

Jackson, yashar koach! You've taught us such powerful Torah here this morning. You shared with us your discomfort with the idea that at the Mishkan and in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, killing animals was once used as a ritual to bring people closer to God. As you interpreted the various commentaries that you brought, you landed on this idea that resonated with you - that our ancestors sacrificed animals as a way of reckoning with their own mortality and the fragility of life. That somehow being near death like that would wake them up to the reminder that we ourselves only have a short time on this planet to live our lives well. And perhaps most critically, you turned that idea on its head. You suggested that we don't best learn that lesson by ending a life, but instead by protecting and caring for life. And you gave beautiful examples of how you have cared for and protected other vulnerable human beings in ways that helped you live as your best self and have helped you feel closer to God for doing so.

I've never quite heard the critique of our ancient sacrificial system like this and I think that you're on to something.

In fact, at the end of parshat Tzav, we find an insight about the tension that you've raised. Throughout this parsha, God has been guiding Moses through the ordination of the Priests - his brother Aaron and Aaron's sons. And now, Moses is giving them some final instructions. It's important to note that up until this moment, only Moses has made animal sacrifices; Aaron won't make his first sacrifice until next week's Torah portion. But as the power to do so passes to Aaron and his sons, Moses tells them the last part of their ordination ritual: וּפָתַח אֱהֶל מוֹעֵד תִּשְׁבּוּ. יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-מִשְׁמַרְתִּי יְהוָה Remain at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting day and night for seven days, protecting God's presence.

The Hebrew phrase - "protecting God's presence" is *u'shmartem et mishmeret Adonai*. And you shall guard, or protect, drawing from the Hebrew word "*lishmor*" - to protect. So the very final action that they take to become Priests is not to bring about death, not to take an animal's life - it is to learn how to *u'shmartem* - to stand guard. *Lishmor*. To protect. Whatever is to come next, this obligation to protect comes first. It's an act that takes vigilance - seven days they need to stay there, alert, attentive, insistent. And, as you proposed, it's an act that draws them existentially closer to God.

Now this word *lishmor*, to protect, or to guard, it has a particular resonance for us because of where it first appears in Torah. We first see it in the story of creation. In parshat B'reishit, the first Torah portion, it's used to describe our relationship with this earth and all that lives on it. We read: וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּגַן-עֵדֶן לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ:

The Eternal God settled *Adam* - the Human being - in the garden of Eden, to work it and *l'shomrah* - to protect it. This is the first way that we come to understand what it means to protect. It describes the intended relationship between human beings and the earth. We are to tend to it AND we are meant to protect it and all that lives on it. Vigilant, attentive, insistent on its safety.

Because of the power of its position in our creation story, we might suggest that wherever we find this word, *lishmor*, it will carry some of its first meaning for humanity. So when it shows up again in your Torah portion and your instinct is to say - wait a minute, how is destroying a life something holy, I think our Torah answers you with a primordial response, saying: it's not. The Priests first had to learn how to *lishmor*, how to protect life - that was their core teaching above all, as if God were reminding them of our first purpose on earth, pleading with them to choose protecting life over taking it, wherever they could.

Now, there's a third place that this word appears that is particularly compelling on this day, on Shabbat HaGadol, the Shabbat before Passover. As you know, at our Passover seder, we retell the story of our people being freed from Pharaoh's cruel and oppressive grip in the land of Mitzrayim, Ancient Egypt. We suffered his brutality for hundreds of years, and then God heard our wailing, and sent Moses to tell the Pharaoh - as we know - let my people go. And Pharaoh said no, and the plagues rained down, and then it was time. After the 10th and darkest plague, we were told to be ready, with shoes on our feet and our staff in hand, waiting for Moses to say "Run!" And on the eve of our freedom, the text tells us: לַיְלִיל שְׁמֹרִים הוּא לְיַהֲוָה לְהוֹצִיאָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם - That was for God a *leil shimurim*, a night of protecting to bring us out from the land of Mitzrayim safely. God stands guard all night long, vigilant, attentive, insistent on our safety. Protecting life in its most vulnerable form - the oppressed that yearn to be free.

