

TORAHSCOPE: Shemini (Eighth)

by Mark Huey posted 28 March, 2008 www.outreachisrael.net

Leviticus 9:1-11:47
2 Samuel 6:1-7:17

“True Shock and Awe”

“Now it came about on the eighth day that Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel” (Leviticus 9:1).

As *Shemini* commences, the title of the *parashah*, which means “eighth,” points one to the chronological context of the “eighth day” that begins this section of the Torah. A glance at *Tzav*'s concluding statements quickly determines that the seven days of consecration that God required of Aaron and his sons has just been completed. Aaron and his sons had been very busy anointing and consecrating the Tabernacle, various implements for sacrifice, different accoutrements for the Tent of Meeting, and even themselves:

“At the doorway of the tent of meeting, moreover, you shall remain day and night for seven days and keep the charge of the LORD, so that you will not die, for so I have been commanded. Thus Aaron and his sons did all the things which the LORD had commanded through Moses” (Leviticus 8:35-36).

Now that the seven days of consecration are completed, the glory of God is ready to appear before the people of Israel:

“Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after making the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Then fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat on the altar; and when all the people saw *it*, they shouted and fell on their faces” (Leviticus 9:22-24).

This is a very dramatic and exciting section of Scripture to contemplate and imagine in one's mind's eye. Now that the anointing and consecration of the Tabernacle are completed, and all of the required sacrifices have been offered, the glory of God appears. First, Aaron lifts up his hands, and then Moses blesses the people. Then, His glory falls on the Tent of Meeting. Next in a powerful way, a fire appears and consumes the burnt offering and portions of fat on the altar. The appearance of the all-consuming fire was so overwhelming that the people shouted for joy that their offerings were acceptable and fell on their faces in awe.¹

Aaron's Sons Consumed

At this point in the portion, there is a distinct break as the scene changes to a very tragic incident involving the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. For some unstated reason, the two eldest sons of Aaron decided to offer up “strange fire” that was unauthorized by the Holy One of Israel. They

¹ As an aside, it is interesting to note two things from this account. First, note the reality that witnessing supernatural actions “in person” can generate enough fear to buckle the stiffest of knees. Secondly, we must take note that the witnesses to the glory falling and the consuming fire fell on their faces. This incident, and others throughout the Scriptures (cf. Genesis 17:3; Numbers 16:4; Joshua 5:14; Daniel 8:17; Matthew 17:6), indicate how people generally responds to the presence of God. Back in the early to mid-1990s a phenomena was moving through charismatic circles, and was known by a variety of names such as the “Toronto blessing” or “holy laughter.” As people claimed to have been blessed by various speakers, etc., many were falling down under the purported “power of the Holy Spirit.” In many cases, as they were being prayed for, the typical response was to fall on one's back as the forehead was being touched, rather than forward on the face, as is typical from the Scriptural examples.

Things like this should make one pause and ask just what kind of a “spirit” was being served in those meetings. If more of the participants had been Torah observant and trained, there would probably have been an immediate recognition that these actions were not lining up with the established testimonies of the Scriptures. Thankfully today, as more and more Messianics become better acquainted with the basic principles of the Torah, deviations like these will be more obvious and the warnings to the curious will be uttered with greater conviction and knowledge of the truth.

soon discover that unsanctioned activities at this sacred place—based on their own volitional choices—have terminal consequences:

“Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD” (Leviticus 10:1-2).

Obviously, this was a stunning and unexpected tragedy. It was a clear display of God’s apparent displeasure with the actions of Nadab and Abihu. Moments before, it appears that the holy fire was consuming sacrificial offerings. And then, for offering “strange fire,” the heirs apparent of Aaron are consumed. As the Hebrew verb *akal* (אָכַל) describes it, they are “eat[en], devour[ed], consume[d]” (AMG).² The same verb for the consumption of the offering (Leviticus 9:24) is used for the devouring of Nadab and Abihu. The stunned Aaron knew it was the will of God, and even as Moses tries to comfort him, Aaron remains silent. One might conclude that Aaron was in *total shock!* After this, Moses communicated these direct commands to Aaron that he had received from the Lord:

“Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘It is what the LORD spoke, saying, “By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.”’ So Aaron, therefore, kept silent” (Leviticus 10:3).

Certainly, these words from God, spoken by Moses, struck a chord with Aaron. Is it possible Aaron was thinking back to the admonition uttered just before the Decalogue was received at Mount Sinai?

“Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, or else the LORD will break out against them” (Exodus 19:22).

At this juncture, Moses was warning the Israelites to not be presumptuous about approaching their God. He especially was reminding the “priests” about the need for personal consecration, lest they be punished. Aaron’s silence was deafening. After all, can you imagine what was going through his mind knowing that he was, in some respects, responsible for the golden calf incident? There is no doubt that Aaron knew how unholy he was as he grieved over the charred remains of his sons. Aaron understood in a very visible way that in order to be in the presence of the Lord, one must be sanctified unto Him.

These statements by Moses made this understanding even more profound. The Lord requires holiness for access to His presence. He demands that He be glorified and honored by His creatures. It is quite possible that Aaron was terrified that he could be the next victim of the consuming fire of God.

