

The Fire We Carry

Parshat Shemini (April 11, 2026)

I have a friend who has been through more than most people should have to carry in one life. He said something to me recently, and it hit me really hard. He said, "I don't know how to want things anymore without being afraid of what the wanting will cost me."

And I've been sitting with that ever since he said that to me. Because I think he wasn't just speaking for himself, but for a lot of us at this moment. A time in which we live with a kind of caution about our own intensity.

We watch fervor and intensity, political, religious, and personal, burn people and burn through people. We've learned maybe too well to keep our fire at a low simmer, to manage our longing, to be sensible about our desires, to be suspicious maybe of too much fire. And that's where this week's Parsha hits us.

It drops one of the most devastating and bewildering stories in the entire canon of our literature right into our laps, Parshat Shemini, the eighth day. Ahiva Yom HaShemini was on the eighth day. The Mishkan was completed.

The portable sanctuary, that mobile Mishkan that the Israelites have been building now. They've cast their gold into it, woven their fabrics for it. They've consecrated it with oil and with blood and weeks of preparation.

It's finally ready. And what happens is staggering. Astonishing is the word that was used this morning in our open book.

The word astonishing means from stone to become like stone. Astonished. What happens, fire comes down from God and consumes the offerings on the altar.

The people are literally astonished. The people, they see it, they fall on their faces. They begin to exult and scream with joy.

There was a collective gasp. The Shekhinah had arrived. The Divine Presence was in the house, literally.

By every measure, this is the most triumphant moment in the book of Leviticus. The house is built and God has moved in. Yay.

And then, Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's two oldest sons, take their fire pans. They fill them with incense and bring in the Torah's language A strange fire, a foreign fire that was not commanded by God and then fire once again comes from heaven. The same fire, the same God and it consumes them.

The joy of the chapter collapses into the grief of its loss in one single verse. What happened? What did they do wrong? The rabbis across the centuries have offered so many explanations that the sheer abundance of them tells you something which I said in the open book. Nobody knows.

The sheer abundance of rabbinic commentary tells us something very clear. They have no idea what went wrong. They were drunk, says Rabbi Shmuel in the Sifra.

They rendered a legal ruling in the presence of their teacher, says Rabbi Eliezer. They entered without the proper garments. They looked upon the Shechina and kept walking when they should have fallen.

They didn't consult each other. They didn't ask each other permission. They didn't consult with Moshe.

I mean, you look at the list of all these possible grievances and you think, you know, the text told us that they brought a strange fire and now you've added and added and added. Each of these explanations has its own logic, its own moral, but there's one, though, that really hits me every year and it haunts me. And I think it's the one that Parshat Shemini is really asking us to wrestle with.

And it comes from within the Hasidic tradition, from the Sfas Emes, who is building on much earlier traditions within the mystical canon of our faith. He says that Nadav and Avihu were betachlita tzidkut. They were exceedingly righteous.

That they acted l'shem shamayim, they acted with pure intentions for the sake of heaven. They saw the fire descend and they wanted to add love to love. They were overcome by a longing for God and so they reached for the fire.

Another Hasidic Rebbe whose Torah we've been learning last month, he writes something even more radical. He takes it one step further and says that Nadav and Avihu understood themselves as having arrived at the level of a king, of a melech, who has the authority to breach boundaries because a king's will is aligned with God's will and they believed their desire was God's desire. The Yishbetzer says they were right that their longing was real.

They were wrong that they had clarified that longing fully. He says a person should do nothing without clarifying their desire seven times. They had the fire.

What they lacked was the right vessel for it. There is a word in this parasha that the tradition has chewed on for 3,000 years and I want to sit with that now also. So the first part is about the desire of the two children of Aaron and in the Hasidic reading they have a profusion of desire.

It was lahosiv ava alava. They thought they were like kings, says the Yishbetzer. Their will was aligned with God's and in both of those the desire was rich and justified but it lacked the right vessel.

And then there's this word that the tradition wants us to focus on with Aaron, which is vayidom, that he was silent. His two sons, his eldest son, the heirs, the young men who had been inaugurated into the priesthood a couple of minutes before this, they're dead and then Aaron is standing there in radical silence. We interrogated that word this morning in the open book.

What is the silence of Aaron? The word vayidom is a unique word for silence. There are a number of words in Hebrew for silence. Shtika.

