

## Torah Study 2026 - Parashat Shemini

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אֵישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בְּהֵן אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֶת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֲתֶם: וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אֶהֱרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה | לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִּי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד וַיָּדַם אֶהֱרֹן:

*Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before Adonai alien fire, which God had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from Adonai and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of Adonai. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what God meant by saying: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people." And Aaron was silent. (Lev 10:1-3)*

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### **Sefat Emet [R. Judah Aryeh Leib Alter, 19<sup>th</sup> c. Poland]**

R. Isaac Meir Alter of Ger said that one can deduce from this event that the most important component in the performance of commandments is the fact that one performs them because he was commanded to, rather than any lofty intentions he has in performing them. The proof is here, in that we see that Nadav and Avihu, who were great sages, surely had the most lofty of intentions, yet they were punished for doing something they had not been commanded to do. How much more, then, is the reward of a person who fulfills a commandment solely because it was commanded by God, even though he knows nothing about the hidden intentions involved.

### **R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (19<sup>th</sup> c, Germany)**

Closeness and nearness to God can be attained only by being disciplined to God's will...We may understand the death of the sons of Aaron on the eighth day of their consecration as a warning to future generations of priests to avoid personal and subjective predilections and ordinances of their own invention in their approach to the service in the sanctuary, which belongs to God and is governed by His law and not by any newfangled innovations introduced into the order of the service. Only by observance of the precepts of the Torah can the priest of Israel remain true to his principles

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### **"The Dangers of Enthusiasm" R. Jonathan Sacks**

The word "enthusiasm" did not always have a favorable connotation. Originally, it referred to someone possessed by a spirit or demon. In 17<sup>th</sup> century England, "enthusiasm" was used to refer to extreme and revolutionary Protestant sects and essentially became a synonym for religious extremism, zealotry and fanaticism. Enthusiasm was thus deemed irrational, volatile and dangerous.

Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) noted that "the corruption of the best things produces the worst" (*Of Superstition and Enthusiasm*). This is especially true

of religion, in which there are two ways things can go wrong: through superstition and through enthusiasm. Superstition is driven by ignorance and fear; irrational anxieties and terrors are often dealt with by resorting to equally irrational remedies. Enthusiasm is the opposite. It is the result of over-confidence, and the enthusiast, in a state of high religious rapture, often comes to believe that he is being inspired by God himself, and is thus empowered to disregard reason and restraint. The person in its grip is so full of what he takes to be holy rapture that he feels able to override the rules by which priestly conduct is normally governed, thinking that “rules and regulations are for ordinary people, not for me, for I know better.” Hume notes that this state of mind can be very dangerous indeed.

Turning to Torah, we now have a precise description of the sin for which Nadab and Abihu died. It was a shocking tragedy for sure, occurring as it did on the day of the inauguration of the service of the Mishkan, a moment that should have been one of the great celebrations in Jewish history. Instead, celebration turned to tragedy.

The sages, though, have been puzzled by this episode. The text itself merely states, “They offered unauthorized fire - *aish zarah* – before Adonai, that God had not commanded. So fire came out from the presence of Adonai and consumed them, and they died before Adonai.” Putting together clues in the biblical text, the rabbis speculated... that Nadab and Abihu were guilty of entering the Holy of Holies; that they had given a ruling of their own accord without consulting Moses or Aaron; that they had become intoxicated; that they were not properly robed; that they had not purified themselves with water from the laver; that they were so self-important that they had not married, thinking no woman was good enough for them; or that they were impatient for Moses and Aaron to die so they could become the leaders of Israel.

However, while these and other midrashic interpretations are valid and important, they do not represent the plain sense of the text, the *p’shat*. As Rabbi Sacks notes, “The text is clear.” In each of the three scriptural places where their death is mentioned, the Torah says merely that they offered “unauthorized fire.” Simply, the sin was that they did something that had not been commanded.

The history of the word “enthusiasm” helps us to understand this episode with greater clarity. Nadab and Abihu were enthusiasts, not in today’s terms, but in the way the word was understood centuries ago. They, like enthusiasts, were filled with religious passion and believed that God was inspiring them to do deeds in defiance of law and convention. But while potentially holy, they were also dangerous. According to Hume, “All enthusiasts have been freed from the yoke of ecclesiastics, and have expressed great independence in their devotion, with a contempt of forms, ceremonies, and traditions.” Enthusiasm, he notes, is diametrically opposed to the mindset of priesthood.

To bring unauthorized fire to the Tabernacle might seem like a small offense to us, but a single unauthorized act in the realm of the holy causes a breach in the laws around the sacred that can grow into a gaping hole. Enthusiasm, harmless though it may be in some of its manifestations, can quickly become extremism, fanaticism and religiously motivated violence. History and contemporary realities surely illustrate this truth.

Applying this message to contemporary reality, Sacks writes that “We now understand in detail that the human brain contains two different systems. The ‘fast’ brain, the limbic system, gives rise to emotions, particularly in response to fear. The ‘slow’ brain,

the prefrontal cortex, is rational, deliberate, and capable of thinking through the long term consequences of alternative courses of action.” It is no accident that we have both systems. Without instinctive responses triggered by danger we would not survive. But without the slower, deliberative brain we would find ourselves time and again engaging in destructive and self-destructive behavior. Individual happiness and the survival of civilization depend on striking a balance between the two.

Precisely because it gives rise to such intense passions, the religious life in particular needs the constraints of law and ritual, the entire intricate system of worship, so that the fire of faith is contained, giving light and a glimpse of the glory of God. Otherwise it can eventually become a raging inferno, spreading destruction and claiming lives. After many centuries in the West, we have tamed enthusiasm to the point where we can think of it as a positive force. We should never forget, however, that it was not always so. That is why Judaism contains so many laws and so much attention to detail – for the closer we come to God, the more we need.

