

## Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Shemini

What a show! Aaron slaughters the animals, dashes their blood across the corners of the altar, and offers the meat of the animal as a sacrifice. It was the very first use of the altar and the people came from the all corners of the camp to watch the spectacle. The Torah goes into great detail describing the ritual of the altar's inaugural use. To be candid, it is a little gruesome and the details are graphic – yet the people are all assembled to watch the priest “do his thing.” But then we get a really interesting twist on the story. Near the end of Chapter Nine (Leviticus) the text tells us that after this showmanship, Moses and Aaron walk into the Tent of Meeting together, and only then, as they both emerge together – does the glory of God appear before the camp. For all of the offerings and rituals ...God was not there. God was not there until Moses and Aaron joined together. Moses was the prophet and Aaron the priest. The prophets and priests war throughout the bible and it is most likely that this story in text was written as a response to those conflicts. The priest and the prophet each argued they were more right before, but the author (as I see it) may well have been telling us that neither are complete; whole without the other.

"There is no *me* in team." "*U* and *I* have to both exist if there is *UNITY*." Yes, these are clichés, but even as clichés, they are very true. Teams and communities cannot function while individuals care more for themselves than for the community around them. At the same time, when anyone of us fails to participate, the whole community suffers. Ok, we all know this – it is taught in school and from every pulpit of every religion. Why then must we suffer through the rhetoric that we experience daily ... the rhetoric that only serves to pull us apart? Yesterday the Texas Governor asserted his state's right to secede from the Union. A pundit openly hopes that the President fails. Another Governor decides to sell a political office to the highest bidder. Religious leaders claim to own God and God's message - EXCLUSIVELY. Still so many voices are screaming, “ENOUGH!” In reality, though what they have had enough of is that their rhetoric is not being covered as loudly in the media as the opposing rhetoric. Candidly, I too have had enough. I have had enough of pundits on the left screaming that those on the right are seditionists. I have had enough of those on the right screaming that those on the left are communists. I certainly know that I have had enough of people telling me that God is finite (because God must be if they are the only ones who get to define God), and the systemic prejudice that keeps us afraid of each other, just because they are the other.

At this time of year I get lots of calls from seminary students who have to interview someone from a different faith for a comparative religions class. This year I asked each caller and interviewer, “Why Judaism?” The answers run the gamut, but pointedly several said, “It is the only other religion around.” In telling them that there are two mosques, a Hindu temple, and Buddhist centers, the reaction is always the same, sincere surprised to hear me refer to them as religions. Some callers have even been surprised to hear that as a Jew, I am not a Christian. With one exception this year, all have been surprised to hear that Jews (within the normative Jewish world) recognize the validity and authenticity of all faiths – equally, since there is only one God; a God beyond finite definition. I also asked each one whether my being right or them being right matters when it comes to accomplishing the work we both have to do to take care of those in need. Our stories and our theologies provide us the impetus to come to the table to get good work done. For us to spend energies proving whose story is more right and whose is not only takes energy away from accomplishing any real healing in the world. It seems to me that we spend more time politically bludgeon each other and religiously “out God-ing” each other, fighting over doing things our own way and less time over accomplishing things for each other.

Where we disagree (as in the roles of the priest and the prophet), we need to spend more energy dignifying each other for the integrity of our work, and less time vilifying each other over our divergent views. We will find ourselves hearing each other more keenly, helping each other grow more justly, and most importantly working together more productively. We all hold pieces to this puzzle. We can both be saying different things, yet each feel vested in the integrity of what we espouse. It seems to me that this Torah portion's poignant message is one that we need to hear, internalize, and perform. It is not my puzzle or yours – it is ours. When we can emerge side by side – as did Moses and Aaron – then God's blessing will rest upon **our** work and we will all thrive . Shabbat Shalom.