

# Shemini - Who by Fire?

*Source Sheet by Judith Spicehandler*

**Leviticus 10:1-11**

Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before יהוה alien fire, which had not been enjoined upon them.

And fire came forth from יהוה and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of יהוה.

Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what יהוה meant by saying: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people." And Aaron was silent. Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, "Come forward and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp."

They came forward and carried them out of the camp by their tunics, as Moses had ordered.

And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, "Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and anger strike the whole community. But your kin, all the house of Israel, shall bewail the burning that יהוה has wrought. And so do not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die, for יהוה's anointing oil is upon you." And they did as Moses had bidden.

And יהוה spoke to Aaron, saying:  
Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages, for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the impure and the pure;  
and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which יהוה has imparted to them through Moses.

**ויקרא י'א'-י"א**

ויקחו בני־אהרן נדב ואביהוא איש מחתתו ויתנו בהן אש וישִׂמו עליה קטרת ויקריבו לפני יהוה אש זרה אשר לא צוה אתם:

ותצא אש מלפני יהוה ותאכל אותם וימתו לפני יהוה:

ויאמר משה אל־אהרן הוא אשר־דבר יהוה | לאמר בקרבי אקדש ועל־פני כל־העם אפבד וידם אהרן:

ויקרא משה אל־מישאל ואל אלצפון בני עזיאל דד אהרן ויאמר אליהם קרבו שאו את־אחיכם מאת פני־הקדש אל־מחוץ למחנה:

ויקרבו וישאם בכתנתם אל־מחוץ למחנה כאשר דבר משה:

ויאמר משה אל־אהרן ולא לעזר ולאיתמר | בניו ראשיכם אל־תפרעו | ובגדיכם לא־תפרמו ולא תמתו ועל כל־העדה יקצף ואחיכם כל־בית ישראל יבכו את־השרפה אשר שרף יהוה:

ומפתח אהל מועד לא תצאו פן־תמתו כי־שמן משחת יהוה עליכם ויעשו כדבר משה: {פ}

וידבר יהוה אל־אהרן לאמר:

ינו ושכר אל־תשת | אתה | ובניך אתך בבאכם אל־אהל מועד ולא תמתו תקת עולם לדרתים:

ולהבדיל בין הקדש ובין החל ובין הטמא ובין הטהור:

ולהורת את־בני ישראל את כל־החקים אשר דבר יהוה אליהם ביד־משה: {פ}

**Rashbam on Leviticus 10:1:1**

(1) ויקחו בני אהרן נדב ואביהוא before the fire had emanated from the Holy of Holies they each took his own pan planning to offer incense on the golden altar, seeing that this offering precedes (timewise) the disposal of not totally burned leftovers from the previous day's sacrificial meat. They placed "alien" fire on these pans, something which had not been commanded by Moses to be done on this day. Even though on ordinary days the rule of "the sons of Aaron will place in these pans fire on the altar" (Leviticus 1,7) was in effect, this rule did not apply to the day of inauguration, and Moses had not wanted any man made fire to be introduced into the Tabernacle. This was because he expected heavenly fire to manifest itself so that the addition of man made fire would have completely ruined the impact of the miracle. On this day the name of God would be glorified by all the people becoming aware of Divine approval of their offerings, by God accepting same by means of heavenly fire.

רשב"ם על ויקרא י"א:א'  
 (א) ויקחו בני אהרן נדב ואביהוא - קודם שיצא האש מלפני יהוה כבר לקחו איש מחתתו להקטיר קטורת לפנים על מזבח הזהב, שהרי קטורת של שחר קודמת לאיברים ונתנו בהן אש זרה אשר לא צוה אותם משה ביום הזה, שאף על פי שבשאר ימים כתיב: ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח - היום לא צוה ולא רצה משה שיביאו אש של הזיוט, לפי שהיו מצפים לירידת אש גבוה ולא טוב היום להביא את זה, כדי להתקדש שם שמים שידעו הכל כי אש באה מן השמים, כמו שאמר אליהו: ואש לא תשימו - לפי שהיה רוצה לקדש שם שמים בירידת האש מלמעלה.

