

The Eighth Day: The Infinite That is Within Our Grasp
Parshat Shmini
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How many of us ever find ourselves counting with our fingers? For children, fingers provide a tangible representation of quantities, making addition and subtraction easier to grasp. But counting is so much more than keeping track or measuring on our fingers and toes. We count because numbers carry meaning that ordinary language cannot express. Computer science is built from a language that revolves around numbers which has given way to a cyber universe whose potential is just being tapped by artificial intelligence.

The ancient world knew this intuitively, even without the invention of computers. The Pythagoreans believed that numbers were the very substance of existence — that beneath the visible world, what was truly real was mathematical. The kabbalists built entire architectures of meaning on the sefirot — ten divine emanations, each a number, each a window into the nature of God.

And the Torah — our Torah — is saturated with this understanding. The Hebrew word for letters, *otiyot*, also means signs, symbols, portals, and numbers. Every number in the biblical world is not merely a quantity but represents a deeper truth. Which is why when the Torah opens this week's parasha with a single word — *Shemini*, the eighth — it is not giving us an accounting detail. It is not telling us which day it was on the calendar so we can check the schedule. Here, the Torah is making a declaration about the nature of the world, not this world per se, but the world that human beings are capable of bringing into reality.

To appreciate the power of eight, we must first appreciate the power of seven. The word *shemini* means "eighth." It is referring to the dedication of the Tabernacle, the place on earth that God would dwell physically. From everything we know in the Torah, we would have thought that this holy celebration of God's indwelling place, the *Mishkan*, would have been completed in seven days, as the number seven represents the creation itself. God created a place for human beings in seven, and now human beings are creating a place for God. Seven days of ritual. Seven days of preparation. Seven days of doing everything in the most punctilious way possible.

And then came the eighth day. *Vayehi bayom hashemini* — "And it was on the eighth day." Just three Hebrew words. But those three words carry the weight of an entire theology because the Torah is telling us something profound: seven is not the end of the story. Seven is the floor, the foundation for all things. Eight is an open door leading us to something that can yet be.

Why wasn't 7 enough? The Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Judah Loew, teaches this explicitly. Seven, he says, corresponds to the natural order. It is *teva*, nature itself,

encoded in number. When you count to seven, you have measured the whole of the physical cosmos, what you can see.

And that is precisely why seven can become a prison. It can limit you into thinking that what you can see reflects all that is. You can begin to believe that what is, is all there can be. That the world as it exists, with all its beauty and all its brutality, is the final word. That the horizon is the limit. That when the seventh day comes and you look at what you have built, you can say it is finished and mean it as a closing of the door rather than an opening.

The rabbis understood this. They taught that God gave us the Sabbath day not just for rest, but as protest. As a weekly declaration that the world of six days is not ultimate. There is a spiritual world beyond what we can see and touch. We need not be slaves to the natural order. On the seventh day we engage what the Rabbis call our *Nefesh Yeteirah*, our additional soul, our Shabbat soul that reminds us of the realm of holiness that takes us beyond the world of seven.

All this brings us to the number eight as a reminder of what "more" actually looks like. Eight, in Jewish thought, is the number of the natural world and the transcendent world converging. A baby boy is circumcised on the eighth day. Why? Because the covenant of Abraham is not natural — it is above nature. It is a mark that says: this human being participates in something that seven cannot contain.

Chanukah lasts eight days. The miracle of the oil was not supposed to happen. By every law of physics, of politics, of military probability, the Maccabees should have lost. The oil should have run out. The natural world said seven — and God said eight.

The instruments of the Temple — the lyre, the harp — were, according to the Talmud (*Arakhin* 13b), tuned to seven strings. But in the world to come? Eight strings. The music of the Messianic era will have a note that has never yet been heard.

Eight is the number of what is truly wondrous before us. The number of the covenant. For Jews, it is the number of what happens when human beings refuse to accept that seven is the end. Refuse to accept the idea that because it has always been that way it must always be that way!

And so Parashat Shemini begins: on the eighth day. After all the preparation. After all the completeness of seven. Aaron and his sons step forward, and something astonishing happens. Moses and Aaron enter the Tent of Meeting, and when they come out — *vayevarchu et ha'am* — they bless the people, and the glory of God appears to the entire nation. Fire comes down from heaven and consumes the offering on the altar. And all the people saw, and they sang out, and they fell on their faces. The eighth day is the day the world becomes larger than anyone thought possible, large enough to even contain the presence of God.

But now I need to ask you something. Do you know what else was happening while the Mishkan was being built? Israel was in the wilderness. Not a vacation. A wilderness — stark, dangerous, and surrounded on all sides by peoples who did not

want them to survive. The generation that built the Mishkan had been slaves. They carried the trauma of Egypt in their bodies. They had seen the sea split and yet lived in fear and complained endlessly. They had received the Torah and built a golden calf. They were, as we might say today, a people at war with themselves and with the world. And yet, in the midst of all of that, they built something of such beauty and precision and holiness that, when they finished, God's own presence descended to dwell among them.

Seven and eight. Earth and infinity. War and wonder. Simultaneously. This is the great Jewish secret that Shemini is trying to teach us, and I think it is a most relevant teaching for our moment.

