

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Shemini  
April 10, 2021 \*\*\* Nisan 28, 5781

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Shmini in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/2875/jewish/Shemini-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2875/jewish/Shemini-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

On the eighth day following "seven days of inauguration," Aaron and his sons begin to officiate as Kohanim (priests); a fire issues forth from G-d to consume the offerings on the Altar and the Divine Presence comes to dwell in the Sanctuary. Aaron's two elder sons, Nadav and Avihu, offer a "strange fire before G-d, which He commanded them not" and die before G-d. Aaron is silent in face of his tragedy. Moses and Aaron subsequently disagree as to a point of law regarding the offerings, but Moses concedes to Aaron that Aaron is in the right. G-d commands the kosher laws, identifying the animal species permissible and forbidden for consumption. Land animals may be eaten only if they have split hooves and also chew their cud; fish must have fins and scales; a list of non-kosher birds is given, and a list of kosher insects (four types of locusts). Also in Shemini are some of the laws of ritual purity, including the purifying power of the mikvah (a pool of water meeting specified qualifications) and the wellspring. Thus the people of Israel are enjoined to "differentiate between the impure and the pure".

Haftarah in a Nutshell - II Samuel 6:1 – 19

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/657618/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/657618/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's *haftarah* mentions how Uzzah was struck dead when he disrespectfully touched the Ark of the Covenant; reminiscent of Nadab and Abihu's death described in this week's Torah reading.

The Holy Ark had been in storage in the house of Avinadav for many years, ever since the destruction of the Tabernacle in Shiloh. Recently crowned King David decided to move the Ark to the new capital, Jerusalem. He had the Ark placed on a cart and it was transported amidst singing and dancing. When the procession reached Goren Nachon, the oxen misstepped and Uzzah, Avinadav's son, took hold of the Ark to steady it—whereupon he was instantly killed.<sup>1</sup> David was devastated, and he temporarily placed the Ark in the home of Oved-edom the Edomite, where it remained for three months.

"And it was told to King David saying: 'G-d has blessed the house of Oved-edom, and all that belongs to him, because of the Ark of G-d.' And David went and brought

up the ark of G-d from the house of Oved-edom into the City of David with joy." The Ark was brought up to the city of David with great singing and dancing. David then blessed and distributed presents to all the assembled Israelites.

### **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

Reticence vs. Impetuosity (Shemini 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://rabbisacks.org/shemini-5781/>

It should have been a day of joy. The Israelites had completed the Mishkan, the Sanctuary. For seven days Moses had made preparations for its consecration. [1] Now on the eighth day – the first of Nissan – one year to the day since the Israelites had received their first command two weeks prior to the Exodus (Ex. 40:2) – the service of the Sanctuary was about to begin (Lev. 9:1 – 24). The Sages say that in Heaven it was the most joyous day since Creation (Megillah 10b). But tragedy struck. The two elder sons of Aaron “offered a strange fire that had not been commanded” (Lev. 10:1) and the fire from heaven that should have consumed the sacrifices consumed them as well. They died. Aaron’s joy turned to mourning. “Vayidom Aharon” meaning, “And Aaron was silent.” (Lev. 10:3) The man who had been Moses’ spokesman could not longer speak. Words turned to ash in his mouth. There is much in this episode that is hard to understand, much that has to do with the concept of holiness and the powerful energies it releases that, like nuclear power today, could be deadly dangerous if not properly used. But there is also a more human story about two approaches to leadership that still resonates with us today.

First there is the story about Aaron. We read about how Moses told him to begin his role as High Priest. “Moses [then] said to Aaron, ‘Approach the altar, and prepare your sin offering and burnt offering, thus atoning for you and the people. Then prepare the people’s offering to atone for them, as God has commanded’”(Lev. 9:7). The Sages sensed a nuance in the words, “Approach the altar,” as if Aaron was standing at a distance from it, reluctant to come near. They said: “Initially Aaron was ashamed to come close. Moses said to him, ‘Do not be ashamed. This is what you have been chosen to do.’”[2]

Why was Aaron ashamed? Tradition gave two explanations, both brought by Nachmanides in his commentary to the Torah. The first is that Aaron was simply overwhelmed with trepidation at coming so close to the Divine Presence. The second is that Aaron, seeing the “horns” of the altar, was reminded of the Golden Calf, his great sin. How could he, who had played a key role in that terrible event, now take on the role of atoning for the people’s sins? That surely demanded an innocence he no longer had. Moses had to remind him that it was precisely to atone

for sins that the altar had been made; and the fact that he had been chosen by God to be High Priest was an unequivocal sign that he had been forgiven.

