

Henry and Rose,

Each of you focused on rules. And Leviticus surely has plenty of those. In different ways, each of you approached the rules of this parsha not as random commandments from God, but as tools for growth and reflection.

Henry, in your case, you described the general importance of rules. Which, though sometimes overwhelming, ultimately shape our character. Nadav and Avihu, as you argue, represent what “not to do,” as they break the rules, in all sorts of ways, according to the rabbis. But unfortunately for them, in the high drama of Torah, they didn’t get another chance. By contrast, you pointed out that at least in tennis, when you make a mistake, you still get another shot. You reset, you focus, you get better, and eventually grow as a player and as a human being. The rules matter, you said. But so does the chance to course correct and live within them.

And Rose, you focused on one law in particular. Specifically, the law around touching a dead, unkosher animal. Even if Nadav and Avihu get top billing in Parashat Shmini, the latter portion of this portion is devoted to kashrut, the dietary laws, and other ritual laws about purity and impurity. You explained the Torah’s reasoning cleverly that when a person has the misfortune of encountering a dead animal, it might remind them of their own mortality. And therefore they need a ritual to return to some kind of normal way of being, which is why the Torah includes this specific rule.

Taking both of these teachings together, we can say that rules – religious, secular, athletic, artistic, moral, and otherwise – are not usually designed to control us. But instead exist to help us navigate moments of intensity, failure, confusion, and so on. Rules are not merely about limits and restrictions. But they often serve as a scaffolding upon which we build our lives.

These days, as we know, rules and norms seem to be broken with more frequency than we’re used to in public life. As the federal government continues to test the limits of our Constitution, it’s worth remembering that

the rules of that sacred text are *a/so* not designed to control us, but to allow us to live freely. If Jewish laws speak in the language of obligations, of thou shalt and shalt not, American laws speak in the language of rights and freedoms. For individuals. The laws are not designed to restrain *us*, as free people, but to restrain the powers of the government so that we, the people, can thrive. And for all these reasons, when the Constitution comes under threat, we need to work hard to protect it.

But let's face it...we know all that already. We have spoken at almost every Shabbat of 2025 about the ways in which rules continue to be broken, and about the need to hold our government accountable. You may be tired of us talking about it. But so it goes. This political moment is filled with so many twists and turns that we have to keep talking about what's going on, trying to make sense of it, and attempting to find new ways of acting, protesting, and protecting our democracy.

To that end, I want to turn back to the story part of Parashat Shmini. The most famous part. When two sons of Aaron actually break a rule. Because the narrative itself, laden with plenty of lessons for what *not* to do, also carries with it another lesson for us as we try to respond to this time.

After detailing the laws of sacrifices in the first nine chapters of Leviticus, we read this week of Aaron finally performing the very first sacrifice, paying close attention to all of the aforementioned rules. He does it all, deliberately, precisely, fearfully even. God accepts his offering. And the people shout with awe and possibly joy.

In the very next breath after describing the successful inaugural offering, literally the next verse, at the beginning of Chapter 10, we read of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, who make an offering of their own, against God's rules. "Immediately, a fire came forth from God and consumed them."

We can only imagine that anyone who witnessed this would have been overcome with grief and confusion, maybe also indignance. All the more might this have been the case for their father and uncle standing right

there. But Moses, for his part, turns to his brother Aaron and curtly says, “I told you so.” “This is what God meant,” says Moses, “by saying, ‘Through those near to Me I will show myself holy, and gain glory before the people.’” At which point we read two final words: Vayidom Aharon. And Aaron was silent.

How could this possibly be? After pouring his heart out in a sacrifice to God, then witnessing his two sons succumb to a painful death, and then having his brother pour salt on his wound...how could Aaron stay silent?

Chizkuni says Aaron had no choice...other than quietly accepting their fate. Rashbam adds that he resisted the impulse to mourn at all. And Ibn Ezra imagines Aaron’s silence as concealing an internal monologue trying to make sense of why God had to punish his sons. These sages follow the plain reading that Aaron remained silent. But Ramban says something different. For *this* medieval sage, there was no world in which Aaron actually remained still. Surely, says, Ramban, Aaron cried out as any parent might, but then, after crying out, he silenced *himself*.

Ramban’s more expansive interpretation of this scene invites us to think about what Aaron’s silence meant. Maybe he was in shock. The other commentators solve for that, too. But if we imagine that he did respond, and then silenced *himself*, then we see a different picture unfold. It wasn’t so much that he couldn’t do anything. Nor was it true that he didn’t have a visceral response. Instead, he had some intuition that only silence could help him know what to do next. No amount of consolation would help. Neither would dulling the pain with any distraction. But genuine time with himself simply to be, to think, to meditate, to come to understand what had just happened, so he could regroup and then move forward with integrity and purpose. This reading also follows Rashi, who explains that Aaron was rewarded for his silence, which we know because the next time God speaks, it is to Aaron directly, giving him laws for how to proceed and how to be careful – how to distinguish between the sacred and profane, pure and impure, and then teaching the rest of Israel how to do the same.

In other words, by opting for silence in a deeply confusing time, Aaron was able to channel the insight to know exactly what to do next. Note, also, that his silence was only temporary – and indeed Aaron does begin enacting God’s laws shortly thereafter.

I think, for us, as we face painful episodes in our own time, on a national scale, horrifying news stories of leaders pushing the limits of or possibly breaking established laws, there is a lesson here from Aaron’s own response when he witnessed the unthinkable happen. A different lesson from what we usually offer, in our efforts to respond to the avalanche of terrifying news.

Though now is surely a time for us to act, in response to governmental decisions that we find objectionable...though we are protesting, and organizing, and reading, and talking, perhaps we also need to leave room for silence. Not *staying* silent against abuses of power. But silencing the noise around us, the diversions of everyday life, the distractions of work and pleasure, the things that we fill our minds with in normal times. And finding within ourselves some new clarity about how to get organized around threats as large and as fast as what we are seeing right now.

Aaron’s silence in the face of trauma, loss, and the breaking of priestly rules, is a model for us inasmuch as it was not avoidant. It was not an empty quiet. But a state of being that allowed him to think clearly. When rules appeared to have collapsed before his eyes, and when it must’ve felt like mayhem personally and collectively, Aaron paused long enough to remember the purpose of the laws themselves and, following Rashi, to intuit and discern where to go next.

Though we, today, are also diligently pursuing action, attempting to do our part in this historic political era, we must also remember the importance of taking a break, resting on Shabbat, feeling deeply, and meditating on our values. This sort of active silence must be part of a multipronged approach to resisting the tide of authoritarianism, allowing us to choose our next steps with intention. Like Aaron, witnessing the unthinkable before him,

may we, too, trust the sacred possibility of taking a beat. So that when we act, it comes from a place of purpose.

Shabbat Shalom.