**Sacks, Jonathan. Leviticus: The Book of Holiness (Covenant & Conversation 3) (p. 139).**

That is the function of the holy – the point at which “I am” is silent in the overwhelming presence of “There is.” That is what Nadav and Avihu forgot – that to enter holy space or time requires ontological humility, the total renunciation of human initiative and desire. The significance of this fact cannot be over-estimated. When we confuse God’s will with our will, we turn the holy – the source of life – into something unholy and a source of death. The classic example of this is “holy war,” jihad, Crusade – investing imperialism (the desire to rule over other people) with the cloak of sanctity as if conquest and forced conversion were God’s will. The story of Nadav and Avihu reminds us yet again of the warning first spelled out in the days of Cain and Abel. The first act of worship led to the first murder. Like nuclear fission, worship generates power, which can be benign but can also be profoundly dangerous.

The episode of Nadav and Avihu is written in three kinds of fire.

First there is the fire from heaven: Fire came forth from before God and consumed the burnt offering. (Lev. 9:24) This was the fire of favour, consummating the service of the Sanctuary.

Then came the “unauthorised fire” offered by the two sons. 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]. (Lev. 10:1)

Then there was the counter-fire from heaven: Fire came forth from before the Lord, and it consumed them so that they died before the Lord. (Lev. 10:2)

The message is simple and intensely serious: Religion is not what the European Enlightenment thought it would become: mute, marginal, and mild. It is fire – and like fire, it warms but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame.

### A few other instances of fire in Torah (far from a complete list)

#### Genesis 15:17

(17) When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces.

#### בראשית ט"ז:י"ז

(יז) וַיְהִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה וְעֹלָטָה הָיָה וְהִנֵּה תְנוּרָה עֹשֶׂת וְלֶפֶיד אֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָבַר בֵּין הַגְּזָרִים הָאֵלֶּה:

#### Exodus 3:2

(2) An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed.

#### שמות ג':ב'

(ב) וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ ה' אֵלָיו בְּלֶבֶת-אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּינָה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסִּינָה בֹעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּינָה אֵינָנוּ אֲכָל:

#### Exodus 13:21

(21) The LORD went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel day and night.

#### שמות י"ג:כ"א

(כא) וַה' הָלַךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמֹּד עָנָן לְנַחֲתָם הַדֶּרֶךְ וְלַיְלָה בְּעַמֹּד אֵשׁ לְהָאִיר לָהֶם לְלַכֵּת יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה:

**Exodus 19:18**

(18) Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

**שמות י"ט:י"ח**

(יח) וְהָרִי סִינַי עָשָׂן כְּלוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד  
עָלָיו ה' בְּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עָשָׂנוֹ כְּעֵשָׂן הַכִּבְּרִיּוֹן  
וַיִּחָרַד כָּל־הָהָר מְאֹד:

**A few mentions of fire in Rabbinic Texts (far from a complete list)**

## Shabbat 33b

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai **and his son**, Rabbi Elazar, **went and hid in the study hall.**

**Every day Rabbi Shimon's wife would bring them bread and a jug of water and they would eat. When the decree intensified, Rabbi Shimon said to his son: Women are easily impressionable** and, therefore, there is room for concern **lest** the authorities **torture her and she reveal our whereabouts. They went and they hid in a cave. A miracle occurred and a carob tree was created for them as well as a spring of water. They would remove their clothes and sit covered in sand up to their necks. They would study Torah all day** in that manner. **At the time of prayer, they would dress, cover themselves, and pray, and they would again remove their clothes afterward so that they would not become tattered. They sat in the cave for twelve years. Elijah the Prophet came and stood at the entrance to the cave and said: Who will inform bar Yoḥai that the emperor died and his decree has been abrogated? They emerged** from the cave, and **saw people who were plowing and sowing.** Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai **said:** These people **abandon eternal life** of Torah study **and engage in temporal life** for their own sustenance. The Gemara relates that **every place that Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar directed their eyes was immediately burned. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them:** Did you emerge from the cave in order **to destroy My world? Return to your cave. They again went and sat there for twelve months. They said: The judgment of the wicked in Gehenna lasts for twelve months.** Surely their sin was atoned in that time. **A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Emerge from your cave. They emerged. Everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would strike, Rabbi Shimon would heal.** Rabbi Shimon **said to** Rabbi Elazar: **My**

