

Shemini 5786

April 11, 2026

Responding to Max Berick and Alice Dolnick

Max and Alice thank you for teaching us new ways to see this parasha. Max, your focus on the moment when G-d's presence appeared as fire and the people fell on their faces gave us a wonderful opportunity to reflect on our own ideas and feelings about G-d. Alice, your struggle with the deaths of Nadav and Avihu and reflection on innovation, ambition, and unjust authority helped us to think in new ways not just about Torah but also about our own times.

Over the last 2,000 years, the Rabbis really struggled as you did, Alice, trying to understand why God would behave this way, what Nadav and Avihu did that was so wrong to warrant the death penalty. There are a couple of explanations that I have found useful. The first is that this was not a punishment but a consequence. That the role of the priests was actually quite dangerous. Serving as intermediaries between the earthly realm and the heavenly realm, standing in the breach between the human and the Divine, is extremely risky. Coming near to G-d at all, in the Biblical context, requires tremendous precaution. Whether they were drunk, as seems implied by the following verses, or for some other reason didn't follow instructions, their lack of precaution put them too close to the Divine fire without adequate protection and they died. The second is a conjecture that the strange fire they put into their pans was the same fire that was used by the surrounding pagan nations to make child sacrifice. The 13th century French commentator Chizkuni sees this connection because the language here describing the alien fire that G-d did not command matches the language in Jeremiah about child sacrifice that G-d does not command. We know that one throughline in the Torah is a polemic against child sacrifice, and it could be that this story is an attempt to set an example for the wilderness generation (in the way that the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, set an example for their ancestors), that pagan worship involving child sacrifice will not be tolerated.

However we try to understand the Nadav and Avihu story, your comparison to the contemporary persecution of immigrants in this country is itself innovative and important. And your message about unjust authority in our time is fitting. I'm going to come back to that in a minute.

First, let me address Max's questions about G-d, which were also important and meaningful. Max, I too have read pretty much all of Rick Riordan's books. My kids were really into them. You are not wrong that there's some overlap between the Greek gods and the G-d we find in Torah. Many people don't know this, but in Torah the Israelites were not monotheists. If you look closely you can see it. They are monolatrous, meaning that they had only one G-d for themselves, that was Abraham's innovation, whereas their neighbors had many gods, and their one G-d existed in a world full of gods. We just went through a holiday that was based on a battle between gods, Pharaoh was a god to the Egyptians and Adonai was the G-d of the Israelites and they duked it out and the Israelite G-d won. If you look carefully at Mi Chamocha, our prayer of redemption which our ancestors sang as they crossed the sea to freedom, you see it reads "Who is like you, Adonai, among the gods that are worshipped?" In other words, the song proclaims that the miracle of yetziat mitzrayim, bringing us out of Egypt, proves that our G-d is the most powerful among a panoply of gods. Many verses of Torah, including the Ten Commandments, tell us that we must not worship other gods because our G-d is jealous. That sounds very much like the pagan ideas of the Greeks, in which gods fight with each other, have intrigue between them, get jealous of one another, and use human beings as pawns in their epic battles. Similarly, this parasha is about initiating the sacrificial system, which the priests facilitated, and which required great precaution. The Israelite sacrificial system resembles the pagan practice of feeding their gods.

We see that though some of Torah's descriptions of G-d would be familiar to people who had lived their whole lives in pagan societies, the Torah is also moving them away from that familiar understanding of divinity toward something entirely new. A G-d who, as you taught us, Max, though appearing in fire and smoke, has no representation, no image. A G-d whose name cannot even be spoken. As you described, Max, our sense of and relationship to G-d moved over time from the visual realm into the realm of feeling. By the time of the prophets, G-d became a Oneness that includes all divinity and that imagines a future in which humanity also unites and becomes one. I understand this to mean that all of the gods of all of the peoples of the earth are just different facets of the same reality, the same Oneness which underlies and unites all things. Another key difference is that for the Israelite G-d, human beings are not pawns but are themselves the image of G-d, with inherent dignity and worth, and are needed partners for the redemption of the world. That's how and why we have covenant.

You wouldn't make a covenant with a pawn, only with a partner whom you take seriously as possessing inalienable freedom, agency, and responsibility.

