



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

שמיני תשע"ט
Shemini 5779

**Between
Hope and
Humanity**

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT SHEMINI IN A NUTSHELL

In the 25th chapter of Exodus we read of the command to build the Sanctuary. Shemini represents the conclusion of that story with the celebration of the first services in the Tabernacle. But what would have been a joyous occasion

turns into tragedy when two of Aaron's sons die because they brought a "strange fire" as a sacrifice to God. The parsha then continues with a description of the dietary laws (kashrut), specifically describing which animals, fish, and birds may be eaten.



THE CORE IDEA

It should have been a day of happiness and celebration. The Tabernacle, the Children of Israel's first house of worship, was finished. For seven days, Moses had performed the ceremony that declared the Tabernacle open for business. Now, the eighth day had finally arrived on the first of Nissan. The Priests, led by Aaron, were ready to begin their service.

It was just then that tragedy occurred. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, brought a "strange fire, which [God] had not commanded them." Fire then "came from God" and they died. We then follow two conversations between Moses and Aaron. The first:

Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke of when He said, 'Among those who are near to Me, I will show Myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured.'" Aaron remained silent. (Lev. 10:3)

Moses then commanded their bodies to be removed, and Aaron and his remaining sons not to perform the usual customs of mourning. He also gave them more instructions to prevent such tragedies from happening again in the future, and then checked whether the sacrifices of the day had been performed. He discovered that Aaron and his sons

had burned the sin offering, instead of eating it. This led to the second conversation:

[Moses] was angry with Eleazar and Itamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and asked, "Why didn't you eat the sin offering in the Sanctuary area? It is most holy and was given to you to gain forgiveness for the community before God. Since its blood was not taken into the Holy Place, you should have eaten the goat in the Sanctuary area, as I commanded."

Aaron replied to Moses, "Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, but now that this has happened to me today, would God have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering?" When Moses heard this, he approved. (Lev. 10:16-20)

The psychology behind these two conversations is fascinating. Moses tries to comfort his brother, who has lost two of his sons. He tells him that God has said, "Among those who are near to Me, I will show Myself holy." According to Rashi, this means, "Now I see that they [Nadav

and Avihu] were greater than you and me.” The holier the person, the more God demands of them. It is as if Moses said to Aaron: “My brother, do not give up now. We have come so far. We have climbed so high. I know your heart is broken. We thought that our troubles were behind us, that after all we suffered in Egypt, and at the Red Sea, and in the battle against Amalek, and in the sin of the Golden Calf, we were finally safe and free. And now this has happened. But Aaron, don’t give up, don’t lose faith, don’t despair. Your children died not because they were evil but because they were holy. Their act was wrong but their intentions were good. They just tried too hard.” But despite Moses’ words of consolation, “Aaron remained silent,” because his pain was too great at that moment.

In the second conversation, Moses is concerned with something else – the community, whose sins should have been forgiven through the sin offering. It is as if he had said to Aaron: “My brother, I know you are in pain. But you are not just a private person. You are also the High Priest. The people need you to perform your duties, whatever you feel inside.” But Aaron replies: “Would God have been pleased if

I had eaten the sin offering today?” Perhaps Aaron is saying: “I know that in general, a High Priest is forbidden to mourn as if he were an ordinary person. That is the law, and I accept it. But had I acted today as if nothing had happened, as if my sons had not died, would this not seem to the people as if I were heartless, as if human life and death meant nothing, as if service of God meant denying my humanity?” This time, Moses is silent. Aaron is right, and Moses knows it.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Were the words of Moses to Aaron (regarding the death of his sons) inappropriate? If not, then was Aaron wrong to refuse to be consoled by them?
2. Is it fair to expect Aaron to ignore his pain and continue to perform his role as a spiritual leader for the people?
3. What is the message of the two conversations together, that we should continue despite the grief and pain and tragedy of life? Or that we must allow ourselves time to be human and to grieve?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Rabbi Yekutiel Halberstam, the Klausenberger Rebbe, lived through the Warsaw Ghetto, the work camps, the death march to Dachau, and then Auschwitz itself. He survived, but his wife and eleven children did not. In Auschwitz, he vowed that if he survived he would dedicate himself to life. He resolved to build a hospital that would honour the image of God in every human being. It took him fifteen years to raise the money, but eventually he built the Laniado Hospital in Netanya, Israel, dedicated to treating everyone alike, Jew and Arab, Israeli and Palestinian. This is what he taught his followers after the Holocaust:

The biggest miracle of all is the one that we, the survivors of the Holocaust, after all that we witnessed and lived through, still believe and have faith in the Almighty God, may His name be blessed. This, my friends, is the miracle of miracles, the greatest miracle ever to have taken place.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think the Klausenberger Rebbe chose a hospital to be his legacy?
2. Would you describe faith after the Holocaust as a miracle? Just for the survivors, or also for the generations that follow?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

In the two exchanges between two brothers we saw in *The Core Idea* above, a momentous courage is born: the courage of an Aaron who has the strength to grieve and not accept any easy consolation, and the courage of a Moses who has the strength to keep going in spite of grief. It is almost as if we are present at the birth of an emotional configuration that will characterise the Jewish people in centuries to come. Jews are a people who have had more than their share of suffering. Like

Aaron, they did not lose their humanity. They did not allow their sense of grief to be dulled, deadened, desensitised. But neither did they lose their capacity to continue, to carry on, to hope. Like Moses, they never lost faith in God. But like Aaron, they never allowed that faith to anaesthetise their feelings, their human vulnerability. That, it seems to me, is what happened to the Jewish people after the Holocaust. There were, and are, no words to silence the grief or end the

tears. We may say – as Moses said to Aaron – that the victims were innocent, holy, that they died *al kiddush Hashem*, “in sanctification of God’s name.” Surely that is true. Yet nonetheless, “Aaron remained silent.” When all the explanations and consolations have been given, grief remains, refusing to be pacified. We would not be human were it otherwise. That, surely, is also the message of the book of Job. Job’s comforters were pious in their intentions, but God preferred Job’s grief to their justification of tragedy. Yet, like Moses, the Jewish people found the strength to continue, to reaffirm hope in the face of despair, life in the presence of death. A mere three years after coming eye to eye with the

Angel of Death, the Jewish people, by establishing the State of Israel, made the single most powerful affirmation in two thousand years that *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish People lives. Moses and Aaron were like the two hemispheres of the Jewish brain: human emotion on the one hand, faith in God, the covenant, and the future on the other. Without the second, we would have lost our hope. Without the first, we would have lost our humanity. It is not easy to keep that balance, that tension. Yet it is essential. Faith does not render us invulnerable to tragedy but it gives us the strength to mourn and then, despite everything, to carry on.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

After the Holocaust, a ravaged, devastated people came back to the land of Israel and there built one of the great states of the modern world. Out of the wilderness they built farms and forests. In place of the totalitarian states from which many of them came, they framed a democracy. From a small population they created an army of invincible courage. In place of Jerusalem “in mourning and in ruins” they created a Jerusalem built “as a city that is closely joined together.” They made the Hebrew language, the language of the Bible, live again. They built *yeshivot*, citadels of Jewish learning, so that the streets of Jerusalem would once again echo with the sound of ancient learning. They brought Jewish communities, threatened by persecution, to safety. Together they brought about the collective resurrection of the Jewish people from the shadow of death to the land of life. Today when Jews sing of Israel they say *od lo avdah tikvatenu*, “Our hope is not destroyed.”

If you were to ask what our response to the Holocaust should be, I would say this: Marry and have children, bring new Jewish life into the world, build schools, make communities, have faith in God who had faith in man and make sure that His voice is heard wherever evil threatens.

Pursue justice, defend the defenceless, have the courage to be different and fight for the dignity of difference. Recognise the image of God in others and defeat hate with love. Twice a year, on Yom Hashoah and the Ninth of Av, sit and mourn for those who died and remember them in your prayers. But most of all, continue to live as Jews.

When I stand today in Jerusalem, or in a Jewish school, or see a Jewish couple under the wedding canopy, or see parents at the Shabbat table blessing their children, there are times when I am overcome with tears, not in sadness nor in joy, but in awe at this people who came face to face with the angel of death and refused to give it a final victory. The Jewish people lives, and still bears witness to the living God.