There is perhaps a third explanation, albeit less spiritual. Until now Aaron had been in all respects second to Moses. Yes, he had been at his side throughout, helping him speak and lead. But there is vast psychological difference between being second-in-command and being a leader in your own right. We probably all know examples of people who quite readily serve in an assisting capacity but who are terrified at the prospect of leading on their own.

Whichever explanation is true – and perhaps they all are – Aaron was reticent at taking on his new role, and Moses had to give him confidence. “This is what you have been chosen to do.”

The other story is the tragic one, of Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu, who “offered a strange fire, that had not been commanded.” The Sages offered several readings of this episode, all based on a close reading of the several places in the Torah where their death is referred to. Some said they had been drinking alcohol.

[3] Others said that they were arrogant, holding themselves up above the community; this was the reason they had never married.[4]

Some say that they were guilty of giving a halachic ruling about the use of man-made fire, instead of asking their teacher Moses whether it was permitted (Eruvin 63a). Others say they were restless in the presence of Moses and Aaron. They said: when will these two old men die and we can lead the congregation? (Sanhedrin 52a)

However we read the episode, it seems clear that they were all too eager to exercise leadership. Carried away by their enthusiasm to play a part in the inauguration, they did something they had not been commanded to do. After all, had Moses not done something entirely on his own initiative, namely breaking the tablets when he came down the mountain and saw the Golden Calf? If he could act spontaneously, why not they?

They forgot the difference between a Priest and a Prophet. As we have seen in previous Covenant & Conversations, a Prophet lives and acts in time – in this moment that is unlike any other. A Priest acts and lives in eternity, by following a set of rules that never change. Everything about “the holy,” the realm of the Priest, is precisely scripted in advance. The holy is the place where God, not man, decides. Nadav and Avihu failed fully to understand that there are different kinds of leadership and they are not interchangeable. What is appropriate to one may be radically inappropriate to another. A judge is not a politician. A King is not a Prime Minister. A religious leader is not a celebrity seeking popularity. Confuse these roles and not only will you fail, you will also damage the very office you were chosen to hold.

The real contrast here, though, is the difference between Aaron and his two sons. They were, it seems, opposites. Aaron was over-cautious and had to be persuaded

by Moses even to begin. Nadav and Avihu were not cautious enough. So keen were they to put their own stamp on the role of priesthood that their impetuosity was their downfall.

These are, perennially, the two challenges leaders must overcome. The first is the reluctance to lead. Why me? Why should I get involved? Why should I undertake the responsibility and all that comes with it – the high levels of stress, the sheer volume of work, and the neverending criticisms leaders always have to face? Besides which, there are other people better qualified and more suited than I am. Even the greatest were reluctant to lead. Moses at the Burning Bush found reason after reason to show that he was not the man for the job. Isaiah and Jeremiah both felt inadequate. Summoned to lead, Jonah ran away. The challenge really is daunting. But when you feel as if you are being called to a task, if you know that the mission is necessary and important, then there is nothing you can do but say, Hineni, “Here I am.” (Ex. 3:4) In the words of a famous book title, you have to “feel the fear and do it anyway.”[5]

The other challenge is the polar opposite. There are some people who see themselves as rightful leaders. They are convinced that they can do it better than anyone else. We recall the famous remark of Israel’s first President, Chaim Weizmann, that he was head of a nation of a million presidents.

From a distance it seems so easy. Isn’t it obvious that the leader should do X, not Y? Homo sapiens contains many back seat drivers who know better than those whose hands are on the steering wheel. Put them in a position of leadership and they can do great damage. Never having sat in the driver’s seat, they have no idea of how many considerations have to be taken into account, how many voices of opposition have to be overcome, how difficult it is at one and the same time to cope with the pressures of events while not losing sight of long-term ideals and objectives. The late John F. Kennedy said that the worst shock on being elected President was that “when we got to the White House we discovered that things were as bad as we’d been saying they were.” Nothing prepares you for the pressures of leadership when the stakes are high.

Overenthusiastic, overconfident leaders can do great harm. Before they became leaders they understood events through their own perspective. What they did not understand is that leadership involves relating to many perspectives, many interest groups and points of view. That does not mean that you try to satisfy everyone. Those who do so end up satisfying no one. But you have to consult and persuade. Sometimes you need to honour precedent and the traditions of a particular institution. You have to know exactly when to behave as your predecessors did, and when not to. All this calls for considered judgement, not wild enthusiasm in the heat of the moment.

