

## Parashat Shmini: The Way Our Hearts Beat

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Dear Friends,

Parashat Shmini is the third parasha in Vayikra. Shmini means eighth, and it describes the climax of the dedication of the Tabernacle in the desert on the eighth day, following seven days of preparation.

On that eighth day Aharon, the High Priest, together with four of his sons, prepare the sacrifices on the altar as commanded. Moshe and Aharon come out of the Tent of Meeting in order to bless the People, and at that exciting moment God appears before all of Bnei Yisrael in the form of fire that ignites the altar and consumes the sacrifice that has been laid upon it.

Emotions are running high! The People are in ecstasy! But at that moment, at the climax of the ceremony, disaster strikes: Nadav and Avihu, two of Aharon's four sons, take one of the pans, put incense on it and offer "a strange fire to God." Again the Divine fire ignites, but this time it comes out of the altar, takes hold of both junior Cohanim and consumes them. Aharon and his two remaining sons are commanded to continue the ceremony and are forbidden to mourn as the People bury the dead and mourn them.

The ceremony continues, but another crisis arises. Moshe commands Aharon and his remaining sons to eat from the Sin Offering they have made in the name of the People, as was the custom. But they burn all of the sacrifice without eating any. Moshe scolds them greatly, but Aharon responds saying that in light of the great misfortune that has befallen his family it would not be appropriate for them to eat from the Sin Offering. Even though there is a flaw in his argument, as the offering had to do with the People and not with Aharon and his family, Moshe accepts his big brother's explanation.

The second half of the parasha touches on another seemingly unrelated topic: the laws of Kashrut. A long list of animals which we are forbidden to eat concludes with a relatively short list of the laws of purity and impurity.

I have to admit... this is one of my favorite parashot: a strange fire! What a wonderful concept! So much has been written about this fire. Even in the biblical text some explanations are given: perhaps they were drunk; perhaps they were over-zealous; perhaps their heads were uncovered; they may have behaved disrespectfully towards Moshe and Aharon; they may have overstepped their role in the ceremony, feeling more important than God. There are other interpretations

that say that they did not sin at all. Moshe says to Aharon: (Vayikra 10:3)"This is what God spoke saying, I will be sanctified by those who are close to me and I before all of the people I will be glorified and Aharon was held his peace." In other words, those who died were especially close to me, and I am sanctified through them."

The theme that runs throughout the book of Vayikra – a book which contains the rules of the priestly caste – is precision! The system of slaughter and sacrifice, the laws of forbidden foods, the laws of purity and impurity, leprosy and other skin diseases, the laws of holiness, etc. – all of these deal with the minute details upon which all else depends.

The formula is: holiness = precision! The degree of precision is the degree of holiness.

In two weeks, when we read parashat Achrei Mot, which we read on Yom Kippur as well, we will see that if the High Priest does not follow the laws related to his role on that holy day to the letter, he will not come out of the Holy of Holies alive. Moreover, if he does not survive the ceremony because of one flaw or another, the entire People will not be forgiven, and this will be considered a disaster.

So what, exactly, is precision? How is it accomplished? How do we know if something is precise or not?

Precision requires attentiveness!

When we don't feel well and we go to the doctor, the first thing he does is listen to our heartbeat. The heart does not just pump life and energy throughout our body; it also tells us something about the pace of our life. Even when we are at a loss and don't know what to tell the doctor, our heart will tell its story. Sometimes it is enough for the doctor to turn from the computer, ask us how we are, listen to our answer, look at the color of our skin, take our hand in his and listen to our heartbeat. At that moment the process of healing begins.

Our heartbeat changes as we exert ourselves physically, and when we are excited, stressed or tired. Our heartbeat responds to external events. But each person also has his or her own beat that they know well. Every person has the pace at which he or she feels comfortable. One person is naturally quick, while another is relaxed. One person is angered easily, while another is calm even in the eye of a storm. It is all a matter of temperament.

Chinese medicine recognizes 28 different heartbeats! The Chinese healer will first check our tongue; then he or she will take our hand and listen with great attention. Sometimes he will close his eyes in order to concentrate more fully on the different

beats deep within our body, and in this way he can diagnose the degree of our physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing.

This, in a nutshell, is the essence of the art of precision: a gentle, skilled attentiveness to our inner rhythms. Healing happens through attention, through adapting our lifestyle to our heartbeats, to our temperament. Everything begins and ends with rhythm, and when one day our heart stops beating, the rhythm that was "us" will be no more.

Going back to our formula, we now have: holiness=precision=rhythm=healing=life!

In fact, though, we live in a cultural reality that contains a lot of noise, speed, and tremendous pressure which increases daily. The technological revolution has connected us to each other and each of us to his or her own gadgets in a wondrous and unprecedented way. But it has disconnected us entirely from our heartbeats, from our inner rhythm that is precise and right for us.

We are run ragged by a strange fire which God did not command of us – the fire of progress, the fire of "self-fulfillment." This fire consumes, and we help it burn brightly, all of us. It is a communal fire fed by our cooperation. It is a hungry fire that is never satisfied. It demands constant sacrifice, and the more strange fire we bring in our pans, the more it wants. We, ourselves, are the sacrifice, and we can't stop!

Or can we?

Can we learn to reconnect with ourselves, to listen to our hearts beat, to recognize the rhythm of silence?

Can we remember the way back?

Do we remember what our hearts sound like?

Do we remember how to listen?

Parashat Shmini is an invitation to precision. It calls us to notice the fire that burns within us, be it strange, all-consuming, divine, life-giving, sanctifying, or healing. Parashat Shmini invites us to recognize our 28 heartbeats (28 in gematria is כח, meaning strength).

Parashat Shmini invites us to return to ourselves, to our bodies.

Parashat Shmini calls us to respect our own pace, to respect our heart.

Perhaps that is the role of Shabbat.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha