



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

שמיני תש"ף
Shemini 5780

Limits

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

To protect the planet and the future generations, we need limits



PARSHAT SHEMINI IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Shemini is the last chapter of the long section that we began in the 25th chapter of Shemot. We started with the command to build the Mishkan (the Tabernacle) and in Shemini, the building and preparations are all finished. It is finally time to start using the Mishkan. Special priestly celebrations took place to mark the services beginning.

But the happy moment soon turned to sadness. Tragically, two of Aharon's sons brought a "strange fire" as a sacrifice to God, and as punishment, both sons died.

Next, the parsha defines some more laws for the Kohanim, such as not serving in the Sanctuary while drunk, and when and where the Kohanim can eat the sacrifices. Lastly, the parsha describes the dietary laws (kashrut), specifically mentioning which animals, fish, and birds we can eat.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think Nadav and Avihu were punished for bringing a "strange fire"?



THE CORE IDEA

The story of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's two eldest sons who died on the day the Mishkan was dedicated, is one of the most tragic in the Torah. It turned a day that should have been a national celebration into one of deep grief and sadness. Aharon's pain was so great he could not speak. A sense of mourning fell over the camp and the people. God had told Moshe that it was dangerous to have the Divine Presence within the camp (Shemot 33:3), but even Moshe could not have predicted something as serious as this.

But what exactly did Nadav and Avihu do wrong? There are many explanations given by the Sages. Some say that they wanted to lead the people and were impatiently waiting for Moshe and Aharon to die. Others say that their sin was that they never married because they thought no women were good enough for them. Others say their sin was that they were drunk. Others say that they did not ask for guidance as to what they should do and what they were not allowed to do on this day. Yet another explanation is that they entered the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest was permitted to go.

The simplest answer, though, is actually the one found in the Torah's description of the story. They offered "*strange fire that was not commanded.*" Why should they have done such a thing? And why was it so serious an error?

It is likely that in this time of great celebration, they were carried away by the mood of the moment. They acted in a kind of ecstasy (from such deep joy and passion) and perhaps they lost control). They were caught up by the sheer excitement of the opening of the first collective house of worship in the history of Avraham's children. Their behaviour was spontaneous. They wanted to do something extra, uncommanded, to express their religious fervour. But they went too far. They should have followed the instructions that were given to them.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is it wrong to be creative and to seek new ways to worship God?
2. How do our laws prevent this from happening?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Sometimes it takes a terrible trauma to bring what is important to the forefront of our minds. As the world is ravaged by a terrible disease with millions affected directly, millions more find themselves trapped in their homes, glued to the terrible news unfolding around the world, as governments desperately try to keep them safe. A vibrant humanity that everyday woke up and rushed to live their lives is suddenly forced to stop and stay home.

Abruptly, with no warning, the things that had only last week seemed important, like money and possessions, jobs and school grades, travel plans and shopping trips, now have become insignificant. Now we realise what is most important. Our health, our family, and the friends and family we can't be with right now. Now we know the true value of those things. The things that are really critical in life.

Now we have a new appreciation for the people that make our lives possible. The everyday heroes in our lives. The doctors and nurses, the first responders and key workers, such as shop workers, farmers, teachers, delivery people, and refuse collectors. Our lives would not be possible without these people.

Let's hope when this is all over and we have made it to the other side, as we will, that our new sense of appreciation and gratitude will not also return to how it was before.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How has the coronavirus pandemic forced us to take a step back and recover a sense of our limitations?
2. Can we find ways to thrive under such strict limitations?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

What was wrong with Nadav and Avihu acting spontaneously? Moshe had acted spontaneously when he broke the tablets after the sin of the Golden Calf. Centuries later, David would act spontaneously when he danced as the Ark was brought into Jerusalem. Neither of them was punished for their behaviour, (although Michal did reprimand her husband David after his dance). What made Nadav and Avihu deserve so severe a punishment?

The difference was that Moshe was a Prophet. David was a King. But Nadav and Avihu were Priests. Prophets and Kings sometimes act spontaneously, because they both inhabit the world of time. To fulfil their functions, they need a sense of history. They develop an intuitive grasp of time. They understand the mood of the moment, and what it calls for. For them, today is not yesterday, and tomorrow will be different again. That leads them, from time to time, to act spontaneously because that is what the moment requires.

