



## When leaders atone: Thoughts on Parshat Shmini

By Erica Brown

A new museum just opened up in Brooklyn, curated by a licensed psychologist. The Museum of Failure is a collection of projects and products from around the world that flopped. It's easy to ask, "What were they thinking?" with hindsight. It's harder to recognize that some failures turn into innovations. The museum is designed to help people take a meaningful look at mistakes and risks and accept that there is often progress hidden in failure. But not always. Sometimes, failure is just a soul-crushing realization that is relived again and again.

In the ancient world, failure was often acknowledged and atoned for with the giving of a sacrifice. A sacrifice could not reset or erase a mistake but created a ritualized break from it that required a significant loss or renunciation from the giver, let alone the animal. When we use the word sacrifice today, we usually mean that someone is ready to give up something of personal importance for a belief or an ideal or to achieve a particular result. On some level, the giving has to hurt to be meaningful.

The laws surrounding all sacrifices in Vayikra, the book of Leviticus, are highly detailed. Moshe Halbertal, in his book *On Sacrifice* explains that ritual, in the case of sacrifices, "is an attempt to grapple with the inherent unpredictability of rejection." When we give a gift to God, whether out of thanks or guilt, it is not like a human gift cycle. In a human gift exchange, I give a gift to you on the presumption that, when the occasion calls for it, you will do the same for me, as part of a normative social standard. It's an expression of social capital.

But when a person gives a gift to God or to any authority figure, there is no expectation of reciprocity. We give gifts to superiors to seek their approval, to appease them, or to put ourselves in their good graces, not to get a reciprocal token

of their affection. With such gifts, we might worry that the gift will be ignored or even rejected, as was the case for Cain early in Genesis: "...to Cain and his offering [God] paid no heed. Cain was much distressed, and his face fell" (Ge. 4:5). Sometimes, as in the story of Cain, no explanation for this dismissal is offered.

To avoid rejection in such gift giving, we do as much research as we can to get it right. Halbertal reasons that all the details and protocols about sacrifices related in the book of Vayikra serve as a "shield for the human approaching God. Any change in the protocol might be lethal...The one who is offering a sacrifice wished to appear before God, to be made visible...And yet being in the spotlight before power can be terrifying." Halbertal warns that those sacrificing should not have "wrongly presumed intimacy" with the Divine, the way that two of Aaron's did.

In this week's Torah reading, Shmini, Moses said: "This is what God has commanded that you do, that the Presence of God may appear to you. Then Moses said to Aaron: 'Come forward to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering, making expiation for yourself and for the people; and sacrifice the people's offering and make expiation for them, as God has commanded'" (Lev. 9:6-7). This must have been, using Halbertal's explanation, the most terrifying sacrifice of all. Part of Aaron's job as a Kohen Gadol, a High Priest, was to seek expiation for himself and his people. Failure was assumed with the job description. It's impossible to serve others as a leader and not make hundreds of mistakes, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in Lessons in Leadership, "Leaders make mistakes. That is an occupational hazard of the role. Managers follow the rules, but leaders find themselves in situations for which there are no rules" ("The Unexpected Leader," Vayigash). Where there are no clear guidelines or precedents, leaders must rely on common sense, instinct, and experience. It's easy to get it wrong.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Lev. 9:7 explains Aaron's role here: "There is a divine command that you make atonement for yourself and for all of the people. You will atone for yourself with a sin offering bullock. Afterwards you will atone for the congregation by offering the people's sacrifice, for a person cannot atone for another unless he has been purified from all sin." It's not only that a leader must be cleansed of sin in order to represent others on the altar; in order to achieve atonement, the leader must confess his own sins first. Leaders might complain about or belittle their followers or regard themselves as superior. The atonement sacrifice only worked because the High Priest first catalogued his own transgressions, making him humbly aware of his own smallness before he confessed on behalf of the people.

Imagine, for a moment, if all leaders today – in every field – had a day of atonement, when they had to spend an entire day both reflecting on and confessing their mistakes and carrying the wrongdoing of those they serve so that they might ask forgiveness. Perhaps many of today's scandals involving the narcissistic, even criminal behaviors of politicians, CEOs, celebrity athletes and entertainers might be kept in better check. Such leaders do not take responsibility for others because they also do not feel accountable themselves. Every day, every newspaper carries such headlines.

In contrast, the High Priest is accountable for himself and for everyone else. It's an astonishing model of leadership. Gifford Thomas, in his article "Leaders Take All The Blame and Give Away All The Credit" (May 8, 2020) writes that leaders "take responsibility... for EVERYTHING. They turn each misstep into an opportunity to learn from the mistake instead of pointing fingers: they pull the thumb and ask themselves 'what could I have done differently?'" In a total shift of mindset, leaders "find a lesson while others only see a problem. They privately address their subordinates' mistakes with them, but take the blame publicly without dissent. If someone slipped up, they pick them up, they don't point the finger and pass the blame."

The greatest act of responsibility as a leader is to hold the mistakes of others as your own. On the one hand, leaders cannot be liable for every failure of his or her followers. On the other hand, responsible leaders must always reflect on the problems in a culture that they are ultimately responsible for by asking three essential questions:

Is there anything I could have done to prevent this problem?

What did I contribute to this problem? (Possibly by ignoring it or not taking it seriously enough)

What can I learn from the way I handled this problem that might prevent failure in the future?

Ultimately, a leader is always a learner who understands the importance of direction, reflection and course correction.

So what failure have you experienced that's been your greatest teacher?

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