We are gathered here today in a time of war. We are in a partial ceasefire and we pray that it holds and becomes complete. One of the terrible things about this war has been the utter disregard for the worth, value, and dignity of human life expressed in word and deed by our own government and the governments of the other warring nations. This week, Donald Trump threatened to wipe out all of Iranian society and culture. He said, "a whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again." These are the same innocent Iranian people whose freedom he was only recently claiming to care about. He also has spoken cavalierly about the possibility of more Americans dying in the war. While Benjamin Netanyahu has expressed greater concern about the Israelis who have died in the war, his government has actively dehumanized the Palestinian people in the West Bank who are being terrorized with impunity by violent settlers. His government just passed a law establishing the death penalty for Palestinian militants but not Israeli militants, and government ministers brazenly wore golden nooses on their lapels in the lead up to the vote on that law. This, after the extreme dehumanization of the Palestinians in Gaza which led 72,300 people to die. Hamas and Hezbollah are equally responsible for the deaths of Palestinians, both in Gaza and in Lebanon, using innocent people as human shields and keeping entire populations hostage to their agenda, which is to eliminate Israel and Israelis. More than 2,000 people have been killed in Lebanon so far, 400 of whom have been identified as Hezbollah militants and 1,600 of whom not, and Israel continues to pound that country with bombs.

Iran has devalued life for decades, calling for the death of Israel and America, calling Israelis "bacteria", "a cancerous tumor", "a small satan". And the Iranian regime murders its own people for simply speaking up or advocating for their own rights. From December to February of this year, more than 7,000 Iranians were killed by their own government. Since the war started, somewhere between 1,500 and 3,000 Iranians have died. Meaning that this year the Iranian government killed more than twice as many of its own people as have been killed in this war. Meanwhile, about 30 Israelis have died, and more than 7,000 have been injured. 4 Palestinians in the West Bank died from Iranian missiles – they have no bomb shelters there –, and 33 Palestinians have died at the hands of settlers or by the IDF in the last three months. 13 Americans have died in this

war. 108 Iraqis have died. 12 people have died in United Arab Emirates. 7 in Qatar. 7 in Kuwait. 4 in Syria. 2 in Bahrain. 2 in Oman. 2 in Saudi Arabia. Each of these deaths is a life cut short, a person who was once a baby, a toddler treasured by their parents, a sibling maybe, a friend. A person who was loved.

All of this devaluing and destruction of human life. All of this pitting civilization against civilization, West versus East. Us versus them. All of this division and degradation of the great Oneness that is within and beyond all things. The G-d you feel, Max, like you feel your grandfather.

The rhetoric against and persecution of immigrants in this country is the same gesture. Us against them, degrading, dehumanizing, persecuting. Trump has called immigrants “an invasion”, “criminals”, said they are “poisoning the blood of our country”, called them “jihadists”, “violent extremists”, and of course, “aliens.” About 40,000 people were locked up in detention facilities just in January of this year. 73% of the people in detention centers have not been convicted of any crime. It’s thought that about 600,000 people have been deported since this government took over.

But the divisive deeds of today’s populists are a throwback to an earlier time and tactic, a reaction to something much more powerful. We are in an era of human interconnection across the globe and growing human awareness of interdependence – economically for sure, also culturally, and environmentally. We just saw images from the Artemis II mission, of the beautiful blue earth floating in black space. We are so small in the scheme of the universe. We are on this little orb together, entirely interdependent. And we are understanding that more and more. If we step back we see that we are in the midst of a great stitching together of humanity through travel, through migration, through technology. Just look at the foods we eat, the supply chain for anything we buy, the influences on social media, the languages we hear around us, the music – Bad Bunny at the Super Bowl is one excellent example. Humans are in the midst of a great global mixing. The current backlash of this presidency is doing a lot of harm to a lot of innocent people – and we must do everything that we can to stand with its victims and to stop it – but it will not, in the end, win. We are moving, in time, toward that great human oneness envisioned by our prophets of old.

Meanwhile, there have never been as many human beings alive at the same time as there are right now. The world is crowded with humans. And we are offloading more and more of what makes us human onto machines, and spending more time with technologies that separate our consciousness from our physical experience of being alive, and from the other living, breathing human beings in our physical environment. And in video games and virtual reality, we spend time as avatars, often killing each other. All of these trends can lead us to care less about human life, to value it less, to lose the sense that it is sacred.

But the reason that Torah finds child sacrifice to be anathema is the conviction that every human being, every one, is an image of the G-d who has no image. That feeling that you have inside yourself, Max, that presence, is inside every human, equally. Every immigrant, no matter what country they come from, is just as much a face of G-d as you or me. Every American. Every Israeli. Every Palestinian. Every Lebanese. Every Iranian.

That may be the single most important challenge of our time – to hold on to and prioritize that idea of the sacred value of human life, every human life.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.