values. Highest on the list of personal qualities these young men consider important is 'being loving.' Dismissed to the bottom of the list of qualities they care to cultivate are 'being ambitious' and 'being able to lead effectively.'" (*Pathfinders*, William Morrow, New York, 1981, p. 42) How would you describe yourself and your parents in terms of such a "happiness formula"?
 4. A question is raised about whether or not garfish is considered *kosher*. It has microscopic scales and a split tail, which would argue for its acceptance. Modern rabbinic scholars have rejected the garfish as *kosher*, however, because its scales are not "visible to the naked eye." Given the various reasons for the dietary laws by the commentators, why should it matter whether or not one eats garfish?
 5. In discussing reasons for observing *kasbrut*, the following reasons have been presented: (a) uplifting ("sanctifying") and imposing discipline on eating; (b) identification and solidarity with the worldwide Jewish community; (c) the ethical discipline of avoiding certain foods . . . because of scarcity of food in parts of the world; (d) living by the authority of Jewish law; (e) desire to have all Jews able to eat in your home. (Simeon J. Maslin, editor, *Gates of Mitzvah*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1979, p. 132) Which of these reasons makes the best sense to you? Why?