Nadav and Avihu were surely great people. The trouble was that they believed they were great people. They were not like their father Aaron, who had to be persuaded

to come close to the altar because of his sense of inadequacy. The one thing Nadav and Avihu lacked was a sense of their own inadequacy.[6]

To do anything great we have to be aware of these two temptations. One is the fear of greatness: who am I? The other is being convinced of your greatness: Who are they? I can do it better. We can do great things if (a) the task matters more than the person, (b) we are willing to do our best without thinking ourselves superior to others, and (c) we are willing to take advice, the thing Nadav and Avihu failed to do.

**People do not become leaders because they are great. They become great because they are willing to serve as leaders.** It does not matter that we think ourselves inadequate. Moses did. So did Aaron. What matters is the willingness, when challenge calls, to say, Hineni, “Here I am.” [1] As described in Exodus 40.

[2] Rashi to Lev. 9:7, quoting Sifra. [3] Vayikra Rabbah 12:1; Ramban to Lev. 10:9. [4] Vayikra Rabbah 20:10. [5] Susan Jeffers, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, Ballantine Books, 2006.

[6] The composer Berlioz once said of a young musician: “He knows everything. The one thing he lacks is inexperience.”

[Kashrut: Eating as an Act of Choosing Life: Shemini 5781 by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg](https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatShemini5781.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=119772185&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--KdbAVe7e9GxxkkfODXpDfgNXfKbzRKdTBK1sHiWvsrl69dUQ5xIXaQx5F_2kf7QW4BlIL5A7ijuFgt5iZ-3VpwLCTg&utm_content=119772185&utm_source=hs_email)

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Our parashah, Shemini, contains one of the two clusters of laws in the Torah describing which animals, birds, and reptiles are kosher for eating and which are not.

Kashrut is one of the defining religious practices of Jewish tradition. Over the centuries, there has been strong criticism of the idea behind kosher food. Scoffers dismissed the laws as “Judaism of the belly.” The New Testament quotes Jesus as saying: “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person—but what comes out of the mouth.”<sup>1</sup> Spirituality should be all about nurturing your mind and heart and directing them to meaningful purposes, not about satisfying your appetite or supplying nutrients to your body.

I beg to differ. The laws of Kashrut are an extraordinary paradigm of the Torah’s spiritual vision of an (ultimate) ideal world—and how to live in the real world as it is, while simultaneously upholding a higher standard, working towards the final tikkun (repair).<sup>2</sup> Underlying this analysis is a fundamental thesis about Judaism: This is a religion that teaches that the highest value is life itself; that humans are called to join in a covenant-partnership with God to live on the side of life.<sup>3</sup> Starting in the present real world, we are to develop life to its maximum. We are to work to improve both nature and society to uphold all forms of life in all the

dignity and value that we deserve. Finally, in every human behavior in life, there is a choice between life and death. The human calling is to maximize life and minimize death in every action to whatever extent possible.

Eating is manifestly a matter of life and death. If you do not eat, you will die. However, what you choose to eat and how you prepare the food can further increase the quotient of life or of death in eating. Hence, the Torah regulates food and its preparation to shape the experience of eating into an act of maximum health and reverence for life.

Crucially, the Torah's ideal of eating is vegetarianism—that is, that a person should not live by killing another sentient being. In the Garden of Eden narrative, not just humans, but all living creatures, are vegetarians. “God said I have given you all every herb bearing seed... and every tree on which is the fruit... to you for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything... on the earth in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food...” (Genesis 1:29-30). According to Isaiah, in the Messianic age, when the world is totally repaired, then not just humans but animals will be vegetarian: “...the wolf shall live with the lamb... and the calf and young lion and the fatling together... and the lion shall eat hay like the cattle...” (Isaiah 11:6-7).

However, in the current real world, the Torah pivots and compromises with the human situation. After the flood, God concludes to live with humans' imperfections, to make concessions rather than uphold ideal standards by force, and to work with humans to repair the world gradually in order to attain the final perfections.<sup>4</sup> Given that humans need the protein and given that humans' hunting is central to their food sufficiency, God grants them the right to eat meat (Genesis 9:2-3).

