



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

#### 26 Shmini—Too Close

##### Text

##### ויקרא ט

כב וַיִּשָׂא אֹהֶרֶן אֶת-יָדָיו אֶל-הָעָם וַיְבָרְכֵם וַיֵּרֶד מַעַשׂ תְּחֻטָּאת וְהַשְּׁלָמִים. כג וַיִּבֹּא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל-הָאֵל מוֹעֵד וַיִּצְאוּ וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת-הָעָם וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד-יְהוָה אֶל-כָּל-הָעָם. כד וַתֵּצֵא אִשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת-הַעֹלֶה לֵה וְאֶת-הַחֲלָבִים וַיֵּרָא כָּל-הָעָם וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם.

##### ויקרא י

א וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אֹהֶרֶן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶמְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בְּהֵן אִשׁ וַיִּשְׂמוּ עָלֶיהָ קֵטֹרֶת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אִשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם. ב וַתֵּצֵא אִשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה. ג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אֹהֶרֶן הוּא אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִּי אֶקְדָּשׁ וְעַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָעָם אֶכְבֹּד וַיֵּדֹם אֹהֶרֶן.

##### Vayiqra 9

<sup>22</sup> Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being. <sup>23</sup> Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. <sup>24</sup> Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces.

##### Vayiqra 10

<sup>1</sup> Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. <sup>2</sup> And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord meant when He said: "Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people."

And Aaron was silent.

##### Context

Parashat Shmini is named *eighth* for the day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*—the culmination of seven intensive days of preparation. Moshe instructs Aaron about the precise sacrifices. Aaron and the priests execute the detailed rituals, performed for the first time, before the entire community witnessing the divine presence. After the formal ceremony, without command, two of Aaron's sons draw near to offer incense and fire; they are consumed. Aaron is forbidden from mourning, and the priests from drinking wine. They are instructed carefully about how to perform the rituals and eat, safeguarding themselves against the mortal danger of sacred service. Thereafter, the Torah distinguishes between sacred and profane, defining kosher animals—those with cloven hooves who chew their cud, and sea dwellers with fins and scales. Touching the carcasses of creatures conveys impurity that must be cleansed in order to maintain the sanctity of the Mishkan and the camp.



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#### Explorations

There are many striking similarities between the incident of the golden calf and the inauguration of the *mishkan*. Compare Shmot 32 with our parashat Shmini.

3 And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. 4 This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" 5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: "Tomorrow shall be a festival of the Lord!" 6 Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

Both are worship services using physical objects made from expensive material contributed by the people. They are both auspicious public festive gatherings. At both, Aaron offers the same animal sacrifices—the burnt offering and the sacrifice of well-being (there is no *sin* offering in the case of the golden calf). At both, the mass of people expresses an emotional response—in one case rising to dance, in the other case, rejoicing and falling on their faces. The subtlety of the preparation of the *mishkan*, the diversity of materials and extensive artistic labor invested, the initiation of an entire tribe into the fine details of the service, the blessing of the people and the divine epiphany—these differences are less apparent to the observer's eye. Indeed, a very thin line separates "holy" service from "foreign" service. The idolatry and the *mishkan* share the same underlying yearning to collectively serve using the full array of human senses. Perhaps this similarity helps to explain the divine leniency in respect to Aaron's role in the golden calf incident and promotion to the High Priesthood in the *mishkan*. God seems to tolerate certain sincere attempts even when they go astray. Our parasha also deals with this issue in the incident of Nadav and Avihu.

Opinions vary tremendously about the meaning of the two verses that describe the older sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu bringing incense and fire to the sacred place. Since they are not stated in the text, the act and motives are the subject of many interpretations that also try to make sense of their death. Some point to the reasons stated in the text—the fire they brought was *strange*, *foreign-zara*, and not commanded. One midrash finds them guilty of four offenses,

Bar Kappara in the name of R. Yirmiya b. Elazar said:  
Aharon's sons died on account of four things:  
for drawing near to the holy place,  
for offering,  
for the strange fire,  
and for not having taken counsel from each other.

‘For drawing near,’ since they entered into the innermost precincts of the sanctuary.



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‘For offering,’ since they offered a sacrifice which they had not been commanded to offer.

‘For the strange fire’: they brought in fire from the kitchen.

‘And for not having consulted with one another,’ as it says, “Each of them his firepan” (VaYiqra 10:1), implying that they acted each on his own initiative, not taking counsel from one another. (VaYiqra Rabba 20:8-10)

According to this midrash, Nadav and Avihu commit sins for which their death is a punishment. The text mentions three serious sins dealing with offenses to the sacred service; the last one, however, concerns their behavior with one another. The implication is that if they had spoken with one another, together their reasoning might have prevailed and they might have decided not to go ahead. Another midrash focuses on the issue of authority more than on the breach of the sanctuary,

Rabbi Eliezer said, The sons of Aharon died only because they decided a law before Moshe, their teacher. What did they interpret? "The sons of Aharon the priest put fire on the altar" (VaYiqra 1:7), reasoning that even though fire came down from Heaven [to ignite the altar], still, there was a commandment for a simple person to bring fire as well.

