

## **Watch Over Me: The Role of Siblinghood in Parasha Shemini and Modern Life**

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*A version of the below d'var torah (literally "a word of Torah" - an analysis of a biblical text) was presented at New York University's Bronfman Center for Jewish Student life in celebration of their annual Family Shabbat event, which is attended by several hundred students, faculty and their family members.*

*"Parasha" is the name given to each of the 54 parts of the Hebrew Torah, which are read week-by-week over the course of a Jewish calendar year. Each parasha is named after the first unique word that appears in its text; the parasha being analyzed is called "Shemini" or "Eighth."*

*Sources are provided via hyperlink; because some sources were cited more than once, multiple hyperlinks may lead to the same source.*

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This week's parasha, called Shemini, begins with the Israelites in the Sinai desert. They've just finished building a sanctuary, called the Mishkan, to reaffirm their commitment to God's covenant after the infamous incident with the Golden Calf. Then, Moses spends seven days initiating his brother Aharon and Aharon's four sons into the priesthood.

On the eighth day (Shemini means "eighth"), the Israelites gather around the Mishkan. Aharon prepares various animal sacrifices, and blesses the crowd. Then, a heavenly fire descends and consumes the offerings on the altar. The Israelites are ecstatic; the Divine Presence is among them. But in the midst of this celebration, Aharon's two oldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, bring an offering of incense to the altar, which the Torah describes as "a strange fire" that God did not command them to bring. Suddenly, the heavenly fire consumes them, and a moment of euphoria turns into tragedy.

Why did that happen? Nadav and Avihu were in the presence of God, in the midst of spiritual ecstasy. In fact, the Sifra, a third-century rabbinic commentary, says the two simply wanted to ["add love to love."](#) Why would the seemingly minor transgression of bringing a foreign fire, done in good faith, be worthy of death? What can we possibly learn from this story?

I think the answer can be found in the interactions of the people around Nadav and Avihu.

The Torah commentator Harry Rothenberg [points out](#) that the first book of the Torah, Genesis, is filled with stories of sibling rivalry. Cain kills Abel; Esau plots to kill Jacob; Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers. But Moshe and Aharon, he says, are great siblings. They have different personalities and leadership styles, but they support each other: in this story, Aharon takes over the role of Kohan Gadol (the high priest) from Moshe, with Moshe guiding the way. Both brothers refer to each other as “the greater.” Crucially, the two also check each other: at one point, Moshe becomes frustrated that one of his offerings has been burnt, rather than eaten. When he confronts Aharon about it, Aharon explains why he ordered the burning of that particular offering, and Moshe accepts Aharon's explanation with humility.

The story of parasha Shemini has at its core the relationships between two sets of brothers: Moshe and Aharon, and Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu.

It's noteworthy that this focus on brotherhood comes when it does, because last week, in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Brussels and Turkey, the New York Times [published an article](#) called “As Siblings Again Unite to Unleash Terror, Experts Ask What Drives Them.” The article points out that almost every major terrorist attack on Western soil has involved siblings: in addition to Brussels, the attacks in Paris in November, the Charlie Hebdo attacks and the Boston Marathon bombing all involved siblings. There were three sets of siblings among the 9/11 hijackers.

This phenomenon is not limited to one particular faith: the article lists examples of sibling partnership amongst Southeast Asian militants, French anarchists and Marxists in Italy. Yigal Amir, the Jewish extremist who assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, [planned the attack](#) with his brother Hagai. In fact, Mia Bloom, a professor at Georgia State University that co-wrote a book called “All in the Family: A Primer on Terrorist Siblings,” [estimates](#) that up to 30 percent of all members of terrorist groups around the world have family ties with someone else in their group.

You can probably guess at the explanations for this phenomenon: siblings influence each other, amplify each other's beliefs, and keep watch on each other. They often live together and can communicate without using phones that risk surveillance. And they are more likely to remain trustworthy and loyal.