Moshe knew that only something as dramatic as shattering the tablets would bring the people to their senses and convey to them how grave was their sin. David knew that by dancing alongside the Ark, he would express to the people a sense of the significance of what was happening, that Jerusalem was about to become not just the political capital but also the spiritual centre of the nation. These acts of precisely judged spontaneity were essential in shaping the destiny of the people.

But Priests have a different role altogether. They inhabit a world that is timeless, ahistorical, in which nothing significant changes. The daily, weekly and yearly sacrifices were always the same. Every element of the service of the Mishkan was bound

by its own detailed rules, and nothing of significance was left to the discretion of the Priest.

The Priest was the guardian of order. It was his job to maintain boundaries, between sacred and secular, pure and impure, perfect and blemished, permitted and forbidden. His domain was that of *the holy*, the points at which the infinite and eternal enter the world of the finite and mortal. As God tells Aharon in our parsha: "You must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean; and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the Lord has imparted to them through Moshe." The key verbs for the Kohen were *lehavdil*, to distinguish, and *lehorot*, to teach. The Kohen made distinctions and taught the people to do likewise.

The Priestly vocation was to remind the people that there are limits. There is an order to the universe and we must respect it. Spontaneity has no place in the life of the Priest or the service of the Sanctuary. That is what Nadav and Avihu failed to honour. It might have seemed like a minor transgression but it was in fact a negation of everything the Mishkan and the Priesthood stood for.

There are limits. That is also what the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is about. Why did God go to the trouble of creating two trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, from which human beings are forbidden to eat? Why did He tell the humans what the trees were and what their fruit could do? Why expose them to temptation? Who would not wish to have knowledge and eternal life if they could acquire them by merely eating a fruit? Why plant these trees in a garden where

the humans could not but help see them? Why put Adam and Eve to a test they were unlikely to pass?

God did this to teach them, and us, that even in Eden, in a world of paradise, there are limits. There are certain things we can do, and would like to do, that we must not do.

Today, the classic example is the environment. As Jared Diamond has documented in his books, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, and *Collapse*, almost wherever human beings have set foot, they have left a trail of destruction in their wake. They have farmed lands to exhaustion and hunted animals to extinction. They have done so because they have not had, embedded in their minds and habits, the notion of limits. Hence the concept, key to environmental ethics, of sustainability, meaning limiting your exploitation of the Earth's resources to the point where they can renew themselves. A failure to observe those limits causes human beings to be exiled from their own garden of Eden.

In *The True and Only Heaven*, Christopher Lasch argued that the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment endowed us with the belief that there are no limits, that science and technology will solve every problem they create and the earth will continue indefinitely to yield its bounty. Forget limits and eventually we lose paradise. That is the warning for all of us within the story of Adam and Eve.

In a remarkable passage in his 1976 book on inflation, *The Reigning Error*, William Rees-Mogg waxed eloquent about the role of Jewish law in securing Jewish survival. It did so by containing the energies of the people – Jews are, he said, “a people of an electric energy, both of personality and of mind.”

Nuclear energy, he says, is immensely powerful but at the same time needs to be contained. He then says this:

"In the same way, the energy of the Jewish people has been enclosed in a different type of container, the law. That has acted as a bottle inside which the spiritual and intellectual energy could be held; only because it could be held has it been possible to make use of it. It has not merely exploded or been dispersed; it has been harnessed as a continuous power ... Contained energy can be a driving force over an indefinite period; uncontrolled energy is merely a big and usually destructive bang. In human nature only disciplined energy is effective."

That was the role of the Kohen, and it is the continuing role of *halachah*. Both are expressions of limits: rules, laws and distinctions. Without limits, civilisations can be as thrilling and short-lived as fireworks. To survive they need to find a way of containing energy so that it lasts, undiminished. That was the Priest's role and what Nadav and Avihu betrayed by introducing spontaneity where it does not belong. As Rees-Mogg said, “uncontrolled energy is merely a big and usually destructive bang.”

I believe that we need to recover a sense of limits because, in our uncontrolled search for ever greater affluence, we are endangering the future of the planet and betraying our responsibility to generations not yet born. There are such things as fruit we should not eat and fire we should not bring.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

What do you think has caused the human race to lose their perspective on the importance of limits in the world?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

“One of the greatest challenges in free societies is to maintain a balance between the ‘I’ of self-interest and the ‘We’ of the common good. We must be able to compete but also to co-operate. There is within each of us an ‘I’ that asks: ‘What’s in it for me?’ But there is also a ‘We’ that knows that ‘we are all in this together’.

