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Dying and Keeping Kosher

Priscilla Frank '06 | Bronfman Torah | Shemini / Yom HaShoah 2017

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I was first interested in writing something about Parshat Shemini because it grappled with death -- specifically, the deaths of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, after they prepare burnt offerings for G-d and are eaten up by his divine fire. "And fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord." In Parsha time, their death takes place following the seven days of the inauguration of the Tabernacle -- hence the name, "Shemini," or eighth. In Priscilla time, this Parsha aligns with the week my dad died in 2014.

When first reading the portion I couldn't help but chuckle at the fact that, after Nadab and Abihu are pretty swiftly killed toward the beginning of the narrative, the remainder of the text is spent with G-d breaking down the rules that distinguish Kosher foods from non-Kosher foods. "These are the creatures that you may eat among all the animals on earth," G-d begins, before delving into great detail. Of course, I thought, I sign up for a portion about death and it ends up being about food.

Food played a huge role in the final phase of my dad's life, and our first days without him, so the coupling seemed startlingly appropriate. After he was first

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diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2012, concerned friends and family swooped in offering anecdotes of distant relatives whose cancer had been cured by eating healthy, or raw, or vegan, or a less than appetizing combination of the three. The fact that we lived on the outskirts of Los Angeles surely didn't help with the onslaught of advice regarding healthy food habits. We didn't keep a Kosher home, but suddenly the family's eating was governed by strict laws. My dad's diagnosis was clear from the start: he would be lucky to live five years. So it seemed silly and almost cruel to hold him to health standards that restricted him in his last days, when he was already suffering unimaginably and cut off from so many of life's joys. And yet the alternative was to give up hope entirely.

Much of the conversation regarding Shemini seems to revolve around why Nadab and Abihu were killed. One Rabbi says it's because they drank wine, another because they were arrogant, callous, unmarried, etc. One more optimistic consensus, however, reads the brothers' death as a result of their being too righteous. They thus transcend their earthly bodies, consumed by G-d's divine kiss. "Although they sensed their own demise, this did not prevent them from drawing near to G-d in attachment, delight, delectability, fellowship, love, kissing and sweetness, to the point that their souls ceased from them." (Ohr HaChaim)

This debate will sound familiar to anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one and asked the inevitable question *why?* Were they unhealthy? Did they live too dangerously? Were they "too good for this earth"? The reason for Nadab and Abihu's death remains mysterious, just as death most often is. It is tempting to search for a singular reason behind the unfathomable event -- is it a punishment or reward? -- but ultimately the text provides no definitive answer.

There is also much discussion over the discrepancy between the two subjects discussed in Shemini, as the topic shifts swiftly from death to dinner. This again relates back to the Parsha's title "Shemini" -- the eighth -- with eight signifying transcendence from the natural order. There are seven days of the week, but divine miracles are reserved for the eighth day. While seven signifies nature and eight spiritual transcendence, the Messianic era will usher in the blending of the two, so what is natural becomes spirit and what is spiritual becomes of the earth.

This idea of seven-meets-eight is enacted through keeping Kosher, thus endowing

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our daily sustenance with spiritual force, blending seven and eight. The notion also appears in “Shemini” itself, which couples matters of life and death with those of proper eating habits. And it of course appears all the time in everyday life, when the transcendent pain of losing someone is inextricably linked to physical realities - - organizing a funeral, feeding yourself and others, gathering their belongings, feeling physically ill. The metaphysical and the mundane go together, in death and in Jewish life. Those who attended my dad’s funeral felt this quite literally, because the caterer gave everyone food poisoning.

Continue the conversation. Send Priscilla your thoughts: priscillamfrank@gmail.com.

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