ALIEN FIRE – PARASHAT SH'MINI & YOM HASHOA
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This week, we read the portion of Shemini, which means "the eighth." It refers to the eighth day of the opening of the Tabernacle, which was actually its first real functioning day, after seven days of special inaugural rituals performed by Moses, Aaron, and the other priests.

On this 'official opening day,' Moses commands Aaron and the people to bring sacrifices to the Tabernacle, "for today God will appear to you," which is, after all, the point of the Tabernacle.

Aaron and his sons prepare the animal sacrifices as they are commanded, and as hoped for, "…the glory of God was shown to the entire nation.

And a fire went out from before God and consumed the burnt offering and the fats which were on the altar, and the entire nation saw, and celebrated, and fell on their faces."

This moment, the climax of so much work and ritual, is what the Tabernacle was all about: the palpable presence of God, experienced by the entire people. The feeling one gets when reading this section is--it worked! They did it! All that effort paid off, and the people really experienced God's presence.

Unbelievably, tragically, what happens next is this:

"Now Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan and placed in it fire, and placed on it incense, and brought it before the Lord; a strange fire which he had not commanded them. And a fire went out from before the Lord and consumed them and they died before God. And Moses said to Aaron: this is what God was referring to when he said 'with those close to me I will be sanctified, and before the entire nation I will be honored'. "*Vayidom Aharon"* and Aaron was silent."

I am so incredibly troubled by this week's parasha it's hard to know where to begin to explain it to you. There is no reading of the devastating story of the death of Aaron's son's Nadav and Abihu by divine fire that I am comfortable with.

No explanation among the dozens in the commentaries that assuages my horror at the idea that these two boys are killed by God for bringing an uncommanded sacrifice.

The rabbis of our tradition twist and turn in exegetical knots trying to explain why somehow these two boys are deserving of such divine punishment.

- Some say that they were drunk, based on the passage that follows about the prohibition of being intoxicated while performing religious rituals
- The Talmud argues that they were killed because they were jealous of Moses and Aaron, relating the story:
    - It once happened that Moses and Aaron were walking along the road and Nadav and Avihu [Aaron's two sons] were walking behind them, and all Israel was walking behind them. Said Nadav to Avihu, "When will these two old men die and you and I will lead the generation?" Thereupon, G-d said to them: "We shall see who will bury whom!"
- For centuries, commentators have debated the meaning of what Moses meant when he said, "this is what God was referring to when he said 'with those close to me I will be sanctified, and before the entire nation I will be honored?'"
    - Some have the unmitigated hubris to suggest that the death of these children was necessary to sanctify the name of God. Completely denying that Judaism was a response to abomination of human and namely child sacrifice, that nothing is more anathema to Jewish theology than the death of innocents in the name of God.

I can reason away the first position as one of convenient if not lazy biblical criticism. It's far too simple to say "this relates to that" because they are stories next to each other.

I can dismiss the second argument, that the boys were jealous, as blatant historical revisionism, inventing a story after the fact to justify prior events.

But this third argument, that somehow their death was necessary to serve some greater theological purpose, that God 'needed' their blood to prove a point about God's unmitigated power and authority – I cannot accept this on any level. I cannot believe in a God that would want such a payment in human life and I could not participate in, let alone lead a religion that believed such foolishness.

It is fitting that this parasha Sh'mini comes just a day after Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day; a day that implores us to remember and never forget the death of six million innocent Jews who were also consumed by fire.

But the similarity between this parasha and the Shoa is NOT the fire – rather it is the theological challenge to our sense of justice. Nadav and Avihu did not do anything that seems to merit a death sentence. Neither did the Jews who perished in the Shoah. Both this week's parsha and the remembrance of the Shoah challenge our understanding of God's justice.

The Holocaust forces us to reexamine our theology.
[slide 1] Richard Rubenstein – a Conservative rabbi, scholar, and former university President wrote "The thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been

broken [by the Shoah]. We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?"

There is a long-standing tradition in the Jewish tradition to blame ourselves for disasters that come our way. The Talmud says that when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple the first time, in the 6th century BCE, he was "the rod of God," punishing the Jews for their lapsing into idol worship and abandoning the ways of God.

When the Romans destroyed the Temple a second time a bit over 600 years later, the rabbis didn't see a level of sin that would have justified such a punishment. So they developed the idea we talk about on Tisha b'Av, that the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam*, because of gratuitous hatred between Jews.

I don't think I could have a personal relationship with a God who would use the Nazis as a tool for punishing Jews who had sinned in an earlier life. I wouldn't want to have anything to do with such a God. How could I possibly pray to a God who would do such a thing? How could I possibly rely on such a God? How could I call God my fortress, or my rock, my savior?

Instead, I take comfort in the theology of Maimonides. [slide 2] Rambam said there are three kinds of evil or suffering in the world.

- The first are bad things that happen as a side effect of the way God created the world – this would include things like earthquakes and cancer.

