

THE MILN E H S

FUSION
WITH RABBI JASON



with
Rabbi Jason Sobel

5785 - THE YEAR OF OPEN WINDOWS

TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Shemini



THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS

LEVITICUS 9:1-11:47

Parashat Shemini / פרשת שמיני

In this weeks guide...

COMMENTARY..... 1

If there's one word that gets Christians worked up, it's "legalistic." So much of our contemporary disdain for "religion" is the overflow of a "works-based" relationship with God. But what if we've (ironically) committed the proverbial sin of "throwing the baby out with the bath water"?

NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN..... 2

The detailed regulations in the Book of Leviticus can make modern readers' eyes glaze over. This week, we hope to show that a closer reading of the text can actually make it come alive. Why? Because God is in the details!

HEBREW WORD STUDY..... 3

Sacrifices. Offerings. Animals. Altars. That's right—we're in the thick of Leviticus! This week we're going to analyze a seemingly ordinary word that invites us into the deepest mysteries of the goings on in heaven's throne room. Much like the Commentary, this study will make seemingly mundane things brim with vigor!

This week's Torah portion is called *Shemini*, from the Hebrew for "eighth." This is based on the first words of Leviticus 9:1, which says, "Now it came about on the eighth day that Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel."

There are three major sections of this portion. The first section details the ceremony and sacrifice surrounding the consecration of the Tabernacle, which took place eight days after it was erected. Both the blood sacrifice and grain offerings that were described earlier in Leviticus play a central role in this event. The section that follows is the tragic and severe account of the death of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. This disturbing tale is as sobering as it is heart-breaking, and introduces more guidelines for the function of the priests. Finally, there is an extended section on dietary codes, which have come to be known as "Kosher."



OVER VIEW

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Weekly Torah Portions – *Parashat Shemini* / פרשת שמייני | with **Rabbi Jason Sobel**

Staff Contributor

COMMENTARY

If you ever approach a traditional Jew and ask them what the purpose of being Jewish is, you'll most likely hear, "To keep the *mitzvot* (commandments)." God called the Jewish people out of Egypt and gave them His Torah so we could be a distinct people with a unique way of life. Of course, some biblical laws make clear sense, while others lack such obvious reasoning. Nevertheless, a Jew's responsibility is to keep the *mitzvot*.

If you ever approach a Christian and ask them the purpose of being a Christian, you might get a response like, "To have a personal relationship with God." This reply is understandable since *Yeshua* came to earth to die for our sins, making personal intimacy with God possible. This relationship usually takes the form of personal prayer and Bible reading, and even whilst attending church on Sunday, the context can be quite individualistic.

It isn't much of a surprise (one can hope) that both "sides" of this discussion are missing something. *Parashat Shemini* succinctly encapsulates this, "[Moses said, This is what ADONAI commanded that you shall do, so that the glory of ADONAI may appear to you](#)" (Leviticus 9:6 *emphasis added*). God informed Moses, who in turn told the people that in order for them to enjoy an intimate relationship with the Almighty, they had to obey Him. *Yeshua* echoed this reality: "[He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me. He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and reveal Myself to him](#)" (John 14:21).

Closeness to God is directly related to loving obedience.

The opposite is also true. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, acted in disobedience, which didn't go well for them. Out of the myriad of the Children of Israel, their immediate family had the most extraordinary access to God. Even with such privilege, approaching God in a way "which He had not commanded them" (Leviticus 10:1b) led to death, the very opposite of God's glory.

Does observing the commandments automatically lead to an intimate relationship with the LORD? Unfortunately, no. Is it possible to have a personal connection with God without keeping His ways? That's another no. We discover this truth as we consider that most of the Torah describes how God wants His earthly abode to function in exacting detail. God promised to dwell amidst His people to the extent that they managed His house in a particular and precise way. While some may view such as a bunch of lifeless rules, the reality is that, when observed through love and faith, the Children of Israel were privileged to experience the presence of the living God. What could be better than that?

Parashat Shemini teaches us that those of us who want to experience an intimate and authentic relationship with our Messiah must walk in the manner He has prescribed for us. Every relationship has its own set of rules, which are in place to help preserve and protect it. And if the fruit of those "Old Testament regulations" was the ability to know the Creator and Redeemer of the universe, they were absolutely worth the effort!