I would hope that we emerge from this long dark night with an enhanced sense of ‘We’. Never in my lifetime have we lived through a period in which people in every country throughout the world are suffering the same fears, the same dangers, the same risks. When it comes to real fundamentals like life and health, what unites us is greater than what divides us. Despite all our affluence and technological powers, one tiny virus has brought humanity to its knees. From here on, we should never underestimate our vulnerability.”

The Mail on Sunday, 29th March 2020



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think there are so many different explanations for what Nadav and Avihu's sin was?
2. Why must we be cautious with religious spontaneity? How do religious rules and laws help?
3. How can we apply this message about the importance of limits to our own lives?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. There are many rabbinic explanations to explain their sin. The text states that they brought “a strange fire” to the Mishkan. As Aharon’s sons, they were Kohanim, Priests, with important responsibilities. But they didn’t follow the rules that Hashem had given them. Although there was a clear way that Hashem had asked the Kohanim to behave when conducting the rituals in the Mishkan, Aharon’s sons Nadav and Avihu had ignored this and decided to instead do their own thing.

THE CORE IDEA

1. Although their intentions may have been pure, it is dangerous to use an emotional spontaneity to worship Hashem. This could (and has often in history) led to destructive and impure results. An example from the Torah is the Golden Calf (where the people seemingly were trying to use the idol to connect to God in the absence of Moshe their spiritual leader).
2. The complex laws of Judaism are designed to prevent this from happening, and Nadav and Avihu ignored them, and allowed themselves to get carried away by their own passion. Although passion and emotion are definitely encouraged in worship of God, the *laws* are the receptacle through which this passion is *channelled*. The laws protect us from becoming overwhelmed with emotion and passion for God.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Rabbi Sacks concludes *this Covenant & Conversation* with the belief that we need to recover a sense of limits. Humanity has lost their perspective on what is important in life, in our constant drive to build and develop our world and create more wealth. We have been arrogant and demonstrated hubris, as we progressed as a human race, believing technology and science could solve every problem and challenge. Our progress as a species has been magnificent, but it has sometimes been at the expense of our core values and we have lost a sense of the important things in life. This pandemic has forced us to withdraw from the relentless race and helped us to take stock. In many ways, the world is healing itself (less pollution, for example), as humanity withdraws from it to some degree. While this may be temporary, we hope that the lessons we are learning will not be.
2. Sometimes limitations force us to reconsider, to be creative, and to try harder. Many people in quarantine are connecting positively with one another by speaking more often via video calls. Many have changed the way they work, started exercising innovatively, or learnt new hobbies. Exciting initiatives have started through social media, with strangers teaming up to fundraise and volunteer together. We have found new appreciation for our key workers. We have even found ways to show support for key workers whilst confined to our homes, like country-wide claps for the national medical teams. Dave Stutman once wrote, “Complacency is the enemy of progress.” The new limits and rules in place right now may seem severe, but we can always find ways to connect with each other, and sometimes under duress, we can thrive.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. The magnificent progress and achievements of humankind in a relatively short space of time has led to an arrogance and overconfidence. Humanity has placed too much faith in science and technology, and lost its sense of perspective and responsibility. We hope that humanity will grow and regain a sense of perspective from the challenges it currently faces. Nadav and Avihu demonstrated some of the arrogance and hubris humanity is often prone to. They believed they knew better how to connect and worship God. We must learn their lesson. We need to remember that we are limited as a species and we need to follow the guidance of God.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The fact that there are so many explanations for why they were punished is a reflection on the ambiguity of their sin found in the verses in the Torah. The most obvious explanation, found in the verse and explained more fully by Rabbi Sacks, that they demonstrated spontaneity in their worship, is not easily understood at the superficial level.
2. In the words of William Rees-Mogg, as quoted above, “uncontrolled energy is merely a big and usually destructive bang”. Religious spontaneity can and has led to destructive forces if not harnessed and controlled. Jewish history has many examples of this, from the Golden Calf, to the various false messiahs we have encountered. Religious law contains and channels this energy safely.
3. Rabbi Sacks uses the environment as an example of an important area where we can apply this message to our contemporary lives. Without limits, humanity has put the wellbeing of the planet and future generations at risk. We have been learning similar lessons during these challenging times living in a world with the coronavirus. The pandemic has forced us to withdraw, and to recognise our limitations as a species. We pray we come out of this stronger than before, having learned some important lessons.