Rashi reiterates this view, commenting on VaYiqra, 1:7

“There is a command to bring an ordinary fire, even though the fire would descend from heaven and ignite the wood.”

The midrash continues,

Rabbi Eliezer had a student who determined a case [without consulting with him]. Rabbi Eliezer said to Ima Shalom, his spouse, "I doubt that he will live out the year." The student died before the year was out. She asked, "Are you a prophet?" He answered that he was not prophet but had a tradition that anyone who teaches a law without consulting his teacher deserves to be put to death." Eruvin 63a

This interpretation demonstrates a shift of priorities from the sacredness of the *mishkan* to an issue much more relevant to the rabbinic sages: the power hierarchy. The sin of the children is not idolatry, *foreign* fire, nor even that it was not commanded—for indeed the Torah states earlier that it is lawful to bring fire. The sin is insolence and innovation. Regardless of the correctness of an act, it not permissible for a student to go beyond the teacher's instruction.

The dispute about the legitimacy of authority and from where it comes concerns the talmudic sages profoundly. One of the most famous passages in the Talmud is a dispute about the fitness/purity of the “Oven of Akhnai” in which Rabbi Eliezer's supernatural proofs for his lenient position, and even the divine voice are over-ruled by the majority opinion that the oven is unfit (See the text and interpretation of the Oven of Akhnai about how “The Torah serves as raw material for human creation, and man must develop the Torah in the direction that seems right to him (sic)”). Under the supervision of Rabban Gamliel, the sages vote to excommunicate Rabbi Eliezer. Ima Shalom, the sister of Rabban Gamliel and married to Rabbi Eliezer, is caught



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between the disputants. This drama follows,

Ima Shalom was R. Eliezer's wife, and sister to R. Gamaliel. From the time of this incident onwards she did not permit him to fall upon his face [and say the *Tachanun* supplication-prayer that might cause harm to her brother]. Now a certain day happened to be a New Moon, but she mistook a full month for a shortened one [the *Tachanun* is not said on the New Moon]. Others say, a poor man came and stood at the door, and she took out some bread to him. [On her return] she found him fallen on his face. 'Arise,' she cried out to him, 'you have slain my brother.' In the meanwhile an announcement was made from the house of Rabban Gamaliel that he had died. 'How do you know it?' he questioned her. 'I have this tradition from my father's house: All gates are locked, excepting the gates of wounded feelings.' Baba Metzia 59b

The text portrays Rabbi Eliezer as a person of extraordinary power—inspired with divine insight, and jealously, even violently protective of his authority. Ima Shalom tries, but fails to prevent the fatal outcome. A rare woman on the pages of the Talmud, she sees the danger of zeal and the harmful emotions that accompany it. Though Rabbi Eliezer might be *right* in terms of the law, even in God's view, Ima Shalom shows how being right is not enough. Rabbi Eliezer fails to harness his genius to inspire the kind of acceptance he wants from his student and colleagues. The pain of rejection brings grief rather than revelation to the world. The contrast between Ima Shalom and Rabbi Eliezer is stark. While Rabbi Eliezer is busy with his hurt feelings and prayer that brings death, Ima Shalom might be caring for a hungry stranger. Ultimately, she proposes how people must care enough for one another to respect a flawed human process, even when it compromises their truth.

Nadav and Avihu have a similar zeal. According to the midrash in Eruvin, they go headstrong into the sacred realm without hesitation. Though they might be justified according to the law, their defiance of Moses' authority is inexcusable. Taking a completely different approach to that passage, the hasidic master Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk comments from his very personal perspective about his anxiety that his own son Rav Eliezer succeed him in leading his followers.

Know my child that Nadav and Avihu were very great righteous people. Even so, they would wonder every so often whether they were fit for the job of leading the nation. This is the meaning of their strange words. Nadav asked ‘When?’ When will we make a sincere account of our worthiness? ‘These two elders will eventually die and it will be up to us to shoulder the burden of leading the generation.’ It is our task to continually evaluate whether we are worthy of taking their place...’

The younger generation always feel worthy of filling in the shoes of their elders. In truth they need to work hard to improve their holiness and purity. They do this by following the ways of their elders and delving deeply into Torah and service. It is only in this manner that one can possibly be fit to lead. (יגדיל תורה, ח"ג, ע' קכ"ד)

This generous attitude about Nadav and Avihu suggests that their desire was to learn and know the sacred in order to be worthy to serve. They had experienced the revelation at Mount Sinai in a privileged way,

Moshe, Aharon, Nadav and Avihu and seventy of the elders ascended. They saw the G-d of



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Yisrael, and under Her/His feet was that which had the form of a sapphire" (Shmot 24:9-10).