Pleasing the Holy One

There is speculation by the Jewish Rabbis that Nadab and Abihu were perhaps under the influence of alcohol when they made the bad decision to offer up strange fire on the altar. The mention of this prohibition in a few verses leads many to that conclusion:

“Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you will not die—it is a perpetual statute throughout your generations—and so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean, and so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them through Moses” (Leviticus 10:9-11).

The problem with alcohol may provide some explanation, but when you look at the Hebrew source text you will note that there is a paragraph break between vs. 7 and 8.³ If you look at the last admonition before the written break, you will note these interesting statements that succinctly describe how the Father views the serious nature of priestly functions:

² Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, eds., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), 49.

³ Rudolph Kittel, et. al., eds., *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977), 172; Aron Dotan, ed., *Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 159.

“Then Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, ‘Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, so that you will not die and that He will not become wrathful against all the congregation. But your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, shall bewail the burning which the LORD has brought about. You shall not even go out from the doorway of the tent of meeting, or you will die; for the LORD's anointing oil is upon you.’ So they did according to the word of Moses” (Leviticus 10:6-7).

Aaron's other two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, have taken the place of Nadab and Abihu. They are instructed not to mourn for the untimely deaths of their brothers. Then they are told to not even leave the Tent of Meeting, because “the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you” (RSV).

From these instructions given through Moses, you can readily conclude that God of Israel is very serious about His chosen priests honoring the position where they have been placed. In some respects, you can ascertain that from the shock of the consuming deaths of Nadab and Abihu, a genuine awe and reverence of the Lord has settled in the hearts of Aaron and his other sons. Obedience to these statements is adhered to without question. As this section of Scripture closes, Moses asks Aaron and his sons why they have not followed the instructions to partake of the “holy” offerings that were clear instructions from the Most High:

“Why did you not eat the sin offering at the holy place? For it is most holy, and He gave it to you to bear away the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD. Behold, since its blood had not been brought inside, into the sanctuary, you should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, just as I commanded.’ But Aaron spoke to Moses, ‘Behold, this very day they presented their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD. When things like these happened to me, if I had eaten a sin offering today, would it have been good in the sight of the LORD?’ When Moses heard *that*, it seemed good in his sight” (Leviticus 10:17-20).

Aaron responds to this rebuke with a very heartfelt reply, that indicates that the circumstances of his son's deaths, in his mind, prohibited him and them from eating the sin offering. Having seen his two sons die in a very tragic way, and having heard the admonitions about mourning and leaving the presence of the Lord while under the anointing, Aaron's heart seems to finally be in the right place.

Even with the potential for immediate Divine retribution, Aaron's contrite response was, “would the LORD have approved?” (NJPS). Apparently, this was what the Father was looking for from His high priest and his sons, because this section of the Torah ends with Moses declaring that he was satisfied with the response. Since Aaron was not consumed for disregarding the requirements for the sin offering, the Lord was pleased with the spoken concern in the heart of Aaron for His purposes.

At this point in the Torah, the Father has made it abundantly clear through a very dramatic episode what He requires of His priesthood. As exemplified in Aaron and his sons, He desires a set-apart people who understand the call upon their lives and who put His interests ahead of their own. Aaron has learned from the shocking deaths of Nadab and Abihu that we should not be presumptuous about how we approach God. Aaron was a changed man. Is it possible that he went through a mental checklist asking the question of whether or not God would approve before every priestly action? The Father was preparing him for the heavy mantle of being the high priest of Israel.

Conforming to His Image

Today, we should have that same attitude about our personal roles as priests of the Most High. We need to start by understanding His ways. This is why personal Torah study is so beneficial to us as Believers. So much knowledge and understanding is being imparted in these foundational teachings, so that those chosen to be priests can hopefully gain a more comprehensive grasp of His statutes, precepts, and commandments.

Consider the fact, if you read the next chapter in this portion, Leviticus 12, that includes the dietary laws that distinguish between clean and unclean animals. Many of those in the world who claim to be “priests of the Most High” do not adhere to some of these very basic laws. As

stated earlier, most in the realm of priests before the Lord have been without a Torah education, and are not even aware that when in the presence of the Holy One, the overwhelming response is to fall on your face in reverence. If many are blinded to these fundamentals, how easy is it for presumption to arise?

As we search our own hearts in these days of “shock and awe,” perhaps we should ask the Father to give us hearts that are reminiscent of Aaron’s heart. Before we take actions, let us ask the simple question of whether or not He would approve. By training our hearts and minds to this pattern of behavior, those called for His service should begin the process of being conformed to the image of His Son, Yeshua:

“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Romans 8:29-30).

Let us be reminded that Yeshua only did what the Father instructed Him to do:

“So Yeshua said, ‘When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me’” (John 8:28).

By His grace, may we also be reminded that we, as obedient priests, should be doing only that which the Father initiates. By so doing, He will be glorified and we will be truly in awe of His work through us. If we choose otherwise, we may be in for an unexpected shock!

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