## שבת ל"ג ב

אָזל הוא ובִרְיָהּ, טָשׁוּ בֵּי מְדַרְשָׁא. כָּל יוֹמָא הָוָה מַתְּנָא לְהוּ דְּבֵיתָהוּ רִיפְתָּא וְכוּזָא דְּמֵיא וְכַרְכִּי. כִּי תַקִּיף גְּזִירְתָּא אָמַר לִיה לְבִרְיָהּ: נָשִׁים דְּעָתָן קָלָה עֲלֵיהוּ, דִּילְמָא מְצַעְרֵי לָהּ וּמְגַלִּיא לֹן. אָזְלוּ טָשׁוּ בַּמְעָרְתָּא. אִיתְרַחִישׁ נִסָּא אִיבְרֵי לְהוּ חֲרוּבָא וְעֵינָא דְּמֵיא, וְהוּוּ מְשַׁלְחֵי מְנִיִּיהוּ וְהוּוּ יְתָבֵי עַד צְוֹאֲרֵיהוּ בְּחָלָא. כּוּלֵי יוֹמָא גָרְסִי. בְּעֵידָן צְלוּיֵי לְבָשֵׁי מִיפְסוּ וּמְצַלוּ, וְהֵדָר מְשַׁלְחֵי מְנִיִּיהוּ כִּי הֵיכִי דְלָא לִיבְלוּ. אִיתִיבוּ תְרִיסַר שָׁנֵי בַּמְעָרְתָּא. אָתָּא אֵלֵיהוּ וְקָם אִפִּיתְחָא דְּמְעָרְתָּא, אָמַר: מָאן לוֹדְעִיָּה לְבַר יוֹחֵי דְּמִית קִיסַר וּבְטִיל גְּזִירְתֵּיהּ. נִפְקוּ, חֲזוּ אִינְשֵׁי דְקָא כְּרַבִּי וְזֹרְעֵי, אָמְרִין: מְנִיחִין חַיֵּי עוֹלָם וְעוֹסְקִין בְּחַיֵּי שְׁעָה. כָּל מְקוּם שְׁנוּתָנִין עֵינֵיהוּן מִיַּד נִשְׂרָף. יְצַתָּה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה לָהֶם: לְהַחְרִיב עוֹלָמִי יְצַאתֶם?! חִזְרוּ לְמְעָרְתְּכֶם! הַדּוֹר אָזוּל אִיתִיבוּ תְרִיסַר יָרְחֵי שְׁתָּא. אָמְרֵי: מְשַׁפֵּט רְשָׁעִים בְּגִיהֶנּוּם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר חֳדָשׁ. יְצַתָּה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה: צְאוּ מִמְעָרְתְּכֶם! נִפְקוּ. כָּל הֵיכָא דְהוּוּ מְחֵי רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר, הָוָה מְסִי רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן. אָמַר לוֹ: בְּנִי, דִּי לְעוֹלָם אָנִי וְאַתָּה.

**son, you and I suffice for the entire world,**  
as the two of us are engaged in the proper  
study of Torah.

#### Sefer HaChinukh 132:4

And what is the fire that he has? It is a person's nature – since of the four elements in a person, fire is the head of those four; as with it does a man strengthen himself and move to act. And therefore, he needs more blessing in it; and the matter of blessing is completeness – meaning to say a thing in which there is no lack, nor excess. And the fire in a person requires this blessing, such that a man will have what he needs: Not less, since his strength will weaken; and not more, since he will be burnt through it, in the way of people that die from too much of a supplement of it – and that is a burning fever. And the sons of Aharon increased fire without being commanded, and [so] fire was also increased in them, and they were burnt – as according to the actions of people does their punishment come, or does the blessing of God rest [in him] (upon them).

#### Midrash Tanhuma on Genesis 1

The Torah is full of holy fire; it was written with a black fire upon a white fire.