Now, with the *mishkan*, they want to enter deeply into the divine presence. About the synopsis of the incident later in VaYiqra, the great Moroccan commentator, [Or HaChaim](#) teaches,

“They came close to God and died" (VaYiqra 16:1)—they approached the supernal light out of their great love of the Holy, and thereby died. Thus they died by "divine kiss" such as experienced by the perfectly righteous; it is only that the righteous die when the divine kiss approaches them, while they died by their approaching it... Although they sensed their own demise, this did not prevent them from drawing near to G-d in attachment, delight, delectability, fellowship, love, kiss and sweetness, to the point that their souls ceased from them.

Nadav and Avihu might have fulfilled their ultimate desire for the sacred through a total sacrifice. God's presence appears, and fire goes forth from before God, kindling the eternal flame that burns on the altar and consuming the sacrifices that Aaron offers. Fire similarly goes forth from before God and consumes Nadav and Avihu. Their father, Aaron is speechless. There are no words.

Whereas Ima Shalom is concerned with her community, with the wellbeing of the people she knows and those she does not, the characters in these texts are obsessed with their personal, individual drama.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook (1864-1935), an eloquent early proponent of religious Zionism and the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, uses the metaphor of the fire burning on the altar to convey his ideal of spiritual Zionism.

Within the inner heart, in its chambers of purity and holiness, the Jewish flame strengthens itself. It fervently seeks the mighty and constant connection of life with all of the commandments of God. Through this connection, it seeks to solidify the full Jewish spirit that fills the entire volume of the soul, and to express the full Jewish expression with a total gesture, action and ideal. ... Holy fire kindled in the heart of all people of the nation, burns since ancient days, “a fire burning on the altar, never to be extinguished.” ... And all the yearning of life, all hope for redemption, flow only from this source, in order to bring Jewish vibrancy to life in its fullness, without contradiction, without limit. This is the aroused desire for Eretz Yisrael, the holy land, the land of God.

*Orot* (Lights), Eretz Yisrael 8, 1920 (my translation).

The eighth day transcends the weekly Shabbat cycle—it aims beyond time toward redemption. Rabbi Kook's fantasy partakes of the yearning for ultimate sacred experience. He translates that desire into national redemptive action, envisioning the Jewish People collectively sharing in and experiencing sacred service through the building of Israel. It is conceivable to engage in this inspiring process while seeking to fulfill Ima Shalom's commitment to life and wellbeing rather than zealous sacrifice and grief.



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#### Questions for Discussion

- Sacrifice is one of the methods of divine service in many cultures. How can we express our gratitude for our life, and what do we owe? What are the limits of our offering?
- What is the relationship between *truth* and majority opinion?--how do you rate their relative value? What is your access to *truth*, and how is it related to authority and power? To what extent is *truth* a guiding principle and how do you negotiate situations where other values conflict?
- Consider whether and what kind of desire you do or would like to feel about sacredness—under what conditions have you felt the sacred, and/or do you long for it?--alone, or with others. Is there any relation between sacredness and the formal rituals in your life, the synagogue, and/or in relation to Israel?
- Why is Aaron silent? Suggest some of the meanings of silence in this scene. How do you respond in intense emotional moments, of joy and/or grief?
- Analyze the gender considerations in the story about Rabbi Eliezer and Ima Shalom. To what do you attribute their different perspectives and emotions? With whom do you identify and why?

#### Study Links

Watch [this](#) romantic video clip about the life of Ima Shalom.

[Here](#) is one Orthodox rabbi's views about silence in response to tragedy—considering lessons from the holocaust and the death of Nadav and Avihu; [this website](#) explores alternate Eastern tradition-inspired attitudes to silence.

[Watch and listen](#) to Yitzhak Yedid perform Tachanun (supplication), a suite for solo piano, in concert in Jerusalem. The suite is followed by a lesson on Psalm 20, recited in Tachanun. There is also a video clip of a Yemenite Jew prostrating in prayer.

#### Summary of Issues

A brief incident—the fatal incursion of two children into the sacred realm—opens to a wide range of texts and interpretations that debate the topics of zealous belief, individualism, authority, sacrifice, desire for revelation, responsibility, and national destiny. These topics arise from the Torah's careful and profound preoccupation with the sacred realm in VaYiqra.

#### Methods & Observations

In contrast to the male exclusivity of VaYiqra, a woman, Ima Shalom appears in a talmudic passage concerned with this parasha whose character reveals assumptions, critiques values, and asserts the priority of life rather than sacrifice.

#### Contact

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