

## Parashat Shmini: Space and Alien Fire

Dear Friends,

A little more than a week ago we read a wonderful verse in Megillat Esther. Mordechai tells the frightened Esther, who hesitates to go to the king to plead for her people without an invitation: **”If you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter...”** (Esther 4:14)

These words resounded with me this year, and particularly the word “relief”, which is “revach” in Hebrew (רווח). It is a very interesting word, and it has many meanings: “ruach” - רוח, which means both wind and spirit; profit (רווח), and also space or gap (רווח).

In stressful situations the thing we lack most is “revach” (רווח). We feel hemmed in, lacking **space**; our **spirit** feels shallow, like our **breathing**, and with it our patience. Our **material gains** usually suffer accordingly. Our inclination in these moments of stress is to try harder, thereby increasing the stress and pressure even further.

Many times the best thing to do in such moments is the exact opposite - to take a deep breath (wind), take some time out, and find space.

Parashat Shmini relates the tragic story of Nadav and Avihu, two of Aharon’s four sons. The events take place during the inauguration of the Tabernacle in the desert, on the eighth day, following a week of rigorous preparations. The atmosphere is charged and intense, and at a certain point in the ceremony Nadav and Avihu **“each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the LORD alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them.”** (Vayikra 10:1) And then a terrible thing happens: **“And fire came forth from the LORD and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the LORD.”** (10:2)

Aharon, his two remaining sons, and the entire people are shocked. Moshe turns to his brother and tells him that the show must go on, the inauguration of the Tabernacle must continue, and others will bury his sons in the meantime. And then he explains or perhaps consoles: **“This is what the LORD meant when He said:**

**Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people. And Aaron was silent.”**

Many, many interpretations have been given for this tragedy. I myself enjoy returning to the riddle of the “alien fire” every year. It is both disturbing and fascinating. Deep within myself, I feel that sometimes I, too, bring an alien fire that God did not command me to bring.

In the spirit of Megillat Esther and mostly with the help of the “revach” I spoke about earlier, I want to suggest a new interpretation.

At face value, it seems that worshipping God is a complex discipline composed of myriad details of do’s and don’ts. Is this our immediate association with observance - an active attempt to appease and please God.

I would like to suggest, though, that this may not be “true” worship (the quotes are there to remind myself and my readers that I don’t know with certainty what true worship is...). Worship or observance, is not a chain of actions, but rather a way to create space, revach - a small crack - in order to allow God to come into our lives.

In Parashat Shmini we read about the way in which fire appears on the altar for the first time: **“Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw...”** (Vayikra 9: 23-24)

It was not a person who lit the fire. It “came forth.”

Think about the story of the Tabernacle and the work of the Cohanim as a metaphor for life. The altar is reality, existence. The fire that ignited upon it is the fire of life, the energy of creation and animation. (For those of you who prefer scientific metaphors, imagine the light of the Big Bang.) This energy is present in everything - invigorating and animating everything at every moment anew. And just like the fire on the altar, it never goes out.

Most of the time we are entirely oblivious to the fire of life. We don’t give it another thought. Have you ever wondered what enables a body to be so alive at every given moment? Just as the fish does not know it is wet, so it is with us: we do not really know the fire of life!

The nature of consciousness is that we are capable of seeing only the external layer of things and not their essence. This is not an accusation! Every person tastes from the Tree of Knowledge - the biblical one or the contemporary one - at one time or another, and his or her eyes are opened. We are then capable of seeing the external layer of reality. Everything that is inside - the “operating system” - is beyond our ability to perceive.

Through our ignorance and our blindness we think that we are the ones who do the thinking, the creating; that we perform the actions; that we are the ones who strike the fire of life - that we are the operating system. This is a very common error, a central one in our lives. This is the alien fire! Every time I say “I did this” or “I created that” - I am reaffirming the mistaken notion that **“My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.”** (D’varim 8:17) I am thereby seeing myself as the source of power, of fire, and of creation.

This awareness leaves no room for “revach”, for space. And there is no need for it either, because we are the be-all and end-all.

But everything does not come from us! It is not at all clear if anything does. More precisely, in some mysterious way, everything comes through us. When we consider ourselves to be the creators in our lives, the channels of abundance become blocked.

We have learned to depend only on ourselves; to take action, to judge, to conclude quickly, and we do it now, this minute. And then we are surprised when we get stuck, experience stagnation or boredom.

In order to allow something new and fresh to appear in our world, something outside of our limited and well-used brain, needs to be allowed in. For that purpose we need to allow space. Revach is both space and spirit: it is the space that allows for spirit, for God.

This is why Mordechai tells Esther that **“relief (revach) and deliverance will come from another quarter.”** Not from fear and terror - fear comes from the “used” brain - although, of course, sometimes a sense of fear is necessary!

“Revach” (space) requires patience, a pause, time to observe.

Our natural inclination in times of stress is to try harder. Perhaps it is worth considering letting go instead; leaving it alone; going for a walk; for a breath of fresh air. Relief and deliverance will come, but from “another quarter.” This is the reason some of our best ideas come to us in the shower...

Moshe tells Aharon “**Through those near to Me I show Myself holy**”, i.e. anyone who comes too near is in danger. In order for the Divine to appear, make some space. The Divine - i.e. everything that is alive within us - needs space in order to exist, to redeem, and to give vitality. Worshipping God is done by creating space in our lives. Even showering or washing dishes can do the trick!

Shabbat Shalom, a Shabbat of relief - revach - of deliverance, and peace.

Elisha