This permission is a concession which undercuts the sacredness of life; therefore, a restriction is placed on meat eating (Genesis 9:4). Note that the laws of Kashrut are all about restrictions on meat eating. All vegetables and mineral foods are kosher for all humans to eat at all times. The first law of Kashrut is on all human beings, not just Jews. All humans are prohibited to eat blood. Blood is forbidden to eat because it is understood to be the carrier of life.<sup>5</sup> Obeying the ban on eating blood is humanity's acknowledgement that ideally it should not kill other living beings for food. We eat the meat but the blood is not ours to consume; the life belongs to God. This restriction restores some of the sense of the sacredness of life which was weakened by acceptance of meat eating. Thus it is a step from the present flawed reality toward the final stage when life will again be untouched and supreme.

When the Jews enter the covenant of Abraham (and later at Sinai), they commit to be an avant garde, a kind of “lead partners” in the universal covenant with humanity. We commit to push harder toward the final stage by holding ourselves to a higher standard right now. Therefore the Jewish laws of Kashrut apply many more restrictions on meat eating. Note again that there are no restrictions on eating vegetable or mineral products. Thus the Jewish religious diet tries to amplify the

sacredness of life over and above that of the surrounding cultures, even when permitting meat eating.

The additional restrictions are calibrated to the level of life that one is consuming. The less developed forms of life (which appear earlier in the Creation narrative) are less restricted. The lowest form of life permitted to eat under kosher laws is fish. There is only one general restriction on fish. Only a few species are permitted, those that have fins and scales (Leviticus 11:9-12).<sup>6</sup>

If one wants to eat flesh of the next level up of life, that is, birds, then there are two general restrictions. One is, again: only a limited number of species are permitted. The Torah does not give signs that identify a kosher species (like fins and scales among fish).<sup>7</sup> In the talmudic discussion, however, the Rabbis say that there is one definite marker of non-kosher bird species: ones with a prominent strike talon.<sup>8</sup> This shows that the bird is a predator which lives primarily by hunting other birds and smaller animals. Such a species which lives primarily by killing is ipso facto not appropriate eating for a people which seeks to uphold the sacredness of life.

The second general restriction on eating flesh of birds is that there is a specified ritual of slaughter by which it must be killed. This method of shehitah involves cutting the jugular vein and the esophagus with a perfectly sharpened knife (i.e. totally smooth edge, clean, instant strike, not a tearing gradual motion). The knife slash cuts off the flow of blood (and air) to the brain causing instant loss of consciousness. In other words, the bird must be put to death swiftly and painlessly. If the bird dies by beating, wounding, crushing, etc. then its death is slower and its suffering greater and it is not permissible to eat it. Again, the process of Kashrut minimizes death and suffering - thus upholding the preciousness of life even in the face of eating meat.

The highest level of evolved life of permitted kosher food is land animals. Here there are three general prohibitions that restrict the meat eating. The first again is a species restriction. Only animals that chew the cud and have a split hoof (ungulates) are permitted. There are very few species that fall into this category. We know that chewing the cud (that is having a second stomach and rechewing and digesting the food) is because the animal's diet is strictly vegetarian which is more difficult to digest. It follows that all kosher animals are herbivores. They are not carnivores, not hunters.

This begs the question: Why should a peaceable, non-predatory animal be consigned to be eaten? What kind of reward is that for being of a gentle nature? One possibility is the Torah's deeper message is that "you are what you eat." Eating predators instills aggression, be it physiologically or psychologically.

The second general restriction with animals is the requirement of shehitah to insure a swift, painless death.<sup>9</sup> Since cattle and larger animals are more difficult to slaughter, hoist and shackle treatments were developed to hold the animals down.

Some of these procedures were painful and harmful to animals so kosher slaughterhouses changed over to holding pens which are more humane. Some fundamentalist Orthodox slaughterhouses were slower to make these adaptations, leaving some stain on the reputation of kosher slaughter. Nevertheless, the kosher slaughter laws clearly are intended to respect animal life and minimize its pain. The third general restriction placed on eating meat of animals was in the method of preparation. Even properly slaughtered meat can not be mixed or cooked with milk (or served with dairy either). The symbolism is clear. Meat is the flesh of a killed animal. Milk is the nurture of life, especially mother's milk.<sup>10</sup> Life is life and death is death and 'never the twain shall meet' is a good articulation of the halakhic approach. In Jacob Milgrom's words, the tradition is objecting to "the fusion and confusion of life and death simultaneously." The covenant asks its members to see life and death forces in binary opposition to each other and one must not blur the lines between them. Once the choice is stark and clear, the covenant participant is instructed to "choose life."

Every day, in every food preparation, in every meal - by not eating unthinkingly, or consuming whatever is at hand, or the standard food of the society, the kosher practitioner proclaims commitment to the supremacy of life. The selection of food proclaims that s/he/we are on the way to a vegetarian lifestyle and an age when humans will not raise their hands to kill another - be it animals or humans.

**POSTSCRIPT:** The dietary laws and their thrust to uphold life and proclaim its preciousness should not be seen as static. Thus the principles of kosher should be applied to the type of food we eat now. Many people have given up meat in recognition that cattle ranching and meat preparation place enormous strain on the environment, so it is time to move a step closer to the Messianic standard. A new school of religious behavior has arisen, calling itself eco-kosher. It defines what it will eat or not eat by the impact of the food gathering on the environment. Participants won't eat even kosher fish if the species is overfished. I accept this as a valuable supplement to kosher eating. Others offer eco-kosher as an alternative regimen for eating designed to maximize the preciousness of life. I also propose adding additional criteria for kosher: Healthy eating (no sugar or salt), proper payment and health protection for agricultural workers, humane treatment in animal rearing and in bringing them to market and slaughter. The basic model remains: To turn food preparation and eating into a way of living that upholds the preciousness of life.

Shabbat Shalom.

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:11; Mark 7:15. The superiority of ethical/spiritual behavior was echoed from time to time over the centuries in Jewish traditional sources. Nineteenth century Reform criticism also echoed this theme: The Pittsburgh Platform in 1885 concluded that dietary laws "fail to impress the modern Jew with the spirit of priestly holiness..." <sup>2</sup> I learned the basic concept of eating kosher as a way of



expressing reverence for life from an article by Jacob Milgrom which I came across in the 1960s. Over the years, I added some variations of my own. In his commentary on Leviticus, Milgrom has expanded his views into a comprehensive and persuasive characterization of the laws of Kashrut, Leviticus, vol. 1, pp. 643-742. <sup>3</sup> See my book *The Triumph of Life* (forthcoming). <sup>4</sup> See my essay on Parashat Noah, "Covenant," available here: [www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant](http://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant). <sup>5</sup> See Leviticus 17:11 which explains that this is the reason for the Torah's strict prohibition of Jews from consuming blood (when it bleeds away, living things die). I leave it to my reader's speculation as to what process of hatred and distortion took a religion that strictly forbade blood consumption to all human beings and libeled and demonized it with the false charge that Jews kill children and bake their blood into their sacred food, matzah. <sup>6</sup> Jacob Milgrom assesses—in my view, correctly—that the markings of kosher fish species are simply a way of highly restricting the number of species that one can eat. See Milgrom, Leviticus, vol. 1, pp. 643-743, especially p. 661. <sup>7</sup> In the absence of definitive signs for a kosher bird species, observers of Kashrut have generally been willing only to eat species that were known to be kosher by tradition passed on from one generation to another. When the New World (America) was settled, the turkey bird was discovered. The turkey had to undergo quite a process of vetting and review by halachists until it won through and was accepted as a kosher species. I presume that turkey lovers should offer thanksgiving that the bird made it into the kosher pantheon. <sup>8</sup> Mishnah *Hullin* 3:6. <sup>9</sup> In recent decades, some animal rights groups have zeroed in on kosher slaughter and demanded that animals be stunned before killing them. Stunning has been rejected by almost all Orthodox decisors on the ground that it is impossible to tell if the stunned animal is alive and healthy, which is a requirement at the moment of slaughter. In any event, defenders of shehitah argue that it is as swift and painless (and as potential failure free) as stunning. The fact that anti-Semitic elements joined this attack (and anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim groups joined in recent decades) has left the argument unresolved and shehitah under fire in modern Europe. One hopes that the anti-Semites will not win out and that further improvement of procedures should meet the legitimate tests of reducing animal suffering, while upholding religious freedom. <sup>10</sup> In the Torah, the verse on which the prohibition of preparing meat and milk together is based cites: "Do not cook a kid (goat) in its mother's milk." (Exodus 23:19; Exodus 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21). Milgrom describes this prohibition under the rubric "The Ethical Foundation of the Dietary System," Leviticus, vol. 1, pp. 737 ff, especially p. 741. Although the core prohibition of the Torah seems to refer only to animals, by the Rabbinic period it was applied to birds as well.

