



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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**Jews – a nation of revolutionaries**

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman עמיל  
רי מנחם זאב בן פנחס זי"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Shemini

## **Jews – a nation of revolutionaries**

With spring in the air, it's a good time to talk about the Arab Spring, or any of the revolutions that changed the world recently.

These have included Libya, Yemen, Syria and elsewhere throughout the Arab world—with hundreds of thousands demonstrating against their governments. In some countries, dictators were deposed, and in others, it's only a matter of time.

But we Jews have always been a nation of revolutionaries.

Throughout history, Jews were always involved in revolutions, and in many cases were the leaders of those revolutions.

These included the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1960s, in which many famous Jewish leaders marched hand-in-hand with non-violent freedom fighter Martin Luther King, Jr.

In South Africa, top rabbis joined the fight against apartheid, including Rabbi Nachman Bernhard, among South Africa's leading Jewish religious figures. Rabbi Bernhard would speak out sharply every week at his synagogue against the apartheid government to the point that they threatened to expel him from the country, but he still didn't stop.

But the same holds true for the Bolshevik Revolution, most of whose leaders were Jews, including the notorious Leon Trotsky.

The story is told that a Chabad Rebbe once met with important ministers of the Czar's kingdom and asked them why they provoked pogroms in Russia.

They answered him: "The young Jews are the tip of the spear in the war against the kingdom and so, why are you coming to us with complaints? Restraint your youth!"

And the same thing holds true for even further back in Jewish history.

What happened on Chanukah? Yehudah Maccabee raised the banner of revolt against the Greek Empire that was in power in ancient Israel. And the same thing also happened with Bar Kochva, when the Romans ruled Israel and had destroyed the Second Temple—50 years after the Destruction, Rabbi Akiva the great revolutionary rose up and supported Bar Kochva's revolt against the Romans, who were then a world superpower; still, Bar Kochva and Rabbi Akiva were prepared to fight against them.

And the same thing happens in each generation.

Now, where does this come from? The only answer is that it must be in the DNA of every Jew, this business of rebelling and starting revolutions. And it all begins with Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham.

In the Torah (Bereishis 14:13), Avraham is called "Avraham HaIvri," on which the Midrash comments, "the whole world was on one *eiver* and he was on the other *eiver*." *Eiver* means side—and so "HaIvri" means "the one on the other side."

This means that the whole world worshiped idols at the time, with each individual worshiping his or her individual idol. It was just something that everyone did—like watching TV or surfing the Web today. And suddenly, along comes a young person and argues that it's all nonsense and vanity—that it's all meaningless and worthless.

It would be one thing if Avraham was some kind of fringe lunatic. But he wasn't. He came from a good family and a prominent family. His father, Terach, was a very important minister in the court of Nimrod, the warlord who ruled the entire world at the time.

In today's terms, Avraham wasn't some surfer dude living on the beach in California—he was the son of one of the most respected U.S. Senators or presidential Cabinet members.

Now at the time, as we mentioned, everyone worshiped idols—but along came Avraham, who is described by the Prophet Yechezkel (33:24) as "Abraham was one," and went against the mainstream, telling everyone that Avraham was the only one! (Echad haya avraham.)

So our forefather Avraham was the first revolutionary. It was he who rebelled against the conventions of society and was not fazed by the fact that the whole world was against him—or that they even threw him into a blazing furnace (and survived through a miracle—itsself another story). Throughout it all, he stuck to his guns, was thrown into the furnace and was saved by G-d, and passed on that inner strength to all future generations.

But what happened to Avraham essentially happened again and again throughout the course of Jewish history.

During the time Nevuchadnezzar, King of Babylon ruled the world, he decided one day to build a gold idol 60 amos tall. (That's over 90 feet tall!) And when he was done, he ordered every country under his control to send a delegation of three people to bow to his idol.

Now Nevuchadnezzar had three Jewish advisors: Chananya, Mishael and Azarya. And the Midrash tells us that he summoned them and said, "Jeremiah said, 'The nation and the kingdom that does not worship Nevuchadnezzar... with sword and with famine and with plague shall I visit them.' Now, if you don't fulfill the first part of that verse, I will fulfill the second half." Translation: If you don't serve my giant idol, I'll kill you. (Specifically, I'll throw you into a furnace.)

