

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Sh'mini LEVITICUS 9:1–11:47

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Parashat Sh'mini Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Strange Brew—The Dangers of Playing with Fire

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INTRODUCTION



Parashat Sh'mini (“eighth”) opens on the eighth day of the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests. Leviticus 1–7 presents the rules for the sacrificial system, and Leviticus 8 provides additional rules for sacrifices as well as God’s instructions for the ordination of priests. Now that the rules have been established for the sacrificial system and priests have been ordained, worship in the form of ritual offerings can begin. In the midst of the excitement and rejoicing that must have followed the ordination, two of Aaron’s sons—Nadab and Abihu—offer a ritual fire that God did not command, which results in their death. This strange and tragic narrative highlights the danger that can arise from proximity to the holy. The final chapter of the parashah contains dietary laws for the Israelites. While God assigns the priests the role of teaching the people to distinguish between the ritually pure and the ritually impure, it is the people who must make these distinctions in their daily lives, particularly regarding the food they consume. This responsibility—most likely carried out by women—provides a direct link between the priests’ role in the sanctuary and the home lives of ordinary Israelites. Although the Torah gives no explanation for what makes certain animals—and the objects with which the carcasses of such animals come into contact—impure, none is required. *Parashat Sh'mini* teaches that striving toward holiness requires not only the absence of transgressions, but also separation from impurities that can endanger the entire community.

BEFORE GETTING STARTED



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 615–16 and/or survey the outline on page 616. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

THEME 1: STRANGE BREW—THE DANGERS OF PLAYING WITH FIRE



How can we understand the tragic story of two young men, just ordained as priests, who are killed by the very God to whom they offer a ritual sacrifice? The text provides some tantalizing clues: Nadab and Abihu's offering is one of "alien fire" that "had not been enjoined upon them" (Leviticus 10:1). This terrifying display of God's power illustrates that while God protects, God can also be the source of harm. The terrible deaths of Aaron's sons demonstrate that contact with the holy must be scrupulously protected from incursions and that no one—not even an ordained priest—is free from the deadly consequences of such encroachments.

1. Read Leviticus 10:1–2, which describes the actions of Nadab and Abihu and the consequence of their actions.
 - a. According to verse 1, who are Nadab and Abihu (see Exodus 6:23)? Why do you think the text identifies them this way immediately, before telling us about their actions?
 - b. What role do Nadab and Abihu play in the ratification ritual of the covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 24:1–2, 9–10)? What do Nadab and Abihu, and those with them, experience in verses 9–10? What does the information about Nadab and Abihu that we learn from these verses add to your understanding of this episode?
 - c. According to Leviticus 10:2, why do Nadab and Abihu die?
 - d. In the first part of verse 1, we learn that Nadab and Abihu bring an incense offering before God. The second half of the same verse describes this offering as "alien fire." The word *zarah*, translated here as "alien," can also mean "strange" or "foreign." It comes from the verbal root z-v-r, which means "to be a stranger." How does this inform your understanding why Nadab and Abihu die?
 - e. The word *lifnei* ("before") is used three times in verses 1–2. In verse 1 we read that Nadab and Abihu offer this alien fire "before *YHVH*."

In verse 2 we learn that the fire that destroys Nadab and Abihu “came forth from [*lifnei*] YHVH.” The phrase translated as “at the instance of *YHVH*” (v. 2) also contains the word *lifnei* and can be translated as “before YHVH.” To what extent would your interpretation of the scene be different with this alternative translation? How does the repeated use of the word *lifnei* in these verses help you understand the punishment of Nadab and Abihu?

- f. The phrase “which had not been enjoined upon them” (v. 1) can also be translated as “which [God] had not commanded them.” What does this suggest about the nature of Nadab and Abihu’s offense? According to the Central Commentary on verse 1, what was the belief in the ancient Near East about how the deity must be worshipped and what could result from improper worship of the deity? How does that information inform your understanding of what transpired here?
 - g. II Samuel 6:6–7 tells the story of King David’s decision to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem. On the journey to Jerusalem, the ark begins to fall off the ox-cart that is carrying it. A man reaches out and grabs hold of the ark to keep it from falling, and God kills him. How does this episode relate to the story of Nadab and Abihu? What does it help you to understand about Nadab and Abihu’s punishment? What dangers do both of these stories illustrate?
 - h. Given the interpretive “clues” found in these verses, how do you understand what happened to Nadab and Abihu? In your view, what exactly did they do wrong to merit such swift and severe punishment?
2. Read Leviticus 10:3, which describes Moses’ and Aaron’s responses to the deaths of Nadab and Abihu.
- a. In verse 3, Moses tells Aaron, “This is what *YHVH* meant by saying . . . ,” but the Torah contains no record of God’s having said these words. How might you account for that discrepancy?
 - b. The phrase translated as “Through those near to Me I show Myself holy” (v. 3) can also be translated as “I sanctify Myself by means of those near to Me.” How does this alternate translation help you to understand God’s words and the deaths of Nadab and Abihu? What do the deaths of Nadab and Abihu demonstrate about God and the Tabernacle?
 - c. In what way do the deaths of Nadab and Abihu help God “gain glory before all the people” (v. 3)?
 - d. How do you understand Aaron’s response to the deaths of Nadab and Abihu (v. 3)?