Interestingly though, Bloom says her research shows that, during actual operations, siblings are often purposely sent to different locations. The reason, she says, is their leaders' fear that “if the siblings are sent to the same location, one might convince the other to defect, because of the love of their sibling.” When sent to different locations, she says, “They will each go through with it because they do not want to disappoint their sibling and they cannot face the idea of going on without them.”

What does this have to do with Shemini? In explaining the sins that led Nadav and Avihu to their deaths, the second-century Jewish scholar Jeremiah Ben Eleazar [says that](#), among other problems, the brothers sinned by “not having taken counsel from each other.” The Israeli Midrashic commentator Moshe Aryah Mirkin [intuits from this](#) that, had Nadav and Avihu talked things over beforehand, they likely would have had second thoughts and not gone through with the sacrifice.

In other words, Nadav and Avihu failed each other. These two brothers, caught in a wave of religious furor, neglected their responsibility to pull each other back from the brink. The fact that God itself had already laid out the rules for the sacrifice was apparently not enough; the only people that could have stopped Nadav and Avihu were Avihu and Nadav. Likewise, Bloom’s research shows us that terrorist leaders recognize the profound impact siblings can have on each other. That’s why they take advantage of sibling relationships to draw in new recruits, and why they often separate siblings before they have a chance to change each other’s minds.

The story of Shemini reminds us of the immense responsibility we have to our siblings, blood or otherwise. Nadav and Avihu were not bad people; in fact, in the aftermath of their deaths, Moshe seems to imply that the two brothers are [holier than even he himself is](#). But their relationship stands in stark contrast to that of Moshe and Aharon, whose ability to both support each other and hold each other accountable was crucial to the survival of the Jewish people.

So, we ask ourselves: to whom are we accountable? And how do we uphold our end of the covenant that binds us to the people closest to us? I believe the language of the parasha itself provides us with the beginnings of an answer.

In the immediate aftermath of Nadav and Avihu’s death, the first person to react is Moshe. He turns to Aharon and says, somewhat cryptically, “This is what the Lord spoke, [when They said] 'I will be sanctified through those near to Me, and before all the people I will be glorified.'”

This is possibly an attempt to console Aharon through the insinuation that Nadav and Avihu [were especially close to God](#). After that, the Torah simply says, “vayidom Aharon” - “and Aharon was silent.”

There has been much Judaic scholarship focused on the phrase “vayidom Aharon.” [Some have argued](#) the term vayidom implies that Aharon is so committed to God that he is serene in his response to the death of his sons. On the other hand, the 16th-century rabbi Isaac Abravanel [describes](#) Aaron’s heart as turning “to lifeless stone. He did not weep and mourn like a bereaved father, nor did he accept Moses’ attempts to console him, for his soul had

left him and he was speechless.” The contemporary bible scholar Baruch Levine [notes that](#), in addition to the commonly understood meaning of vayidom as “to be still”, the consonant root of this word can also be understood to mean “to mourn, to moan.” These two definitions are contradictory, and yet, because they are, in Levine’s words, “usually homophonous and homographic,” it is often difficult to figure out the intended meaning.

But perhaps the double entendre here isn’t entirely unintentional. What strikes me is that the Torah has made space to recognize Aharon’s silence. The exact meaning of this silence may be up for debate, but what is clear is that it speaks volumes. In acknowledging Aharon’s silence, we recognize his piety, his pain, his complexity and, ultimately, his humanity in a profoundly vulnerable moment.

Shemini reminds us, then, that we should be especially cognizant of those in our own world who are not speaking, perhaps because they have been silenced, or because they feel no one is listening to what they have to say. We should recognize that these silences are often as meaningful as language itself, and that the messages we most desperately need to hear are rarely spelled out for us. We need to take on this challenge because we know: all the FBI surveillance in the world can’t compare to the watchful eye of a caring sibling.