Lishmor - the act of guarding and protecting does not **just** seem to help us face our own fragility, though we can see that it does do that. It does not seem to **just** even draw us closer to God, though we can see how it does that, too. It seems to also be tied up with the idea of freedom - that protecting lives and standing guard for those who are suffering and most vulnerable - is an essential ingredient for hastening and securing the possibility of freedom and redemption.

We are just days away now from sitting down at our Passover seder to tell the story commemorating that *leil shimurim*, that night that God stood guard, protecting us all night long. To tell the story of how we were strangers and slaves in the land of Mitzrayim, but we escaped from there, were saved from there.

Our seder, as you probably know, is not just a delicious meal with weird things to eat. It's a story-telling ritual meant to wake us up to the implications of our story and the claims that our story has on us. It's a night of remembering that Torah teaches us 36 times that because we were strangers in the land of Mitzrayim, so we must never oppress the stranger, for we know the heart of the stranger. Our seder night so becomes **our** *leil shimurim* - our night of protection, like God held, a night of learning how to protect, like the Priests did. A night of remembering the first purpose we were given here on this planet - *l'shomrah* - to protect it and all that lives upon it.

Our seder night is not a rhetorical question. It asks us directly - whose lives are in danger today? Who is suffering under the brutality of a cruel and unyielding Pharaoh? Who are the most vulnerable in our world and how, Jackson, how will we not be a party to the destruction of life, but instead to the care and protection of life as we draw nearer to God and to the best life that we have to live? For whom will we stand guard this year?

Our immigrant neighbors are living the earlier part of this story - oppression and fear and threat from a cruel and unyielding Pharaoh. Stolen from their homes, kidnapped from their classrooms, locked into putrid jails, children held in detention, denied the safety that every human being deserves. Did you know that Liam, the little kid with the bunny hat . . . in retaliation against his family, they've denied his asylum claims. Might we stand guard in a *leil shimurim* for Liam, for all the children in Dilley Detention Center, for our neighbors being held at MDC? Could our Passover seder reawaken us to protect their most vulnerable lives this year? Surely we're marching for them today. At our seder, could we email our legislators, call our Governor, paint a protest sign, donate to their cause?

And there are so many more lives in danger today. Iranians fighting for their freedom, terrified as bombs rain down on them - what actions could we take to protect their vulnerable lives? Or Palestinians living in the West Bank, being brutally abused, threatened, and beaten by settlers who by all accounts are supported by the Netanyahu Government. What could it look like to protect their vulnerable lives, to stand guard for them with the vigilance, attentiveness, and insistence that God stood guard for us? Or for trans folks and children who are trying to live their lives, but are being tormented by a government who seems to relish in making them less safe? Could our seders ignite in us new ideas for how to be the watch for them? Or for Jewish communities today - our own kin - who are literally terrified at the rising violent expressions of antisemitism. How do we stand guard against this hate and protect innocent life in synagogues and also in mosques and other sensitive places of worship?

Our Passover seders are an invitation to us - to eat the *maror* and embody the bitter memories of our own suffering - so we awaken to the suffering of others. An invitation to taste the sweet *charoset* and embody the joyful memories of going free. An invitation to crunch our matzah and remember how when Moses told us to "run!" we ran - and it was scary and it was exhilarating and it was hopeful because God held our protective vigil.

This year, may we hold our own *leil shimurim*, that reminds us of what you taught us this morning, Jackson - that it is magnitudes more powerful to protect a life than to destroy one. And that our story is fully realized only when we remember the very first lesson that we were taught in the twilight of creation - that ours is to protect this earth and all that lives on it. Doing so, may we draw closer to God, closer to humanity and freedom, and closer to living the best lives that we have to live. Amen.