We live, right now, in a world that is very much in the seven-space. There is a fragile peace in a war with Iran that threatens to engulf the wider world. Our brothers and sisters in Israel have been living a good part of every day in bomb shelters and continue to face an implacable foe whose tentacles reach into Hezbollah and Lebanon. There is terror and there is grief across the Middle East. There are families torn apart, communities shattered, and a darkness over parts of our world that feels, some days, permanent and totalizing. You turn on the news, and everything tells you that we have hit bottom. That we have reached the limits of seven, the door that remains in a world that is repeating a cycle as old as time itself.

The world that the Israelites found themselves in during the time of Moses was not all that different than our own. A time of war and brutality. And yet, into that world, our portion of Shemini says: Dedicate the Mishkan, this indwelling place of God, anyway, not instead of fighting for life and justice and safety. Not in denial of the horror, but alongside it. Parallel to it. As a declaration for all time that the people who are fighting the war of seven remain the same human beings who are capable of reaching for eight at the same time. If the Israelites would have waited until the perfect moment, then the Mishkan would have never been built. In the messiness, the brutality and the beauty of seven, Aaron and his sons transversed to eight and the Tabernacle was dedicated. It was an extraordinary act. A reminder for all time that human beings are capable of transcending the world that we can see, touch, and feel, and touch something beyond: seven can give way to eight.

This past Monday we saw something similar happen in our time. On April 6th, 2026 — in the middle of this broken and beautiful world, we were privileged to see this foundational Jewish idea come to life. NASA's Artemis II mission, four astronauts aboard a capsule named Integrity, flew around the far side of the moon. They traveled farther from Earth than any human beings have ever gone — more than 252,000 miles — eclipsing the record set by Apollo 13 in 1970. And then, as the laws of orbital mechanics required, their spacecraft passed behind the moon, and for forty minutes, all communication with Earth was lost.

Four human beings, alone, beyond the far side of the moon, completely cut off from every other human voice. No mission control. No signal from the world they came from. Just the moon, the stars, and the vast silence of deep space. And then they came around.

When contact was restored, Christina Koch, the first woman in human history ever to travel beyond Earth's orbit, broke the silence with the words: "It is so great to hear from Earth again." And then she said something that I believe belongs alongside the most powerful words ever spoken from space. Turning to begin the journey home, she addressed the entire planet: "To Asia, Africa and Oceania, we are looking back at you. We hear you. You can look up and see the moon right now. We see you, too... We will explore. We will build ships. We will visit again. But ultimately, we will always choose Earth. We will always choose each other." Let us sit with those words for a moment.

This was not spoken in a time of peace. It was not spoken from a world that has solved its problems or ended its conflicts. It was spoken now, from a capsule called Integrity, by four human beings who left a planet at war and flew to the edge of what is possible, and looked back at everything they love, and chose it. That is a tribute to the human spirit and, to my mind, the fulfillment of Shmini; Eight.

Christina Koch became the first woman to travel beyond Earth's orbit. Victor Glover became the first Black astronaut to journey around the moon. Jeremy Hansen became the first non-American to fly on a deep-space mission. These are not small things. These are the echoes of the creation story as told in the Book of Genesis — a declaration that the reach toward the infinite belongs to all of us, that the eighth is our destiny if we choose to accept it.

To reach for transcendence while standing in the middle of a broken world requires you to hold both truths at once — the full weight of seven and the full wonder of eight — without letting either one cancel the other out.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that the beginning of wisdom is not knowledge. It is radical amazement. Wonder. To be capable of wonder — genuine, open, un-defended wonder — while you are also carrying sorrow, fighting battles, living in an incomplete and often brutal world: this is the spiritual task of the eighth day. The eighth is not a destination. It is a direction. It is the insistence, against all evidence to the contrary, that we have not yet seen the limits of what human beings — created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God — are capable of.

And notice what Koch said when she came around the moon and saw the Earth again for the first time. She looked back at Asia and Africa and Oceania — at a planet full of suffering and beauty and war and hope — and she said: We see you. We will always choose you. We will always choose each other.

That is not the language of escape. That is the language of the Mishkan. We go out into the wilderness — we reach toward the infinite — not to leave the world behind, but

to come back to it transformed. To come back with a view from the eighth. To come back knowing that this tiny, fragile, breathtaking planet, suspended in darkness, is waiting to be redeemed.

On the Sabbath Day, on the seventh day, four human beings made their way home from the far side of the moon, having experienced the wondrous potential that human beings possess. Riding a column of fire back to a planet they crossed a quarter million miles of darkness to declare their love. *Vayehi bayom hashemini*. And it was on the eighth day.

The eighth day is not someday. It is not after the wars are over or the grief has passed. The eighth is now, as four humans taught us from a capsule called Integrity. In so doing, they remind us that eight remains in our grasp here on earth — beginning when we choose to see the sacred, the image of God, and what can yet be, in every human being, just as Christina Koch reminded us when she said: *But ultimately, we will always choose Earth. We will always choose each other*. She may not have realized it, but in that moment, a human being was demonstrating how to count to eight, not with her fingers, but a soul ignited by the spark of the Divine implanted within each of us.

Shabbat Shalom.