- The second type of evil is the evil people do to each other—like wars and murder.

- The third type of evil are bad things people do to themselves – abusing drugs, eating too much, etc.

So, for Rambam, the evil of the Holocaust is a by-product of free will. God does not create evil. This kind of evil happens because God gave us this wonderful incredible gift of free will, which gives us the opportunity to choose. Sadly, some people choose to follow an evil, wicked path, and hurt or kill other people.

Hitler succeeded because no one stopped him. Not the millions of Germans who accepted his demands for blind obedience – Goerring said "I have no personal conscience; Adolf Hitler is my only conscience." And not the British, whose Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain kept thinking the Nazis would be content with Austria—or Poland, or Czechoslovakia. Not even the Americans. We all remember America's role in beating the Nazis. Less remembered is that two days after Britain, France, Canada, Australia and New Zealand declared war on Germany in September

1939, the United States declared itself neutral. It took another two years before the United States decided to enter the fray – in September 1941, American ships and planes started firing on German war vessels. Three months later the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor – and a few days after that, Germany declared war on the United States. How might history have turned out differently if America had joined the war in 1939 instead of in 1941? How many millions of lives might have been saved?

[slide 3] Dr. Zev Garber a professor of rabbinic studies at JTS wrote "The message of the Shoah for the generation after and for future generations is not survival alone. There is something more important than survival, and that is preventing moral bankruptcy." As long as children anywhere in the world are being taught to be morally bankrupt, to blindly follow demagogues into the cesspool of hate, our children's and grandchildren's future is not secure.

In this analysis, the sinners aren't the people who died – it's the people who lived, and didn't stop Hitler. People who would judge those who perished – like the rabbis of our tradition that try to rationalize why God needed these two young men, Aaron's sons; or even and I shunner to even utter this, the rogue theology that exists within some corners of Judaism today that says the holocaust was necessary for the establishment of the State of Israel.

In the decision of the Knesset to establish the 27th of Nisan as The Day of the Shoah and Ghetto Revolt Remembrance Day, Mordecai Norouk, in the name of the House Committee of the Knesset said "perhaps by the merit of their blood spilled like water, we achieved a state and the beginning of redemption."

But somehow tying together the Holocaust and the State of Israel—with the implication of suffering and reward—is infuriating. Who asked the six million—who asked us?—if it was worth the price?

Proponents of such arguments should instead be judging themselves and the ones who didn't take action to stop what was going on in Germany in the 1930s, rather than use God as a convenient justification for such horrors.

Hitler, of course, was not the first one to kill Jews. But Hitler had a frightening new twist.

In the past, when Jews were persecuted, they were generally offered a way out at the same time: convert. When Ferdinand and Isabella took control in Spain, they offered the Jews three choices: convert, leave, or die. Most left, some converted, a few died.

In medieval Europe, the oppressors were continually trying to get the Jews to convert to Christianity. Some Jews took the easy way out and converted. But most

Jews refused. The majority were proud to be Jews, and they insisted on staying Jewish, sometimes even dying rather than eat a piece of pork.

Hitler's twist was to take the conversion option away. He didn't care what you believed. If you had a Jew too close in your family tree you were destined for the gas chambers. Even people who had converted to Christianity – or whose parents had converted to Christianity – were killed for being "Jewish."

For someone to die rather than convert is a death that we call "Kiddush Hashem," a sanctification of God's name. The people that the Nazis murdered weren't even given the opportunity to die a death of Kiddush Hashem. They weren't given any choice. The ones who would have converted to Christianity died right next to the ones who would have chosen to die rather than to let a piece of pork touch their lips. The dignity of being able to give one's life for Kiddush Hashem was taken away from the poor unwilling martyrs of the Shoah.

This is one reason to prefer using the Hebrew term Shoah over the Greek-derived term Holocaust. Holocaust is the Greek word for a burnt-offering, a sacrifice that was completely burned on the altar. Shoah, on the other hand, means "catastrophe," or "calamity." The victims of the Shoah did not willingly offer themselves as sacrifices, like Nadav and Avihu they were taken not offered. Willing or not they were killed. They weren't given a choice.

There is no theologically satisfactory answer to the issues raised by the Shoah, just as I have not found one for the issues raised by the death of Nadav and Abihu. After all, even if we say that evil comes from people, there have been times when God has chosen to intervene miraculously to save us. Just two weeks ago we told the story of the Exodus at Passover, when God redeems a bunch of powerless slaves from mighty Egypt; the Maccabees defeated the far more powerful Seleucids; many hold that Israel's victory over the Arab armies in 1948, 1967 and 1973 was also nothing short of miraculous. How does God choose when a situation deserves a miracle and when it doesn't?

There are some theological questions that we can wrestle with and wrestle with but can never come up with a completely satisfying solution. When we wear ourselves out from trying to make sense of the senseless, the only response we are left with is the same response that Aaron had when he was told of the death of his sons.

Vayidom Aharon. And Aaron was silent; and sometimes so are we.