[The Seed of the Rabbinic Revolution: Shemini by Jason Rogoff](https://www.jtsa.edu/the-seed-of-the-rabbinic-revolution)  
<https://www.jtsa.edu/the-seed-of-the-rabbinic-revolution>

How important is intention in Jewish law? Do I need to be mentally present when performing commandments, or is it enough to go through the motions and get it done? How often does the Torah care about what I'm thinking? For many of us the answers to these questions would seem obvious: Of course, God demands active engagement with the commandments! Why are mitzvot worth doing if I'm not going

to be mindful in their performance? In reality, these answers are a product of the revolutionary interpretations of the Torah by the early rabbinic sages.

Indeed, the Torah itself focuses on questions of intent when distinguishing between levels of culpability in violations of the law. For example, sacrifices can be offered for accidental violations of the law while more severe penalties are reserved for intentional transgressions. The Rabbis, however, explore the question of intent in numerous situations that are not explicitly stated in the Torah. In a recent article entitled “The Mishnaic Mental Revolution: A Reassessment,” Ishai Rosen Zvi of Tel Aviv University demonstrates this innovation with various examples including the performance of commandments, validity of sacrifice, and the application of purity laws (*The Journal of Jewish Studies*, 66:1 [2015], 36–58). It is this final category that is of particular interest for our parashah.

The lengthy description of the Israelite dietary laws, found in chapter 11 of Leviticus, includes a section about the purity of items that come into contact with “impure” creatures: if an article of clothing, an earthenware vessel, a stove, or other item touches the carcass of one of the eight creatures enumerated in Lev. 11:29–30, it becomes impure. The passage explains further that these creatures even have the ability to defile seeds that will be planted: “If such a carcass falls upon seed grain that is to be sown, it is clean; but if water is put on the seed and any part of a carcass falls upon it, it shall be unclean for you” (Lev. 11:37–38). Paradoxically, the very substance—water—which is used to purify allows for the dry seed to become susceptible to the impurity of the carcass.

These two brief verses unlock a myriad of questions in the rabbinic mind such as: *Does this apply only to water or do all liquids make an object susceptible to impurity?*; *Does this law apply only to seeds or are all types of produce included?*; and *Is there anything that can be done to prevent susceptibility to impurity?* As a matter of fact, an entire tractate of the Mishnah (Makshirin) is dedicated to exploring these and other issues.

The rabbinic interpretive revolution at the core of this issue is the stipulation that an object can only become susceptible to impurity when it comes into contact with a liquid through an event that is acceptable to the owner. In other words, if the owner of the produce, clothing, or vessel did not want them to get wet then they cannot become impure. The Rabbis derive this principle from the unusual passive form of the verb “if water is put” found in Lev. 11: 38: יָטַן. The word is pronounced *yuttan* but appears in the Torah without the *vav* that would have definitively determined this pronunciation (יָטַן), and thus it could be read in the active form *yitten*, “if one places water.” Therefore, the Rabbis compare these two terms and conclude “just as the term *places* [*yitten*] indicates that it was beneficial [to the owner for the item to become wet], so too, the term *is placed* [*yuttan*] means that it must be beneficial [to the owner for the item to become wet]” in order for it to become susceptible to impurity (BT Kiddushin 59b).

The implications of this teaching are quite profound. The rabbinic interpretation restores a person's control over her property. For example, if there was a rainstorm and a pile of freshly picked produce got wet, according to the simple meaning of the Torah, it would now all be under threat of becoming impure. Although it might not seem like a big deal to us, in a world that places great emphasis on purity laws this scenario could be cause for a significant financial loss. The rabbinic interpretation, however, allows for the owner to declare that she had no desire for her produce to get wet and therefore contact with an impure object is of no significance. Incredibly, the rabbinic law allows for a state of mind, the dissatisfaction with the moisture, to override the empirical fact that the produce is wet and should indeed be susceptible to impurity.

This shift described above, from a focus on objective reality to subjective states of mind when determining law, is a hallmark of the legacy of rabbinic thought. In stark contrast to the rigid Second Temple era interpreters of the Torah, like the Sadducees and the Dead Sea sect, who constantly strive to engage with empirical truth, the Rabbis champion a more flexible interpretation of the law. The Rabbis demand engagement with the mental state of the individual and a sensitivity to the circumstances surrounding each case before determining the outcome of the law. This legacy of legal creativity and flexibility has been the backbone of rabbinic Judaism and its interpretation of the Torah since its inception. The tradition of interpretative flexibility has allowed rabbinic leaders to realize the timelessness—and timeliness—of Torah as it evolves in every generation. (Jason Rogoff is the Academic Director of Israel Programs and Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at JTS)

