

**Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at American University**  
February 2024 Minis Study Group

**The Case of Aaron: High Priest or High Crimes? How to serve an irrational God**  
Diane M Sharon, Ph.D.

**SYLLABUS**

While Moses is at the peak of Sinai receiving the 10 Commandments from God, his brother Aaron accedes to the people's request to create an image of molten gold. This act of idolatry merits the death penalty, yet Aaron is soon inaugurated as Israel's first high priest. On that very day, two of Aaron's sons are snuffed out in the midst of dedicating the Tabernacle and the priesthood to God's service. The reason for their deaths is a mystery, and their father is forbidden to mourn. These two episodes offer a case study about the nature of leadership, about the slippery slope between righteousness and apostasy, and about how to live a sacred life when the God we worship appears to be irrational and unpredictable.

**There will be two study sessions during the February Mini Week**  
**Monday Feb 12th and Tues Feb 13th, 9:45-11:15am EST**

In these sessions we will consider the topics noted below. This syllabus is the sole course handout. In addition, please have available during our study sessions a copy of the Hebrew Bible in English translation [JPS is preferred]. If you do not have a hard copy or prefer an electronic version, the JPS Hebrew Bible is available online at <https://www.sefaria.org/texts>, click on Tanakh; Please view the online versions on a device other than the one you are using to Zoom our study sessions.

**Session 1: Exodus 325-**

***The Golden Calf: What is Aaron's Sin?***

While Moses is at the peak of Sinai receiving the 10 Commandments from God, his brother Aaron accedes to the people's request to create an image of molten gold. This act of idolatry ought to merit the death penalty, yet, a few chapters later, Aaron is inaugurated as Israel's first high priest. What is actually going on here? In this session we will examine the incident of the molten calf to take from it lessons about leadership, about Israel's relationship to the Divine, and about the slippery slope that sometimes exists between righteousness and apostasy.

**Session 2: Leviticus 10**

***How to serve an Irrational God:***

Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, are snuffed out on the day of their dedication to service in the sanctuary, in the very midst of inaugurating the Tabernacle and the priesthood to God's service. The reason for their deaths is a mystery, and their father is forbidden to mourn. Aaron's relationship with God is sorely tested as he is confronted with the idea of an irrational and unbridled God. What can we learn from Aaron about how to live a sacred life when the God we worship can seem to be irrational and unpredictable?

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**Images of Ancient Near Eastern Divinities Riding upon Creatures**



(Hiram king of Gebal, 10th century BC, Temple guardians as divinity enthroned on Cherubim).



Inanna



Stele of Qadesh