MOSES AND AARON AMONG GOD’S PRIESTS. Here both Moses and Aaron are called priests. Rashi explains that Moses served as High Priest during the seven days of Aaron’s ordination (see his comment to Leviticus 8:28). But a midrash offers a more radical interpretation: that even after Aaron’s ordination, Moses continued to serve as a High Priest for the forty years in the desert (Midrash on Psalms). Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888, Germany) adds that someone who teaches or inspires another to be able to experience the Divine may be called a priest.

AND SAMUEL AMONG THOSE WHO CALLED UPON THE DIVINE NAME. Samuel served both as prophet and as an acolyte to the High Priest of his day, Eli. Moses and Aaron were of the tribe of Levi; Samuel represents the continuation of prophetic leadership unconnected to levitical lineage.

YOU SPOKE TO THEM FROM AMIDST THE CLOUD. An image borrowed from the revelation at Sinai, where God spoke to Israel the words of the Decalogue from amidst the cloud that descended on the mountain (Exodus 19:18).

EVEN AS YOU PUNISHED THEM FOR THEIR TRANSGRESSIONS. God’s administration of justice knows no favorites. When Moses and Aaron sinned, they were punished—Moses and Aaron died in the wilderness and did not enter the Land of Israel. Nevertheless, they and all the faithful are held close by God even as their sins may be punished, as justice demands. In an alternative understanding, the verb could be revocalized as נקם (n’nikam), which would mean “cleansed them”—that is, the phrase continues the thought begun in the first half of the verse, that God forgives the sins of righteous people. In this reading, justice includes forgiveness.

GOD’S HOLY MOUNTAIN. Literally, this refers to Zion, the Temple Mount, which is here identified with the sanctuary in the desert and the temporary sanctuary at the time of the judges. In the context of its placement here as part of the Friday night liturgy, the psalm suggests that our congregating together each Shabbat is a kind of sanctuary in time, when we too might experience a revelatory moment.

SONG OF SONGS 2:8–13 (opposite page, far left). The time for the lovers to be together has arrived; they are, imminently, to go out to lie down in the field together. The lover calls for his beloved to join him with the phrase וקִחְלָכְת (l’khi lakh), “come away”—a phrase that resonates liturgically with the words of the chorus we are about to sing to greet Shabbat, L’kha Dodi. In the phrase וקִחְלָכְת, we may hear an echo of God’s call to Abraham, לֵךְ וָקֵחַ (Genesis 12:1)—this time, formulated in the feminine. Similarly, the word “voice” (kol) anticipates the seven-fold repetition of the same word in Psalm 29, which follows.