

A Few Thoughts on Parashah Shemini (Leviticus 9:1-11:47) – Practicing Restraint

This week's portion begins where Parashah Tzav, which we read the week of April 4, right before Pesach, ended. Moses dedicates the Mishkan – the Tent of Meeting, invests Aaron and his sons with priestly authority, and declares a week-long festival. It is now the 8th day of the festival and the final offerings are being performed with the entire community in attendance.

Then disaster strikes: For whatever reason, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu decide on their own to bring an offering of incense. But since they were not commanded to do this, but simply took it upon themselves, HaShem regards it as "eish zarah" – foreign, strange fire, consuming them in their own blaze. Aaron remains silent as Moses tells their cousins to carry their bodies by their tunics outside of the camp and orders the entire group to mourn.

What follows is a list of new commands for the high priests, which include not drinking "intoxicating wine" before entering the Tent of Meeting. It is an eternal law, set in place to enable us to clearly distinguish between sacred and secular and between unclean (unfit for sacred use) and clean.

And then we receive a detailed list of the animals we may eat and those we may not eat. It is significant that this comes as we finish Pesach with all its dietary restrains and reenter the world of chametz! Will we binge on our favorite junk food, or will we practice restraint?

What is the underlying message in all of this? That there are limits to what we may do. Freedom is not a license to do whatever we please with no regard for our fellow humans, our animals, and our environment. Freedom comes with responsibilities attached, and only when we acknowledge and accept these responsibilities can we truly be free. Those poor people who made up the ragtag group that fled Egypt, had to learn this lesson the hard way – and we are still learning today! How far does our freedom reach, and what restraints must we observe in order to safeguard freedom for everyone?

Right now, we are in the midst of a terrifying pandemic, something no one still alive has ever witnessed. Like our ancestors making their way through the desert, we are in unfamiliar territory and we are justifiably frightened. Can we trust our leaders? Will the restraints imposed upon us for our safety and the safety of our fellow humans really work? Are they logical, or just disruptive and potentially destructive? When will this all end? Will our lives be forever changed? We simply do not know, so we have to live from day to day, trusting that things will turn out all right in the end.

Psalm 67 – "The Omer Psalm," which we read from Pesach through Shavuot, is one of the many psalms whose words speak of hope. Bracketed by blessings, it promises that HaShem will lead us forever and show us the way – yes, even in these troubled times. Stay tuned for a detailed analysis of this wonderful little song of hope.

Shabbat shalom!