New Testament Tie-In

This week's Torah portion begins with a culmination. The consecration of Aaron and his sons that started in chapter eight reaches its conclusion with the call for sacrifices at the outset of chapter nine. But let's add a layer of complexity (bear with us here): this conclusion of the rites of consecration is simultaneously the beginning of a brief narrative section in Leviticus. The Hebrew word *wayehi* ("Now it happened") in verse one is a literary formula used in the Torah to prepare the reader for such a shift.¹

After a waiting period, Aaron's first priestly act was to:

"Draw near to the altar, and bring your sin offering, and your burnt offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people. Then present the offering for the people, and make atonement for them, as *ADONAI* commanded." – Exodus 14:8

This opening narrative in Leviticus 9 ends with a short line that we might easily overlook as a superfluous detail: "The flesh and the hide he **burned** in a fire outside the camp" (v. 11 *emphasis added*). But as Rabbi Jason consistently points out to us, there are no "incidental details" in Scripture. Whatever is in the text is there for a reason. What if this obscure detail that Moses was inspired to include in Leviticus 9 is relevant to *Yeshua's* words: "if you were believing Moses, you would believe Me—because he wrote about Me" (John 5:46).

In Leviticus 9, Aaron is the priest who offered sacrifices, both for his own sin and Israel's. He prophetically foreshadows *Yeshua* (our "great High Priest") who not only presided over the ultimate sacrifice on Golgotha—He *was* the sacrifice! The New Testament makes this truth abundantly clear. Speaking of *Yeshua*, Hebrews 7:27 states,

"He has no need to offer up sacrifices day by day like those other *kohanim g'dolim*—first for their own sins and then for the sins of the people. For when He offered up Himself, He did this once for all." – Exodus 14:8

We should note that the Hebrew word translated "burned" in Leviticus 9:11 is the verb *saraph*. This word appears in noun form in Numbers 21:8, "Make yourself a **fiery snake** [*saraph*] and put it on a pole. Whenever anyone who has been bitten will look at it, he will live." Moses' inspired writings certainly were about *Yeshua*, the One who told His followers, "as I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to Myself" (John 12:32). The Gospel immediately notes that the Lord said this "to show the kind of death He was about to die" (v. 33).

- Aaron, Israel's high priest, **burned** (*saraph*) the sacrifice for sin.
- *Yeshua*, our great High Priest, was Himself the sacrifice for sin lifted on the cross.
- Moses pointed to the cross by lifting a **fiery serpent** (*saraph*) on a staff, bringing life.

But, of course, there's more! The Torah states that Aaron burned the flesh and the hide "outside the camp." This location detail, too, reveals our glorious Savior and our life of worship in Him. As Scripture encourages us:

For the bodies of those animals—whose blood is brought into the Holies by the *kohen gadol* as an offering for sin—are burned outside the camp. Therefore, to make the people holy through His own blood, *Yeshua* also suffered outside the gate. So **let us go to Him outside the camp**, bearing His disgrace. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come. Through *Yeshua* then, let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips giving thanks to His name." – Exodus 14:8 (*emphasis added*)

Hebrew Word Study

zarah [זרה] / “strange, different; unauthorized”

The most shocking and well-known part of *Parashat Shemini* is the story of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu. Their punishment is easily seen as unduly harsh but even irreconcilable. After all, they were serving in the Tabernacle as members of the priesthood. This week’s Commentary offers us helpful insights from the Rabbis that shed some light on the interpretive confusion. There may also be a clue in the Torah’s description of *what* these brothers offered as a sacrifice. In Leviticus 10:1, we read, “Now Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu each took his own censer, put fire in it, laid incense over it, and offered **unauthorized** fire before *ADONAI* — which He had not commanded them” (emphasis added).

The Hebrew word translated “unauthorized” is *zarah* (זרה) based on the root word, *zar* (זר). Though some English versions vary (e.g., NKJV: “profane,” NRSV: “unholy,” and NLT: “wrong kind”) the most common translation choice other than that is “strange,” as in, “placed incense on the fire and offered strange fire before the LORD” (NASB). One reading of this text would suggest that the LORD’s action against Aaron’s sons was related to this description of the *type* of fire they offered.

