

## DEBAR TORAH by RABBI ROHDE

### Abram's Zeal for Purity

*"And the vulture [swarm] descended upon the corpses, but Abram drove them away"*

(Genesis 15:11)

This is one of the most obscure single verses in the Torah. What does the descent of vultures have to do with anything in this story? If it's significant, then why isn't that more explained? And if it's insignificant, then why even mention the incident at all in this one brief cryptic and enigmatic little verse?

The descent of vultures to eat the dead has been lingering upon my mind since we studied passages in Ezekiel 39:1-20, especially a strange address of God to scavenger birds. Birds in the Bible are especially associated with those scavengers which consume carrion, such as the bird who eats the baker's basket of bread in Genesis, understood as eating the flesh of his head. I pointed out that Jewish burial practice stands in contrast to a Zoroastrian practice whereby corpses are deliberately exposed to the elements and the vultures in order to disintegrate naturally. Leaving dead corpses of man or beast exposed to decompose is considered defiling and contaminating in Judaism, and indeed biologically this is a very well-grounded view. Thus Abram hereby protecting the corpses of the sacrifice from becoming ritually defiled. As some commentators note, the carcasses of the sacrifice had been cut in two, exposing the flesh and thereby attracting scavengers, but not yet cooked or burnt properly as sacrifices, and no instructions were given to carry this out. The sacrifices are only burnt through this numinous miraculous Divine Torch, Fire-Pillar, or Furnace which seems to finally consume the sacrifices, although even that isn't clear. But until the meat is properly offered by this fire to God, Abram seems to act to prevent the meat of the sacrifice from defilement or unauthorized consumption. Sacrificial meat has strict rules about its consumption and must be kept from being consumed in any other way.

Some commentators connect the descent of the vultures to other themes in the following passages, such as the rescue of Israel after the darkness of their sojourn as slaves in Egypt. But I would most likely understand the passage in terms of Abram's protection of the corpses from defilement and debasement. Jews do not leave the carcasses of dead man nor beast out in the open to rot. That is one of the very foundation principles of the Jewish conception of the laws of purity and impurity. The most defiling thing in Jewish purity laws is an exposed dead human corpse, and dead raw, rotting animal carcasses are nearly as bad. Abram shoos away the vultures of his own accord, protecting the holy sacrifice, thereby showing his zeal for purity in holiness. Unfortunately, Abram's offspring will have to undergo a severe but refining test of their purity in Egypt, an ordeal which is referred to elsewhere as Israel's having been tested and refined like metal in Egypt's "iron forge." They will be severely tested but eventually and inevitably found pure, due to the zeal for purity they inherited from their forefather Abram. They will not allow vultures nor ravens to ravenously tear apart, defile and consume the fresh and pure victuals before they can be cooked. They will not suffer God's Creation and Man, made in the image of God, to be defiled.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL  
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

### Shabbat Lekh-Lekha

November 8-9, 2024 | 8 Marheshvan, 5785

#### SCHEDULE

Kaplan: p. 52 | Haftarah: p. 1058

Hertz: p. 45 | Haftarah: p. 60

**Candle Lighting** | 4:26 pm

**Evening Services** | 4:30 pm | Main Sanctuary

**Friday Night Lights** | Rabbi Soloveichik | following services | *5785 Season sponsored by the Julis Romo Rabinowitz family | Session Sponsor: Faith Fogelman, in memory of her father, Theodore Watkin*

**Zemirot** | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

**Shahrit** | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

**Tot Shabbat** | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

**Youth Groups & Junior Congregation** | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

**Kiddush** | following services

**Shabbat Afternoon Class** | 3:35 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik

**Teen Shiur** | 3:35 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

**Evening Services** | 4:20 pm

**Habdala** | 5:12 pm

#### Weekday Service Times

**Mornings**

Sunday | 8:05 am

Monday-Friday | 7:05 am

**Evenings (Arbit Only)**

Sunday-Thursday | **6:30 pm**

## COMING UP

*If registration required, sign up at [shearithisrael.org](http://shearithisrael.org)*