But the three Jewish advisors answered him, "You rule over us with taxes, but with this matter about which you declared, 'I am Nevuchadnezzar!', you and the dog are equal."

Well, as you might imagine, King Nevuchadnezzar didn't exactly like that one.

He immediately flew into a rage and ordered them to be thrown into the furnace. But G-d made a miracle and they emerged from this furnace alive.

And so, we finally come to this week's Torah portion.

This week's Parshah, Shmini, is called "Shmini" after one of the opening words in the portion's first line. But the name of the Parshah symbolizes the concept that the number seven symbolizes the natural order and the number eight symbolizes the supernatural.

Why is the natural order symbolized by the number seven? Because the universe was created in seven days, and the week lasts seven days. There are things we do on Sunday, things we do on Monday, and so on—and when the week is over and the next Sunday comes, we do the same thing over again. That's the order of nature.

But then we have the number eight. This number calls to us to break the routine—to rise to something higher than seven, higher than nature. To step outside of yourself a bit.

And that's why Chanukah, which is revolution, is for eight days, and why bris milah, or circumcision—something above human intellect—is done specifically on the eighth day after the baby's birth.

Not only that, but we find the concept of eight symbolizing that which is above nature in the very Torah portion itself.

The Torah portion tells us about the dedication of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle that our ancestors built for G-d in the desert.

The day of dedication was supposed to be the happiest day for Aharon HaKohen, Aharon the High Priest. It was supposed to be his inauguration as High Priest. And indeed, Aharon completes all of his duties earlier that day. He steps down from the altar, enters the Mishkan with his brother Moshe, comes back out and blesses the people, and then the great event happens—"A fire came forth from before G-d and consumed that which was upon the altar... and all the people saw and roared and fell upon their faces." Meaning, they all personally witnessed how G-d revealed Himself and put His "stamp of approval" on the Mishkan. What a great climax to a dedication ceremony!

But then, two of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, suddenly burst forth "each man bearing his pan; and they put fire in them... and brought before G-d a strange fire that He had not commanded them [to bring]."

Nadav and Avihu had been so inspired by G-d's direct revelation that they also wanted to be a part of it—so they made up their own rules and went and brought their own fire offering upon the altar without G-d's permission. In other words, the revelation kindled in them a fire of love towards G-d, and they wanted to be closer to G-d. This is what drove them to do this deed.

True, they crossed lines and violated G-d's will, as the Torah tells us—they were punished by a fire coming forth and burning them. But the concept that they symbolize—the will to break boundaries, to break out of the mold, is definitely a good thing. The fire of Aharon's sons burns within each one of us—the drive to start revolutions, to challenge conventions and to change the world for the better and more perfect.

In 2009, a book came out called "Start-up Nation: the Story of Israel's Economic Miracle." The book tries to explain what is the engine behind the mighty economic growth of this tiny country called Israel. And the authors conclude that Jews are simply a nation that is not prepared to accept conventions—they are always asking, "Maybe there's a better way or different way to do it?"

It makes sense to say that even the revolutions we've seen in recent years in the Arab world are also a result of Israel—what with Israel being the only democracy in the Middle East. For over 60 years, 1.5 million Palestinians have lived in Israel proper, and in Israel, they tasted the taste of democracy—and it was they who opened the eyes of the entire Arab world that perhaps they can live differently too, that dictatorships were not a fact of life.

As far back as 1979, the Rebbe said that sooner or later, the Arab nations will rebel against their leaders. And the Rebbe said then that just as it happened in Iran with the Shah, so too will it happen with any regime that suppresses its citizens.

In the past generation, there has been a revolution in the Jewish world.

In general, Jews who drifted far from Judaism didn't come back. In our generation, however, the Lubavitcher Rebbe carried out a revolution in the Jewish Nation. He changed the course of history so that not only are Jews not abandoning the faith in numbers as occurred in previous generations, but more importantly—Jews are returning to the fold for the first time in record numbers... and all of us here are a part of that revolution.

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