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## Yom Ha'shoah

### Commemorating the Shoah

*YOM HASHOAH is Israel's official day of Holocaust remembrance when Jews around the world remember the six million Jewish victims of the Shoah, and the countless examples of Jewish heroism and resistance during those years. This year Yom HaShoah falls on Thursday 8th April. The following quotes have been taken from a series of videos recorded in 2020, in partnership with the Holocaust Educational Trust, to coincide with Yom HaShoah and the 75th anniversary of the liberation. You can watch the full video series at [rabbisacks.org/holocaust](http://rabbisacks.org/holocaust).*

### GOD AND THE HOLOCAUST

**The Question:** Why did God allow the Holocaust to occur?

**Rabbi Sacks' Answer:** The first time I went to Auschwitz, I was simply overwhelmed. I asked, "God, where were You?" And words came into my mind... "I

was in the words, 'You shall not murder.' I was in the words, 'You shall not oppress a stranger'. I was in the words that were said to Cain when he killed Abel, (the first murder in the Bible). 'Your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground.'”  
When God speaks and human beings refuse to listen, even God is helpless in that situation. He knew that Cain was about to kill Abel, but He didn't stop him. He knew Pharaoh was about to kill Israelite children. He didn't stop it.  
God gives us freedom and never takes it back. But He tells us how to use that freedom. And when human beings refuse to listen, even God is powerless.

## HUMANITY AND THE HOLOCAUST

**The Question:** Do you have faith in humanity after the Holocaust?

**Rabbi Sacks' Answer:** The Holocaust represented perhaps the greatest failure humanity has ever known. It featured the combination of technical brilliance and bureaucratic efficiency, but dedicated to the most evil of all purposes. This really is the greatest failure of humanity that I can think of... [But,] there's this very remarkable avenue called the Avenue of Righteous Gentiles, in Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem. 14,000 people are honoured there, people whom any one of us would trust because they put their own lives at risk to save the lives of their neighbours and, in some cases, of strangers. These were beacons of light in the midst of one of the worst darkneses humanity has ever known, and therefore, yes, we can trust humanity if humanity shows itself capable of acting for the sake of others and taking risks to save others from death.

## HOPE AND THE HOLOCAUST

**The Question:** Considering the devastation of the Holocaust, how can we feel hope in the Jewish future?

**Rabbi Sacks' Answer:** In the most uncanny evocation of the Holocaust, Ezekiel the Prophet, twenty-six centuries ago, saw the Jewish people as a Valley of Dry Bones, and God said to Ezekiel, "The people say our hope is lost...But it is not lost because I am going to take them out of their graves and bring them to the land of Israel."

I see three signs of hope today, and they're remarkable.

Today we have Israel, we have Judaism, and we have the Jewish people, all three of them stronger than they ever were before.

And I don't need any more grounds for hope than that.

Our hope is not destroyed.

## Learning Lessons from the Holocaust

### The Faith of the Survivors

*The following is an extract from the Epilogue of Rabbi Sacks' book, 'Future Tense'.*

**IT WAS** the Holocaust survivors who taught me. I have read hundreds of books about the Shoah. I made a television programme from Auschwitz. To this day I cannot begin to imagine what they went through, how they survived the nightmare, and how they lived with the memories...

The survivors I came to know in the past twenty years were astonishing in their tenacious hold on life. Perhaps it's how they survived.

Some believed in God, others didn't, but they all believed in life – not life as most of us understand it, something taken for granted, part of the background, a fact that rarely holds our attention, but life as something to fight for, as a consciously articulated value, as something of whose fragility you are constantly aware. They had, in Paul Tillich's phrase, 'the courage to be.' Slowly I began to think about another phrase, not one that exists in the traditional literature, but one that was articulated in fateful circumstances and constituted a kind of turning point in modern Jewish history: Kiddush haChayim, the sanctification of life.

I had expected that trauma would turn the survivors inward, making them suspicious of, even hostile to, the wider world.

It didn't, at least not those I knew, and by the time I came to know them.

Many of them had undertaken, fifty or more years after the event, to visit schools, talking to children, especially non-Jewish children.

What amazed me as I listened to them telling their stories was what they wanted to say. Cherish freedom. Understand what a gift it is to be able to walk in the open, to see a flower, open a window, breathe free air. Love others. Never hate. Practise tolerance. Stand up for others if they are being picked on, bullied, ostracised. Live each day as if it might be your last.