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### **“Spontaneity: Good or Bad?” R. Jonathan Sacks**

Parashat Shemini tells the tragic story of how the inauguration of the Tabernacle, a day about which the sages say that God rejoiced as much as He had at the creation of the universe, was overshadowed by the deaths of two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu:

*Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu took their censers, put fire in them, and added incense; and they offered unauthorised fire before the Lord, which He had not instructed them [to offer]. Fire came forth from before the Lord, and it consumed them so that they died before the Lord. (Lev. 10:1-2)*

In the previous essay we noted the many explanations given by the sages and later commentators as to what Nadav and Avihu's sin was. But the simplest answer, given by the Torah itself here and elsewhere (*Num. 3:4, 26:61*), is that they acted on their own initiative. They did what they had not been commanded. They behaved spontaneously, evidently out of sheer enthusiasm in the mood of the moment, offering "unauthorized fire." Evidently it is dangerous to act spontaneously in matters of the spirit.

But is it? Moses acted spontaneously in far more fraught circumstances when he shattered the tablets of stone on seeing the Israelites cavorting around the Golden Calf. The tablets - hewn and engraved by God Himself - were perhaps the holiest objects there have ever been. Yet Moses was not punished for his act. The sages say that though he acted of his own accord without first consulting God, God assented to his act. Rashi refers to this moment in his very last comment on the Torah, whose final verse speaks about "all the strong hand, and all the great awe, which Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel":

*[This refers to when Moses] took the liberty of shattering the tablets before their eyes, as it is said, "I shattered them before your eyes." The Holy One, Blessed Be He,*

*consented to his opinion, as it is said, "which you shattered" - "Yishar Ko'ah for shattering them!"*

Why then was spontaneity wrong for Nadav and Avihu, yet right for Moses? The answer is that Nadav and Avihu were priests. Moses was a *navi*, a prophet. These are two different forms of religious leadership. They involve different tasks, different sensibilities, indeed, different approaches to time itself.

The priest serves God in a way that never changes over time (except, of course, when the Temple was destroyed and its service, presided over by the priests, came to an end). The prophet serves God in a way that is constantly changing over time. When people are at ease, the prophet warns of forthcoming catastrophe. When they suffer catastrophe and are in the depths of despair, the prophet brings consolation and hope.

The words said by the priest are always the same. The priestly blessing uses the same words today as it did in the days of Moses and Aaron. But the words used by a prophet are never the same. "No two prophets use the same style." So for a prophet, spontaneity is of the essence. But for the priest engaged in divine service, it is completely out of place.

Why the difference? After all, the priest and the prophet were serving the same God. The Torah uses a kind of device we have only recently re-invented in a somewhat different form. Stereophonic sound - sound coming from two different speakers - was developed in the 1930s to give the impression of audible perspective. In the 1950s, 3D film was developed to do for sight what stereo had done for sound.

From the pioneering work of Pierre Broca in the 1860s to today, using MRI and PET scans, neuroscientists have striven to understand how our bicameral brain allows us to respond more intelligently to our environment than would otherwise have been possible. Twin perspectives are needed to fully experience reality.

The twin perspectives of the priest and prophet correspond to the twin perspectives on creation represented respectively by Genesis 1:1-2:3, spoken in the priestly voice, with an emphasis on order, structure, divisions and boundaries, and Genesis 2:4-3:24, spoken in the prophetic voice, with an emphasis on the nuances and dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

There is another area in which there was an ongoing argument between structure and spontaneity, namely *tefilah*, prayer, specifically the *Amidah*. After the destruction of the Temple, Rabban Gamliel and his court at Yavneh established a standard text for the weekday *Amidah*, comprising eighteen (or later, nineteen) blessings in a precise order. Not everyone, however, agreed. R. Yehoshua held that individuals could say an abridged form of the *Amidah*. According to some interpretations, R. Eliezer was opposed to a fixed text altogether and held that one should, each day, say something new.

This disagreement is precisely parallel to another one about the source of the daily prayers:

*It has been stated: R. Yose son of R. Hanina said: The prayers were instituted by the patriarchs. R. Yehoshua b. Levi said: The prayers were instituted to replace the daily sacrifices.*

According to R. Yose son of R. Hanina, *Shacharit* was established by Abraham, *Mincha* by Isaac, and *Ma'ariv* by Jacob. According to R. Yehoshua b. Levi, *Shacharit* corresponds to

the daily morning sacrifice, *Mincha* to the afternoon sacrifice. On the face of it, the disagreement has no practical consequences, but in fact, it does.

If the prayers were instituted by the patriarchs, then their origin is prophetic. If they were established to replace the sacrifices, then their provenance is priestly. Priests were forbidden to act spontaneously, but prophets did so as a matter of course. Someone who saw prayer as priestly would, like Rabban Gamliel, emphasize the importance of a precise text. One who saw it as prophetic would, like R. Eliezer as understood by the Talmud Yerushalmi, value spontaneity and each day try to say something new.

Tradition eventually resolved the matter in a most remarkable way. We say each *Amidah* twice, once privately and silently in the tradition of the prophets, then a second time publicly and collectively by the *shaliach tzibbur*, the "reader's repetition," in the tradition of a priest offering a sacrifice at the Temple. (There is no reader's repetition in the *Ma'ariv* service because there was no sacrifice at nighttime). During the silent *Amidah* we are permitted to add extra words of our own. During the repetition we are not. That is because prophets acted spontaneously, but priests did not.

The tragedy of Nadav and Avihu is that they made the mistake of acting like prophets when they were, in fact, priests. But we have inherited both traditions. For without structure, Judaism would have no continuity, but without spontaneity, it would have no fresh life. The challenge is to maintain the balance without ever confusing the place of each.