

SHEMINI Leviticus 9:1-11:47
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The Torah portion for this Shabbat is Shemini, Leviticus 9:1-11:47. The portion begins with Aaron and his sons following Moses' instructions on how to offer sacrifices so that God will forgive the people. After Moses and Aaron do an elaborate sacrifice to God which is "devoured" by God in flames, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu decide to offer their own "Aish Zarah" "alien fire" to God. Since they brought sacrifices not commanded by God, God punishes them by bringing forth fire and "devouring them". God forbids Moses, Aaron, and his surviving sons from mourning, but commands the rest of the people to do so. The portion ends with laws that explain which animals, birds, fish, and insects are pure or impure. These foods are still avoided by Jews who keep kosher.

This portion has always disturbed me, as you can imagine. When first reading this week's portion, I thought about how horrible it must have been for Moses, Aaron and Aaron's remaining sons to not be able to mourn for Nadab and Abihu. This is especially poignant to us in these days when we are in lock down

and anyone who has a loved one who dies, may not have been able to be with their loved one while they were sick and before they died. There were no hugs, kisses or last words of love with the person. Right now, there are some who are not allowed at the gravesite to grieve and be at a burial of a loved one, either because they have COVID 19 or because of the limitation of how many people can be there. The Wisconsin clergy have been discussing this dilemma and it has been a real ethical problem for Jews. The mourning process for Jews is all about surrounding yourself with community who comfort you in a time of terrible loss. However, because of the social distancing orders, only 5 people may be able to go to a gravesite, staying at a distance from each other and from the grave (especially if the deceased has died from the coronavirus) and the body may have already been lowered into the ground so that the workers don't take up 2 or 3 of the limited allowance of people who can be at the gravesite. Clergy are being faced with real challenges at this time. Is it safe for anyone to go to the gravesite if the person who died had the Coronavirus, or if one or more of their loved ones has the virus? Is it safe for a clergy person to go to the gravesite? How can one comfort someone while standing 5-6 feet away? Is it okay to do burials, minyan services or memorials on ZOOM? Is it enough to comfort the mourners? How do mourners from other

cities get to the city where a loved one is being buried? How do we get bodies from other cities to Wisconsin, especially if they died of the Covid 19? Is it okay to wait extended periods of time to bury a body? What about waiting to observe shiva? It is terrible to have mourners stay in a state of “limbo” while all of these details are worked out! These are all important questions and problems that we have been facing. Thankfully, we have not heard of any of our members who have come down with this disease, and the few people who have told us they had family members come down with it, have said that they are recuperating and getting better.

The hard thing to comprehend about this portion is: What did these sons of Aaron do that was so horrible? In the Torah, we often don't get many details of what happened exactly. We know that Aaron and his sons were ordained that day, and they were the first priests to be “ordained”. His family were commanded to remain the priesthood forever in the future. We do not know how old Nadab and Abihu were. It does not state whether Aaron, Moses and the others were all there when this happened, or were they alone? This happens right after God sends forth fire to devour the offering that Aaron and Moses just offered. The people were joyous and happy that their offering was accepted. Aaron and his sons had just been given explicit

directions and commandments on how the sacrifices were to be done and who was to do each sacred thing. Why would Nadab and Abihu take it upon themselves to do something without being directed by God, Moses and their father? Where was their father while they were doing this? These are all important questions to ponder, and throughout the ages, sages and scholars have given their opinion. I don't profess to be a sage or scholar, but I'll tell you my thoughts on the situation.

I thought about how often kids do things to try to prove they know more than their parents, or to act like big-shots, or just to have fun! We have no idea how old these sons were. Back then, anyone who was 13 or older were considered adults. But we know that between the ages 13 and 19, kids are still figuring out a lot of things! They had a lot of responsibility put on their shoulders. They were also given a high position of authority in the community when they became ordained priests. It may have been too much for them to handle all at once. Like children playing with fire, they literally were playing with oil and incense, which could have blown up in their faces, especially with all of the other fire happening around the prior sacrifice.

It makes me think of those teens who get drunk and go driving and racing in their cars. Some of them have accidents where people die. Kids going against

the law, because they want to get away with it because it's fun. Reality can be a hard lesson when their actions cause their death and/or the death of their friends.

Just recently, the media showed pictures of college kids who went to Florida and California and flooded the beaches partying and having fun in the midst of this pandemic. Several weeks later, we heard of many of these kids coming down with the Covid 19 and some even dying from it. I was so saddened to hear about this. Again, just like I asked where Aaron was, now I ask where were the parents who allowed this were?

As humans, we tend to go into denial when bad things happen, thinking that these bad things can't happen to us. This was a good example of this phenomenon, and unfortunately, it caused the illness and death of many other people. Even though it looks like there will be a lessening of the restrictions in the coming weeks, I caution you to still remain very careful, so that we can finally be rid of this pandemic and have a fun summer together! Thankfully, I know that most of you have been taking this very seriously, and I applaud you for it. As long as we keep a distance of 5-6 feet from people, wear gloves if we know we'll be touching spaces where others have been touching, and wear masks and gloves when we can't social distance, I think we can be going out and doing things within

reason. I would still caution against a lot of interaction with others that you don't know. We need to slowly get back to normal, and we certainly don't want any recurrence of the spreading of this getting out of hand.

I know many of us are going stir-crazy staying at home. However, there have been many blessings that I have found out of it. Through all of our zoom meetings, I feel as if I've had a chance to reach and talk to many of our members whom I don't always see and talk to. I've taken walks more often which are always uplifting and makes me feel better. I have connected with family and friends I don't usually have a chance to talk to. So let us look at the blessings in our lives, not least of all, our good health, and let us stay patient and keep those blessings in the future.

We cannot bring back the lives of Nadab and Abihu, or those who have contracted Covid 19 and died from it. However, we can learn the lessons that our medical experts are telling us, and learn from this portion. We should not take our lives for granted by doing things that we don't know about or the Doctors and scientists haven't approved of. The Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 4:1 (22a) states: "Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." Let us all be the ones who

save a life by being careful over the coming weeks.
Kein Yehi Ratzon-may this be God's will.