They taught the children to have faith in life. The children loved these elderly strangers from another world. I read some of their letters to them; they made me cry. Their courage kept me going through tough times. I count myself blessed to have known them.

### **It Once Happened...**

ON 11TH AUGUST 2017, the world's oldest living man passed away, just a month short of his 114th birthday – making him one of the ten longest-lived men since modern record-keeping began. If you knew nothing else about him than this, you would be justified in thinking that he had led a peaceful life, spared of fear, grief and danger.

The actual truth is the opposite. The man in question was Yisrael Kristal, a Holocaust survivor. Born in Poland in 1903, he survived four years in the Lodz ghetto, and was then transported to Auschwitz. In the ghetto, his two children died. In Auschwitz, his wife Chaje was killed.

When Auschwitz was liberated, he was a walking skeleton weighing a mere 37 kilos. He was the only member of his family to survive.

He was raised as a religious Jew and stayed so all his life. When the war was over and his entire world destroyed, he married again, this time to another Holocaust survivor, Batsheva. They had children. They made aliyah to Haifa. There he began again in the confectionery business, as he had done in Poland before the war. He made sweets and chocolate. He became an innovator.

If you have ever had Israeli orange peel covered in chocolate, or liqueur chocolates shaped like little bottles and covered with silver foil, you are enjoying one of the products he originated.

Those who knew him said he was a man with no bitterness in his soul. He wanted people to taste sweetness. In 2016, at the age of 113, he finally celebrated his bar mitzvah. A hundred years earlier, this had proved impossible. By then, his mother was dead and his father was fighting in the First World War. On his bar mitzvah he joked that he was the world's oldest tefillin-wearer. He gathered his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren under his tallit and said, "Here's one person, and look how many people he brought to life. As we're all standing here under my tallit, I'm thinking: six million people. Imagine the world they could have built.

### **A Prayer for Yom HaShoah**

*Rabbi Sacks composed this prayer in 2013*

Today, on Yom HaShoah, we remember the victims of the greatest crime of man  
against man –  
the young, the old, the innocent, the million-and-a-half children, starved, shot, given  
lethal injections,  
gassed, burned and turned to ash, because they were deemed guilty of the crime of  
being different.

We remember what happens when hate takes hold of the human heart and turns it  
to stone;  
what happens when victims cry for help and there is no one listening;  
what happens when humanity fails to recognise that those who are not in our image  
are nonetheless in God's image.

We remember and pay tribute to the survivors, who bore witness to what happened,  
and to the victims,  
so that robbed of their lives, they would not be robbed also of their deaths.

We remember and give thanks for the righteous of the nations who saved lives,  
often at risk of their own, teaching us how in the darkest night we can light a candle  
of hope.

Today, on Yom HaShoah, we call on You, Almighty God, to help us hear Your voice that says in every generation:  
Do not murder. Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbour. Do not oppress the stranger.

We know that whilst we do not have the ability to change the past, we can change the future.

We know that whilst we cannot bring the dead back to life, we can ensure their memories live on and that their deaths were not in vain.

And so, on this Yom HaShoah, we commit ourselves to one simple act: Yizkor, Remember.

May the souls of the victims be bound in the bond of everlasting life. Amen.

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### Yahrtzeits

Len Grossman remembers his mother Charlotte Grossman on Monday April 12 (Nisan 30).

Motti Benisty remembers his father Rabbi Shimon David Benisty on Thursday April 15 (Iyar 3).

Our regular weekday evening minyan will take place on Monday, April 12, beginning at 8:00. Your presence allows mourners and those observing yahrzeits to say Kaddish. Please support your Kol Rina friends by attending.

Use the following Zoom link to attend:

<https://zoom.us/j/97663987468?pwd=NjFhaVZUZkpSZ3pxQWJjOU5UWFR4QT09>

Meeting ID: 976 6398 7468

Password: 080691

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[More at Kol Rina...](#)

### Friday Torah Study and Service, April 9, 2021

Friday night services on Zoom will commence at 5:15 with Torah study led by Len Levin. Kabbalat Shabbat, led by Rich and Treasure Cohen, will begin at 5:45, followed by Maariv led by Nikki Pusin. This week's guest d'varist will be Treasure Cohen, who will speak on "The Wisdom of Fools--A Drash." We hope you will join us!

Use the following Zoom link to attend:

<https://zoom.us/j/533517572?pwd=dVFHR2NGZFBCYWp1Yzd6ald0bzFRdz09>