Lachshot. Right? Chash is to be quiet, to whisper. Lachisha.

The word vayidom, though, is unique. It's not any of those words. It's not shtika shel hashkama, the silence of someone waiting for the dawn.

It's stillness. It has, as I said, the word stunned or astonished, stopped and frozen. A silence that comes when language is no longer adequate to the reality that is in front of us.

When the gap between what you feel and what you can express is too great. That silence is reminiscent of a lot of silence in this moment, in our current realities. How many of us have had versions of that silence? How many of us know the silence that comes after a phone call that we weren't expecting or after a diagnosis or after a betrayal, after news from across the world that hits you personally, even though it happened to someone else? Vayidom.

It stops us dead in our tracks and words leave. And what's amazing to me this morning and this week is that the Torah does something with air and silence that so often we don't do. The Torah places air and silence into the text without interrogating it and asking what it means.

It just lets its silence be silent. It doesn't interpret it away and even though Rashi will say this or another commentator will say that, the Torah doesn't say a word about air and silence. It just leaves it there.

It records it, it holds it, and it lets it be. As if to say to all of us some things can only be honored by not explaining them. Some things are in their fullness when we don't add our gloss.

And so we put these two things together, the passion that is vessel-challenged and the silence which is vessel-held. We put them into a conversation. I want us to understand these two pieces in the Torah.

The Torah puts them in dialogue. Nadav and Avihu are the part of us that longs with everything we have, the part of us that sees the holy and wants to get close to it to break through the distance between ourselves and the source of life or ideals or whatever it is we yearn for. Nadav and Avihu are the part that doesn't want religion to be managed and moderate.

Nadav and Avihu are the extremists among us who want peace now, who want justice now, who want the thing now. They feel the running, the ratzo, the ecstatic rush towards something and we want to surrender to it entirely. Every one of us has a Nadav and Avihu inside of us.

Every one of us has known a moment when the beauty or the pain or the love was so much that we wanted to throw ourselves into it without reservation. Take a moment now, pause and think and remember a time in your own life when you felt that kind of longing for yourself. Maybe it was today, yesterday, this morning, during prayer.

A moment in your life when your heart reached out for something greater or when your desire for closeness or for meaning or for connection was felt to be overwhelming. Let yourself recall what that moment was like, what it stirred in you and how it shaped the days that followed. That Aaron is that part of us that survived, that stood in front of what can't be explained and chose not to explain it.

The part that knows in the body if not in the mind that sometimes the holiest response to the unbearable is simply to remain, to keep standing, to be in silence, to be in reverence. Together, these two moments, the children and the father are what the Kabbalists speak of when they talk about Ratzovah Shov, a running and returning. The soul runs towards God and then comes back to the body and to the world, to the work of being alive.

We're all Ratzo-ing. These two children represent the future and its desire to be the present. The future running ahead of us, the fire for what's real, the fire for what is perfect, the fire for what is ideal.

But they didn't come back and the teaching of the Parsha is that that fire without returning can be destructive even when the fire is sacred. And returning, what does that look like in our lives? It looks like Aaron. It looks like Aaron's silence and steadfastness.

It looks like showing up for the next sacrifice, for the next meal, the next minion, the next person who needs you even after the worst has happened. It's a return to responsibility and to daily rhythms. It is Aaron's courage in the face of the unspeakable to return back to the body with all of its imperfections, with all of its grief.

That is the power of Ratzovah Shov, of running and returning, of fire that is in a vessel that can stay. I said this last night at the 92nd Street Y. You know that in Kabbalah, when they talk about these two moments, passion and its potential destructive nature, they talk about lighting a fire and using oil to light a fire. We put oil into a container and then it lights.

And then we want the light to be stronger so we add a little bit of oil and it gets stronger, right? And then we keep adding oil. We keep adding oil and the very thing that was burning, that was fueled, becomes the thing that extinguishes the candle. That too much oil, too much passion, too much desire.

And like we began, so then what do we do with it? Become suspicious of your own desire, of your own running, your own ratzo-ing. And Aaron says, no, come back into silence, moderate it. It's not time.

Just relax and take it easy. You're still young. That's your fault.

There's so much you have to go through. Find a girl. Settle down.

