

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT SHEMINI

Fire of Acceptance; Fire of Retribution

Parshat Shemini represents the point of transition between the two major themes of Sefer Vayikra. Whereas the beginning of the sefer focuses on the Mishkan and its sacrificial service, the end explores how we can elevate ourselves as an *am kadosh* — a holy people — by integrating the ideals of the Mishkan into our daily lives. This shift is not merely thematic but deeply structural, reflecting the Torah's vision of a life infused with holiness.

At this crucial juncture, as we move from lessons of the Mishkan to their practical applications, we find repeated references to the concept of fire. Firstly, the verses describe the jubilation of the people when they witnessed the fire descending from Heaven to consume the inauguration offerings on the Mizbeach (altar), marking the culmination of their anticipation and preparation. This miraculous fire not only signalled the Divine acceptance of their atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf, but also, as Rabbeinu Bechaye (Saragossa, d. 1340) explains, became the eternal flame on the *Mizbeach* — a fire that continued to burn for the next 800 years, throughout the era of the Mishkan and the entire period of the First Temple. Following this dramatic manifestation of Divine approval, the Torah describes how Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, brought an unauthorized or 'strange' fire before Hashem, and as a consequence, they were themselves consumed by a fire that descended from Heaven.

In fact, Rabbeinu Bechaye enumerates twelve instances throughout Tanach of fire descending from Heaven, six of which served as a sign of acceptance of people's devotion and six of which came in retribution for misdemeanours. What is particularly striking in Parshat Shemini, however, is the close juxtaposition of these two types of fire: immediately after a fire descends to accept Aharon's korbanot, another fire descends to punish his two sons.

How can we understand the dual nature of fire in this context and indeed, the significance of the fire imagery in Parshat Shemini as a whole?

Unauthorised Fire

What exactly Nadav and Avihu did wrong is not entirely clear. Although the verse does specify that they brought an unauthorised fire, the precise nature of this fire, and indeed why it should not have been brought, remains vague. A number of suggestions are offered by the Midrash and the commentaries, but the principal explanation appears to be that their error was that they brought the fire on their own accord. They acted out of initiative, but without the necessary deference or instruction from those senior to them. The fire itself was meant to have been brought but they were *moreh halachah bifnei rabam* — they ruled this halachah independently, without waiting to be told by their teacher, Moshe Rabbeinu, to do this.

Although this infraction seems like a relatively minor breach of etiquette, the Talmud (Eiruvim 63a) treats the sin of issuing a halachic ruling before one's mentor exceptionally severely.



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This even extends to an exhortation to a teacher not to forgive his student for this contravention of hierarchy.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (Jerusalem, d. 1979) explains that failing to give due deference to one's teacher touches on the sustainability of the Jewish people as a whole. The very right to our existence as a nation rests on the fact that we are part of a national journey, built upon generation after generation of our people who came before us. When one approaches, therefore, a question of transmitting our heritage, there needs to be above all a sense of humility. A student in the position to rule on a halachic question must understand that he is only where he is because of the tradition that he has received and that it is his duty to pass it on to the best of his ability in firm consonance with that tradition.

If the student cannot do that, however, and jumps the chain of authority by failing to defer to his teacher, he runs the critical risk of uprooting and mixing up our entire tradition. This is why a teacher cannot forgive his student for this infraction; the issue is not a lack of respect for the particular teacher in question but an insensitivity and potential risk to the future heritage of the entire Jewish people.

Fire of Tradition

Perhaps this insight into the episode of Nadav and Avihu can help us understand the profusion of references to fire in this parshah. Last week, we mentioned Rav Moshe Shapira's observation about the paradox of fire.

Although a flame appears to be a constant entity, it is actually being continually renewed as it burns its fuel — the flame can only stay alight as long as it is sustained by the fuel that feeds it. Thus, fire, as an analogy to Hashem's relationship with the world, is the teacher of the true face of existence; as much as the world seems to be a constant and independent creation, it only exists inasmuch as it reflects the will of Hashem at any moment.

At this transitional point of Sefer Vayikra, therefore, fire is critical to teaching us how to apply the concepts of *kedushah* — holiness — to our lives. Fire symbolises the way that Hashem sustains in the most profound way all of our existence and our experiences, and it is only after accepting this 'fire from Heaven' that we can move on to study the intricacies of Jewish law delineated in the rest of Sefer Vayikra. Sensitivity to the Divine element of our tradition helps us to refrain from stepping over boundaries and bringing 'unauthorised fire' into our lives. Instead, the acceptance of the fire that descends from Heaven to consume the *korbanot*, symbolising Hashem's complete dominion over us, is the key to living a life suffused with the will of Hashem.

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