

# Parshat Sh'mini

April 18, 2020 – 24 Nissan 5780

Annual (Leviticus. 9:1-11:47): Hertz p. 443

Haftarah (I Samuel 20:18-42): Hertz p. 948

Rabbi Joyce Newmark

## Torah Portion Summary

On the eighth and final day of the ordination ceremony Moshe teaches Aaron, Aaron's sons, and the Israelites about consecration rituals. Aaron offers his own purification offering and burnt offering. He then offers a purification offering, a burnt offering, and an offering of well-being on behalf of the people. Aaron and then Moshe and Aaron together bless the people. The Presence of the Lord appears and a fire comes forth and consumes the offering on the altar. Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu offer "alien fire" before the Lord. A fire comes forth and kills them. Moshe tells Aaron and his two remaining sons that they must not engage in the normal mourning rituals, but the rest of the Israelites will mourn. The kohanim are prohibited from drinking alcohol while they are engaged in their sacred duties. Moshe instructs Aaron, Elazar, and Itamar about which of the various portions of the offerings they may eat. God tells Moshe and Aaron to teach the people about the animals they are permitted to eat. Land animals must have cloven hooves and chew their cud. Animals that have only one of these attributes and therefore are not permitted are listed. Sea creatures must have fins and scales. No attributes are given for birds; forbidden species are listed. Permitted insects are listed; all the rest are forbidden. Animals whose carcasses transmit ritual impurity are listed. A general warning is given to guard against defilement and to be concerned about ritual purity.

I. And the swine – although it has true hoofs, with the hoofs cleft through, it does not chew the cud: it is impure for you. You shall not eat of their flesh or touch their carcasses; they are impure for you. (Leviticus 11:7-8)

1. The Torah does not heap any particular abuse on the pig, and yet it is almost universally known that the aversion to eating pork is one of the defining marks of Jewish identity, often preserved when all others have long been eroded. (Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, Shemini 5764)
2. Why is [Edom, associated with Rome] compared to a swine? To tell you this: Just as the swine, when reclining, puts forth its hooves as if to say, "See that I am clean," so too does the empire of Edom boast as it commits violence and robbery, under the guise of executing justice. This may be compared to a governor who put to death the thieves, adulterers, and sorcerers. He leaned over to a counselor and said: "I myself did these three things in one night." (Vayikra Rabbah 13:5)
3. He addressed the rabbi. "How about it, Rabbi? Pork is even more taboo than any of the others, isn't it? It seems to me that we have a special attitude toward the pig." "That's true. We tend to avoid even the living animal. We don't raise pigs, although we do raise other animals that are not to be eaten, like horses and camels and dogs and cats." "Is it because it wallows in the mud and we think it is dirty?" "I don't think so. One view I've heard is that it is because the pig was an object of worship by some of the pagan people in the area. Among the Greeks, Ceres was frequently portrayed with a pig beside her. My own idea is that it is repugnant to us because it is the one domestic animal which serves no purpose other than to be eaten. Don't you find the thought of raising an animal just to eat it distasteful?" he asked them. "But we eat the other domestic animals, cows and sheep and goats –" "But that is not the ostensible purpose for raising them," the rabbi insisted. "The meat of the kosher domestic animals we can regard as essentially a byproduct. We raise the sheep for its wool, and the goat and the cow for the milk they give. And the cow was also used as a draft animal. As for the non-kosher animals, we use the horse and the camel to provide transportation. The dog protects the house from

intruders. The cat keeps the house clear of rats and mice. Only the pig serves no other purpose than to be killed and eaten, and that is abhorrent to us.” (Harry Kemelman, *Conversations with Rabbi Small*, pp. 131-132)

### Sparks for Discussion

As Rabbi Schorsch points out, the pig is considered the epitome of *treif*. Some Jews who do not observe kashrut, who happily eat shrimp and cheeseburgers, still will not touch bacon and ham. Why? It is because of some attribute of pigs? Novelist Harry Kemelman attributes it to concern for the purpose of an animal's life. What do you think of his argument? Why do so many of us consider a pork chop much more *treif* than rabbit stew?

II. And if any of those [swarming creatures] falls into an earthen vessel, everything inside it shall be impure and [the vessel] itself you shall break. (Leviticus 11:33)

1. A person's external appearance has very little value or importance. What is important is what is inside, a person's thoughts. If a Jew performs a commandment and his thoughts are not pure, there is little value to the commandment. If anything, any impure thought, "falls into" them – into one's performance of a commandment – "everything inside it shall be impure." (Rabbi Isaac Luria, 1534-1572, Germany, Egypt, and Israel)
2. Rabbi Elazar said: A person should always take stock of himself. If he can concentrate his attention, let him pray; if he cannot, let him not pray. (Talmud Berachot 30b)
3. Rava contrasted two verses: "It is written, 'For Your faithfulness is as high as heaven' (Psalms 57:11), but it is also written, 'For Your faithfulness is higher than the heavens' (Psalms 108:5). How is this possible? In the latter case, it refers to those who do [a mitzvah] for the right reason; in the former case, to those who do it for the wrong reason." This follows Rav Yehuda, for Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: "A person should always occupy himself with Torah and mitzvot, even if for the wrong reason, for eventually it will be for the right reason." (Talmud Pesachim 50b)
4. [There] is a story, told by Rabbi Israel Friedman, the Rizhiner, about a small Jewish town, far off from the main roads of the land. But it had all the necessary municipal institutions: a bathhouse, a cemetery, a hospital and a law court; as well as all sorts of craftsmen – tailors, shoemakers, carpenters and masons. One trade, however, was lacking: there was no watchmaker. In the course of years many of the clocks became so annoyingly inaccurate that their owners just decided to let them run down, and ignore them altogether. There were others, however, who maintained that as long as the clocks ran they should not be abandoned. So they wound their clocks day after day though they knew that they were not accurate. One day the news spread through the town that a watchmaker had arrived, and everyone rushed to him with their clocks. But the only ones he could repair were those that had been kept running – the abandoned clocks had grown too rusty! (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism*, pp. 207-208)

### Sparks for Discussion

Does the performance of mitzvot require *kavannah* (intention, focus, directing your heart to heaven)? Most would agree that ideally we should perform every mitzvah with a sense of awareness that we are fulfilling God's commandments. Do you think this is possible? When you do not have *kavannah*, is it better to wait until you feel it or to proceed with the mitzvah anyway? Does it depend on the type of mitzvah – e.g., engaging in prayer, giving tzedakah? What is the value of performing mitzvot without the proper *kavannah*? What is the danger? What can we learn from Rabbi Heschel's parable about the clocks?