Radical Then, Radical Now, pp. 183–184

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does this quote sum-up the message contained in this week’s *Covenant & Conversation*?
2. How has your life been a response to the Holocaust?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Were the words of Moses to Aaron (upon the death of his sons) inappropriate? If not, then was Aaron wrong to ignore them?
2. Is it fair to expect Aaron to ignore his pain and continue to perform his role as a spiritual leader for the people?
3. What are the two examples of courage found in the parsha? Which do you think shows more strength?
4. Where can the message of the bravery of Aaron and Moses be seen in recent Jewish history?
5. According to Rabbi Sacks, what can be found in “the two hemispheres of the human brain” and in whom are these embodied in the parsha?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. Moses was right to try and console Aaron by explaining the context of the deaths of his sons – that they were holy, but they made a human error. Moses tried to give Aaron the strength to continue on, despite this tragedy and his grief. However, Aaron could not hear the words, because of his pain. Perhaps it was just a little too early for him to consider moving on and he needed at this moment to be in a place of pain.
2. Aaron is functioning on two levels – as a human being, who is grieving the loss of his sons, and as the spiritual priestly leader of the Jewish people. The people are relying on him, and Moses was reminding him of this responsibility. While it is not fair to disregard or dismiss his grief, and while Moses needed to allow him to mourn, Moses was correct to remind Aaron that he also had responsibilities to the people.
3. The message of the two conversations taken together is that we need to find a balance. Judaism always takes this approach to joy and grief. Sometimes, at the height of our happiness we still find room to grieve. Examples of this include saying *yizkor* on Yom Tov, breaking a glass to remember the destruction of the Temple under the chupah, and the transition from Yom Hazikaron to Yom Ha'atzmaut. In the *Thinking More Deeply* section Rabbi Sacks suggests this message was actualised in recent Jewish history as the generation that suffered the Holocaust went on to build the fledgling State of Israel. To ignore the suffering of Jewish history completely is to deny ourselves our very humanity. However, to become crippled by grief is inherently un-Jewish. We must move on with courage.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. A hospital represents healing and life, the antithesis of the Holocaust. This particular hospital was founded on the principles of honouring the image of God in every human being no matter their religion or race. This was a profoundly fitting response to the Holocaust which was perpetrated by people who believed in a political philosophy based on the opposite ideals.
2. The Klausenberger Rebbe saw the worst of humanity in the Holocaust, enough to shake any person's belief in God. Many people who lived through the Holocaust lost their faith and no one is in a position to judge them for this. For the Rebbe, it goes against reason that anyone should maintain their faith in God after experiencing that. However, he and many thousands of other survivors did keep their faith, and he describes this as a miracle (an act that goes against rational reason). Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits in his book *Faith After the Holocaust* suggests that because of these survivors who managed to keep their faith intact, we the generations that follow cannot use the Holocaust as a reason to lose faith. However, this period of Jewish history is a difficult one to reflect on and understandably it does raise questions for many. Perhaps the miracle is the rebirth of the Jewish people in the years that followed the Holocaust, a testament to that generation's faith (see *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*).

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. For some things, true consolation will never come. But that does not mean there is no way to move on, and debilitating grief must be avoided. However, to not grieve at all, to ignore or dismiss tragedy, lacks humanity. This is an important lesson on an individual and national level. This quote shows how the Jewish people has found a place for its grief and pain (on specific days during the year) while showing tremendous courage and drive to rebirth.
2. To just live as a Jew is a victory against the forces of evil that were behind the Holocaust (and sadly can still be found in society today). To marry and have children, to live a proud Jewish life, based on the values of the Torah and of our ancestors, are all ways to respond to the Holocaust.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea* answer 1.
2. See *The Core Idea* answer 2.
3. The courage of Aaron who has the strength to grieve and not accept an easy consolation, and the courage of Moses who has the strength to keep going in spite of grief. Sometimes facing grief, and not finding a way to explain it (for example "it is God's will") is as brave as moving past grief (the grief may never disappear – living with grief is what takes courage) and building a brighter future.
4. Post-Holocaust Jewish history demonstrates these two types of courage. "There were, and are, no words to silence the grief or end the tears" – there can be no explanation for the Holocaust. Yet, like Moses, the Jewish people found the strength to continue, to reaffirm hope in the face of despair, life in the presence of death. A mere three years after coming eye to eye with the Angel of Death, the Jewish people, by establishing the State of Israel, made the single most powerful affirmation in two thousand years that *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people lives.
5. Human emotion in one hemisphere, and faith in God, the covenant, and the future in the other. Without the second, we would have lost our hope. Without the first, we would have lost our humanity. Aaron represents the courage to embrace human emotion and what it means to be human, and Moses represents faith in God and the future, and the need to build and progress despite grief and pain.