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*Co-sponsored by the Shearith Israel League*

### **Shabbat Dinner & Conversation with Author Ross Perlin**

*in conversation with Louis Solomon, Parnas*

**Friday night, Nov 22 | after 4:30 Evening Services & Friday Night Lights**

*\*The first 100 households/registrants will receive a free signed copy of the book\**

**Registration Deadline: November 18**

In his fascinating new book, *Language City: The Fight To Preserve Endangered Mother Tongues in New York*, author and linguistics expert Ross Perlin documents a race against time to map overlooked and dying languages across New York City. Professor Perlin, a Lecturer at Columbia University, will share his fascinating insights about the languages many of us care most about. Attendees will have opportunities to interact in the many languages spoken by members of our linguistically rich and eclectic Congregation.

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**Early Bird Deadline: THIS Saturday night, November 9!**

### **Young Professionals Shabbat Dinner**

**Friday Night, November 15 | Ages: 21-35**

**Evening Services & Friday Night Lights: 4:30 pm | Dinner: approx. 6:00 pm**

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### **Special Shabbat Morning Shiur With Rabbi Soloveichik**

**NEXT Shabbat, November 16 | Following Morning Services**

*We interrupt our usual kiddush routine to offer a special learning opportunity...*

At the conclusion of Shabbat morning services, we will head down to the Levy Auditorium, where Rabbi Soloveichik will give a lively 30+ minute interactive class.

Participants will enjoy kiddush during the shiur.

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## COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

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We welcome new member **Olya Turcihin** to our growing Shearith Israel family.

Mazal tob to **Nicole & Raanan Agus** upon the birth of a granddaughter born to Elan & Temmi Agus and to great grandparents, **Renee & Avie Schreiber**.

**Beth Goldman & Louis Solomon** are pleased to announce the engagement of their son, **Joseph Solomon**, to Leah Harris, daughter of Rifka and Mark Harris of Queens, NY.

Welcome to the Straus Center Scholars who are holding their Shabbaton at Shearith Israel.

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### **Monthly Public Synagogue Tour with Rev. Z. Edinger**

**Next Tour: THIS Wednesday, November 13 | 5:45 pm**

Individuals and groups are welcome to attend a free, guided tour on the second Wednesday of every month at 5:45 pm (prior to Evening Services), led by Rev. Z. Edinger.

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### **Parent-Child Learning Returns!**

*For elementary school children & their parents or grandparents*

**Select Saturday Nights | 1 hour after Habdala**

**First Session: November 16 | 6:00 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman**

*Mark your calendars for the rest of the lineup:*

December 14 | 6:00 pm | Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

January 4 | 6:15 pm | Ellin Cooper, Yoetzet Halakha

February 8 | 7:00 pm | Dr. Pasha Kletenek, Head of School, MDS

March 8 | 7:30 pm | Rabbi Ira Rohde

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### **UWS Jewish Community Blood Drive**

**The Entire Week: Sunday, November 17-Sunday, November 24**

*Give throughout the week at a location nearest to you!*

Shearith Israel, Lincoln Square, and other neighborhood congregations are together sponsoring this convenient local blood drive. See our emails for details.

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### **Annual Thanksgiving Pack-A-Thon**

*in partnership with the Jewish Center, the Church of Jesus Christ of*

*Latter-day Saints, West End Church, and Masbia*

**Thursday, November 28 | 9:00 am | Paved Paradise Pavilion**

At this annual event, we will pack over a thousand nutritious food packages for those in need, and Masbia will distribute them to those who need them.

Help us feed thousands of struggling families!

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### **Parade Viewing for Youth**

**Thursday, November 28 | 9:00 am | Portico**

CSI Members: Free!

Pack-A-Thon donors of \$180 & up: Free!

Non-Members: \$50 in advance | \$70 at the door