#### Taanit 7a

**Rabba bar bar Ḥana said: Why are matters of Torah compared to fire, as it is stated: “Is not My word like fire, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:29)? To tell you: Just as fire does not ignite in a lone stick of wood but in a pile of kindling, so too, matters of Torah are not retained and understood properly by a lone scholar who studies by himself, but by a group of Sages.**

#### ספר החינוך קל"ב:ד'

ומהו אש זה? הוא הטבע שבאדם, כי מן הארבעה יסודות שבאדם הוא אש והוא ראש לארבעתן, כי בו יתחזק האדם ויתנועע ויפעל, ועל כן צריכה הברכה בו יותר. וענין הברכה הוא שלמות. כלומר דבר שאין בו חסרון ולא מותר, וכן האש שבאדם צריך לברכה זו שיהא ממנו באדם מה שצריך אליו, לא פחות כי יחלש כחו, ולא יותר כי ישרף בו כדרך בני אדם שמתים בתוספת האש בהם יותר מדאי והוא הקדחת. ובני אהרן הוסיפו באש מבלי שנצטוו ונוסף גם בהם אש ונשרפו, כי לפי פעלת בני אדם יבא עונשם או תנוח ברכת השם [בן] (עליהם).

#### תענית ז' א

אמר רבה בר בר חנה למה נמשלו דברי תורה כאש שנאמר (ירמיהו כג, כט) הלא כה דברי כאש נאם ה' לומר לך מה אש אינו דולק יחידי אף דברי תורה אין מתקיימין ביחידי

#### Chasidic Fire

**Kedushat Levi, Exodus, Mishpatim**

(11) Exodus 24,17. "and the appearance of G'd's glory was like a consuming fire on the top of the Mountain." When man serves the Lord through observing the commandments and studying His Torah, he provides the Lord with a great deal of satisfaction. If he wishes to know if his service was really pleasing to the Lord, the test is to look into his own heart. **If he notices that his own heart is as if burning with fire in his enthusiasm and that whenever he performs acts of service to Hashem it thoroughly warms his heart and he himself experiences a profound satisfaction and joy at serving his Creator, this is proof that he receives a heavenly assist to continue on the path he has chosen... when his own heart seems to him to be on "fire," and he is close to ecstasy, this is proof that G'd takes pleasure in his efforts.**

קדושת לוי, שמות, משפטים  
 (יא) ומראה כבוד ה' כאש אוכלת כו'  
 (שמות כד, יז). דהנה האדם בעבודתו  
 להשם יתברך בתורה ובמצות מביא  
 תענוג גדול למעלה. וכשאדם רוצה לידע  
 אם השם יתברך יש לו תענוג מעבודתו  
 הבחינה הוא על זה, אם אדם רואה  
 שלבו בוער כאש ומתלהב תמיד  
 לעבוד אותו ויש לו חשק ורצון  
 בעבודת הבורא אז בוודאי מוכח  
 שהשם יתברך יש לו תענוג מעבודתו  
 ולכך מסייעין לו מן השמים ושולחין  
 לו מחשבות קדושות לתוך לבו.  
 ...ולזה כאש אוכלת אם לבו בוער  
 כאש וקל להבין:

**Yanki Tauber, chabad.org**

We yearn to tear free of our "wick" — of the body that anchors us to the physical reality and sullies us with physical needs and wants. We strive upwards, yearning to transcend the physical, the human and the particular, and fuse with the universal and the divine. At the same time, we cling to the body, to the bit of matter that sustains us as dynamic and productive participants in G-d's world. It is this perpetual up-and-down, this incessant vacillation from selfhood to selflessness and back again, that we call life. It is this eternal tension between our desire to escape the physical and our commitment to inhabit it, develop it and sanctify it that makes us spiritual beings. We can sit and gaze at the flame for hours, because we are gazing at ourselves.

**Rabbi Yael Levy, "Shemini: The Eighth Day," in *Directing the Heart: Weekly Mindfulness Teachings and Practices from the Torah*, pp. 75-76.**

We do not know the meaning  
 Of strange fire



Or if Nadav and Avihu were being punished  
Or blessed by the consuming flames.

And we ask:  
What do we do when faced with mystery,  
When faced with what we can never understand?  
What do we do when faced with catastrophe,  
When even the best intentions and heartfelt actions  
Bring forth results that leave us trembling and afraid?

There is no easy answer,  
No sure way through.

There is, though, the power of presence.  
Let us remember to draw close to each other  
And make an offering of our presence.

With words,  
With a touch,  
With silence, with a glance,  
Let our presence appear.  
Let our presence go forth.  
Let our presence to each other be sturdy and strong.

Let our presence be an offering in the face of the Mystery  
And a balm for the consuming fires of pain, devastation, hardship  
and fear.