If you want, you can marry. Look at me. But I'm happy.

The Torah is telling us when you can hold the fire and the silence, when you can burn with longing and still remain in your body and in the mystery of all that you don't yet know in your life and in your obligations, that's where I will meet you, God says. The last layer of this remarkable story is that the Torah names, or the rabbis name this parasha as Shemini, the

8th day. And all of you know that the number 8 in our tradition always points beyond the natural order.

It's a teaching that came from the Ma'aral of Prague. 7 is creation, 7 is Shabbat, 7 is the cycle of time as we know it, but 8 is L'malam and Azman. 8 is what comes after.

B'rit Milah happens on the 8th day. The Messianic era is sometimes called Yom Shekulo Shemini, the day that is all 8s. The 8 strings of King David's kinor, of his harp, L'malam and Azman on the 8th, the higher octave of living.

Maybe this is the deepest teaching here this morning that the 8th day is the day when heaven came so close to earth that the boundary between them thinned almost to nothing and two young men full of 8, two young men full of love tried to cross that boundary and couldn't survive the crossing. The holiest day became the most grievous. The fire that was consecrated also consumed them.

We know that the same intensity that makes love possible is the intensity that makes loss devastating. The same passion that drives us toward justice can burn us out if we don't tend to it. The same longing for God and for meaning that draws us into prayer can, if it is ungrounded, become a fight and a flight from the very life we are called to sanctify.

And so what do we do? Do we tamp down the fire? Do we play it safe? The Torah is adamant about this. We don't. After the death of Nadav and Avihu, God doesn't cancel the priesthood.

The sacrifices continue and Aaron goes back to work. That becomes Yom Kippur. Elazar and Itamar, the surviving sons of Notarim, take up the duties of their dead brothers.

The fire keeps burning on the altar. The instruction is don't extinguish the fire. Learn how to carry it.

To carry the fire means learning to hold your passion, your dreams, your longing for the holy, even with loss and with pain. It means tending to our inner lives with care rather than letting it die out. Carrying the fire is a practice of balance.

It means cherishing what makes us deeply and moves us deeply but also shouldering the responsibility that comes with that energy. Keeping it alive as we move through the routines and rhythms of our daily lives. The founder of the Hasidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov, I shared this morning in the open book and when I mentioned the Baal Shem Tov, all of you should feel like we're mentioning our lineage here in this shul.

That there's a direct grafting onto the tree of the Baal Shem Tov that was my own Rebbe, Reb Zalmashacher Sholomi, a blessed memory through his teachers within the Hasidic movement of Chabad. The Baal Shem Tov used to say that the greatest tov, the greatest gift that God shows a human being is that we remain alive after a moment of divine encounter. The soul wants to leave the body in ecstasy and God gently holds it in place.

Keeps us here among the living. When I think about my friend, the one who told me that he wasn't sure if he was willing to pay the price for yearning. He doesn't know how to want things anymore.

I think that the Torah is saying to him and to me and to all of us don't give up on wanting. Don't give up on yearning. The fire that is inside of you is not the problem but carry it the way a priest carries the incense with awe and with preparation.

With an awareness that you're holding something that is bigger than you. So carry it in the community and let the community carry it with you. Carry it with the knowledge that the fire will ask everything of you and the work of being alive is to give everything you have while running and still come home.

That looks like I think in this community and in others showing up for loved ones even when we feel overwhelmed. It looks like pouring your heart into creating art or music. It looks like being an incredible vivacious, alive, dynamic parent even when your children are responsible for your sleepless nights.

It means continuing to volunteer even though you can't finish the work but you can't desist from doing it. It means holding in your heart the deepest prayer of those who have no words. To hold in your heart that at this moment there are many who are afraid to yearn, afraid to attach, afraid to connect and we pray for them that they might find a way back to that burning, yearning, longing, wanting place with the safety and security of being able to come home to its warmth, its imperfection but its vitality.

This is Shmini this morning. This is where it finds me on this week. A week like many others that have gone by over the last couple of years in which I suspect my own yearning and my own longing and wonder how it is to remain a yearning being in a world in which yearning so often leads to disappointment and to shock and astonishment.

I pray for all of us that we're able to hold both of these truths, both the power of yearning and running and necessity of coming home. May we learn to hold them with holiness. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvsktMX8XbY>