

APRIL 19, 2017

Parashat Shemini

Two Types of Fire

A strange fire (Leviticus 10:1)

אש זרה (ויקרא י:א)

For many years, Iran has been developing ballistic missiles and has not been shy about the purpose of these rockets; inscribing on them, in Hebrew, “Israel must be wiped out.” Iran’s proxies in the Middle East have also been working feverishly to develop their own rockets. While their rockets are far less powerful than Iran’s ballistic missiles, the huge arsenals [amassed by Hezbollah in the north](#) and [Hamas in the south](#) threaten the lives of Israelis throughout the country, as they are now [more powerful](#), and, in many cases, can reach Israel’s major population areas. At the same time, Israel and the United States have also been developing rockets. These rockets though are intended not to take life, but to protect it.

The tragic story of the deaths of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, relates to the offering of fire. After their father, Aaron, made the prescribed offerings in the Tabernacle according to Moses’ specific instructions, “There came forth fire from before the Lord and consumed upon the altar the burnt-offering...” (Leviticus 9:24) Nadab and Abihu, on the other hand, “offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them.” (10:1) For this they were killed. Noting that this event took place on “the eighth day,” (9:1) Rabbi Steven Riskin connects this story to the Midrashic teaching that God gave the gift of fire to Adam and Eve on the first Saturday evening after Creation—the eighth day of existence. “This was the first time that darkness began to descend upon the world... And the Almighty prepared two flint stones for Adam; Adam rubbed them together and there emerged fire.” (*Bereishit Rabbah* 11:2) Rabbi Riskin [explains that](#), “God sent down His Divine light and fire as a sign that He accepted our Sanctuary, the work of human hands... We must [therefore] use our creativity in the service of God to perfect ourselves and our world—but only in accordance with His will, in accordance with the limits He has placed on Divine Service, so that we never fall into the trap of bringing the strange fires of Moloch (Deuteronomy 18:10) and the immoral wars of Jihad (which also involves the sacrifice of children). Human hands created fire—but human hands must use that fire to recreate and not to destroy.”

Before Passover began, at the Hatzor Airbase in Central Israel, the IDF officially inaugurated the [David’s Sling missile-defense system](#). This system represents the third and final piece of Israel’s missile defense program, joining the Iron Dome and Arrow missile defense systems to provide protection against a broad spectrum of short and long-range missile threats. David’s Sling Unit Commander Lt. Col. Kobi Regev [said that](#) the timing of the designation before Pesach was, “not intentional, but there is nothing more symbolic than a new defense system, and a new unit, beginning an important mission specifically on the festival of freedom.” In his address at the inauguration, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman [noted that](#) the system has no substitute and cannot be bought anywhere else in the world. He continued, “It also of course combines all the knowledge, all our intellectual abilities and that of our partners in the United States.” While we in the United States take great pride in seeing the fruits of our many years of labor, which ensured the financial and political support crucial to make this missile defense shield a reality, this program represents a source of pride to us for another reason. These rockets speak not only about our technological prowess and technical know-how. They also speak to our values, and proclaim loudly and clearly that while too many build their fires to destroy, harm and kill, the United States and Israel are working together to harness the power of fire to protect, defend and save lives around the world. ■

Standing Strong

And Aaron held his peace (Leviticus 10:3)

וַיִּדַם אַהֲרֹן (ויקרא י: ג)

On the Thursday before Passover, as most Jews around the world were busy preparing for Passover, hundreds of people gathered on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem to [pay their final respects](#) to twenty-year-old Sgt. Elchai Taharlev, who was killed by a terrorist in a car-ramming attack during his military duty. This attack represents the latest of [many dozens of attacks](#) that Palestinians have perpetrated over the last eighteen months. While we normally would, and should, mention Palestinian media incitement, the monthly stipend awaiting the terrorist's family, as well as the Hamas communique that praised this heinous act—on this Shabbat that falls before Yom Hashoah, we place our focus on a different aspect of this terrible crime: the strength and determination to stand up tall and strong, and persevere in the face of tragedy.

Parashat Shemini describes yet another family tragedy that befell no less than Aaron, the high priest of Israel and his family, on what should have been the joyous occasion of the consecration of the Tabernacle. After Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu offered "strange fire before the Lord...there came forth fire from before the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." (Leviticus 10:1-2) We read that after he witnessed the terrible loss of his two eldest sons, "Aaron held his peace." (Verse 3) Literally, the verse teaches us that "Aaron was silent." Why was he silent? Rashbam (on verse 3) explains that Aaron held his peace "from his mourning—and he did not cry out nor [exhibit outward displays of] mourning." While Aaron needed to cry out and felt the internal anguish that any parent would, he recognized that his duty at that moment, as the high priest during a joyous consecration—required his silence. So he summoned the emotional fortitude to stand tall, ready to fulfill his duty to his people. In Israel in the IDF, when soldiers are called to attention the commander shouts, "*Amod Dom*"—literally meaning, "Stand silent." But "*Amod Dom!*" doesn't just mean "Silence." It means "Stand at attention! Prepare yourself for the next command!" Technically, Aaron was silent. But his silence was much more than just silence. Aaron stood at attention.

This coming Monday, Jews around the world will observe *Yom Hashoah*, Holocaust Memorial Day. We will remember the terrible loss of Six Million Jewish souls destroyed by the Nazis. Yet, the full name of Yom Hashoah is *Yom Hashoah v'hagevurah*—the Day of Holocaust and Strength. While the early Knesset members focused on the strength of those who tried to fight back against the Nazi tyranny, in recent years the Jewish community has focused on a different type of *gevurah* ("strength"). We recognize the strength to stand tall in the face of the impossible; to accept one's fate without compromising one's faith; and finally, to refuse to submit to the forces of evil. We recognize this *gevurah* in the victims who recited the Shema before being murdered by the Nazis and in the tiny efforts to retain any connection to Jewish life in the horror of both the ghettos and the concentration camps. There was also not a small amount of *gevurah* in the generation of Jews living after the horrors of the Holocaust, who refused to submit or capitulate to the magnitude of the Holocaust, and built a thriving Jewish community in America and a Jewish state in the Promised Land.

This is also the *gevurah* of the families of the victims of the ongoing attacks in Israel, who follow in Aaron's footsteps and refuse to capitulate in the face of terror. In [his eulogy for Sgt. Taharlev before Passover](#), Rabbi Dov Zinger, the head of the Mechor Chaim high school where Elchai had studied, noted the juxtaposition of the tragedy to the upcoming Seder night. He said, "As we stand on the eve of the Seder...We will recite the famous passage of *Vehi She'amdah* which promises that the story will end in a positive manner—that the Holy One with save us from the hands of our oppressors. However, we can also add that the words *Vehi She'amdah* ("It was she who stood") refers to the mourning mother, the mourning family, the entire nation of Israel who is in so much pain. Yet, she stands and knows that we will finish this story with praise—in a positive fashion...this gives us the strength to withstand this great pain...We will continue to carry the stretcher like Elchai, with the call of 'Next Year in [the rebuilt city of] Jerusalem.'" ■

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