So what do we make of this Hebrew word, *zarah*? One lexicon defines it thusly: strange, different; heterogeneous, illicit; unauthorized; non-Israelite; prohibited; other.² In that listing, “strange” appears well ahead of “unauthorized,” suggesting a more common meaning. The overall tone of the adjective is that of foreignness or differentness. Perhaps the most directly associated biblical text is Exodus 30:9a (speaking in reference to the Altar of Incense), “You must not offer up unauthorized [*zarah*] incense on it.” Obviously, this instruction appears in the middle of God’s command *that* the priests offer incense—it was *what kind* of incense was being burned that merited warning.

Because of the use of *zarah*, there is a consensus amongst modern scholars that what made the fire of Nadab and Abihu *zarah* was its source, for example, incense placed on coals taken from an ordinary oven.³ The coals heated the incense to produce the desired effect and were supposed to come from the main altar in the Outer Court. Yet notice what happened at the main altar just before the tragic incident with Nadab and Abihu: “Fire came out from the presence of *ADONAI*, and devoured the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces” (Leviticus 9:23). And so one commentary notes, “Since access to the main altar (where coals for incense offerings were supposed to be obtained) was difficult given the consuming fire, and since Aaron’s sons decided that incense was needed to shield the people from viewing the glory of the Lord (see 16:13), coals from another source (unauthorized fire) were used.”⁴

This Hebrew word sobers us. The altar was the place of atonement, where the separation caused by sin was overcome by grace. The fire from that space was required to burn incense. Both the altar and the incense of the Tabernacle are prophetic symbols, pointing to *Yeshua*’s death on the cross and the prayers of the *kedoshim* (“saints”), respectively. The **only** thing that should fuel our prayer is the grace of God expressed in the death of His Son—anything else is just “strange.”

FUSION

Rabbi Jason & Fusion Global present
HEBREW WORD STUDY

זָרָא

זָרָא / *zarah*: ADJ. *strange, different; heterogeneous, illicit; unauthorized; non-Israelite; prohibited; other.*¹

The adjective typically means “strange,” whether “unfit” (Lev 10:1), “foreign” (outside the household: 1 Kgs 3:18; outside the clan: Deut 25:5; outside the nation: Isa 1:7; Jer 18:14), “unusual” (Isa 28:21), or even “offensive” (Job 19:17). It also denotes “not sacred,” whether “profane” (Deut 32:16) or “lay” (Exod 29:33). Proverbs often describes literal adultery as a man having relations with a strange (*zār*) woman—i.e., one who is not his wife (e.g., Prov 2:16; 5:20; 7:5). As elsewhere, this concept is then applied metaphorically: Idolatry is accepting a “strange” god (Psa 44:20; Isa 17:10; Jer 5:19; Ezek 16:32).²

¹taken from the *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible*

²taken from the *Lexham Theological Wordbook*

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THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

Take some time this week to prayerfully consider and discuss with friends:

- “Saved by grace” has become a slogan (of sorts) for Christians who sense a need to push back against “works-based religion.” With that mentality, the Torah can be especially challenging to read well. How does this week’s Commentary help us address this? Have you been able to reconcile the tension between relationship and obedience in your walk with the Lord?
- Each of us has been bitten by the “fiery serpent” of sin and the prognosis is death. Consider the shocking correlation of a serpent on a pole and our Savior on a cross... Now take time read and meditate on 2 Corinthians 5:21. Our healing from sin and reconciliation to the Father are possible because, in one sense, *Yeshua* became something horrific on our behalf.

GLOBAL

NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Tazria-Metzora* / פרשת תזריע-מצרע

TORAH

Sunday / Leviticus 12:1-13:23

Monday / Leviticus 13:24-39

Tuesday / Leviticus 13:40-54

Wednesday / Leviticus 13:55-14:20

Thursday / Leviticus 14:21-32

Friday / Leviticus 14:33-15:15

Saturday / Leviticus 15:16-33

Prophetic Reading (*Haftarah*):

2 Kings 7:3-20

New Covenant Reading:

Mark 1:35-45

¹ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 396.

² Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

³ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 398.

⁴ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament, electronic ed.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Le 10:1.