3. Read Leviticus 10:4–7, which describes Moses’ instructions to the family of Nadab and Abihu after their deaths.
 - a. What instructions does Moses give to Mishael and Elzaphan in verses 4–5? In your view, why does Moses instruct them to take the bodies to a place “away from the sanctuary” and “outside the camp”? What is the purpose of Moses’ instruction to carry the bodies out of the camp “by their tunics”?
 - b. Moses instructs Aaron and his remaining sons not to “bare their heads” or “rend their clothes” (v. 6). What are the reasons for these instructions? In your view, why are Aaron’s kin and “all the house of Israel” permitted to mourn Nadab and Abihu, but Aaron and his sons are not permitted to do so?
 - c. According to the Central Commentary on verse 6, how can we understand the word translated here as “kin” (*achim*)?
 - d. Moses tells Aaron that he is not permitted to go outside the camp to bury his sons because “*YHVH*’s anointing oil is upon you” (v. 7). The Torah gives specific instructions about anointing oil for the priests, as well as outlining the consequences of its improper use (Exodus 30:30–33; Leviticus 21:10–12). In addition, the Torah is explicit about the deadly dangers of ritual impurity for the entire Israelite people (see Leviticus 15:31). How do these teachings help you to understand Moses’ instruction to Aaron?

4. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Blu Greenberg (pp. 632–33).
 - a. According to Greenberg, what is Aaron’s role as the *kohein gadol* (high priest)? What are the circumstances of the great celebration at the beginning of *Parashat Sh’mini* (9:1–24)?
 - b. How does the Torah support Greenberg’s portrayal of Nadab and Abihu as “outstanding young men”?
 - c. How does Greenberg’s suggestion that the deaths of Nadab and Abihu might have been a “random accident” compare with your interpretation of the reason suggested in the biblical text (10:1–2)?
 - d. What questions about God’s nature does the story of Nadab and Abihu raise, according to Greenberg?
 - e. How is it possible, as Greenberg suggests, that the actions of Nadab and Abihu both did—and did not—“fit the crime”?
 - f. According to Greenberg, how does Moses’ message to the people after Nadab and Abihu’s deaths walk the line between finding an explanation for what happened, teaching the people to follow God’s law, and consoling his brother Aaron?

- g. How does Greenberg understand the phrase *vayidom Aharon* (“And Aaron was silent”) in 10:3?
 - h. According to Greenberg, how do tragic deaths challenge some people’s beliefs about the relationship between good and evil, reward and punishment? How does Greenberg use the tragedy of her son JJ’s death to teach us about the reason for the instruction that a *shiva* visitor should not speak until the mourner speaks?
 - i. Based on your own experience of the loss of a loved one or having comforted someone who has had a tragic loss, what is your reaction to Greenberg’s comment, “Sometimes, the deepest response of love is to be silent”?
5. Read the excerpt from “Contractions of Death,” a chapter from *The Blessings of a Broken Heart*, by Sherri Mandell, in *Voices* (p. 634). (Sherri Mandell and her family live in Israel. Mandell’s thirteen-year-old son, Koby, and a friend skipped school to go hiking on May 8, 2001. They were found bludgeoned to death in a cave, their deaths attributed to Palestinian terrorists. Their murderers have never been found.)
- a. In what ways does Mandell describe mourning for her son as similar to labor?
 - b. How does Mandell’s image of her womb as a grave help you to understand her grief?
 - c. How does Mandell’s description of her grief after the death of her son contrast with Aaron’s response to the death of his sons in this parashah? In your view, are there differences in the way mothers and fathers grieve the deaths of their children? If so, how might you account for these differences?
 - d. If you have experienced the death of a loved one, how do you react to Mandell’s statement that “the pain will never leave me”?

THEME 2: YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT AND WHAT TOUCHES YOUR POSSESSIONS—LAWS OF DIET AND PURITY



The dietary laws introduced in *Parashat Sh’mini* shift the focus of ritual observance from the sanctuary to the home. It is the responsibility of the people—responsibilities largely carried out by women—to observe these laws. Under the guidance of the priests, the people must be able to distinguish between foods that are pure and impure and to prevent creatures that are impure from coming into contact with household objects. The Torah’s concern with physical and ritual purity stems from the belief that impurity is contagious and must be wiped out before it has the chance to spread to the entire community. Ultimately, left unchecked, the proliferation of impurity can threaten God’s

presence among the people. No reasons are given for these rules, and none are necessary. God is holy, and in order for the Israelites to be a holy people, they must guard against impurity.

1. Read Leviticus 11:1–8, which describes the dietary laws regarding animals that walk on land.
 - a. According to verse 3, from which animals may the Israelites eat? What types of animals fit in this category?
 - b. What does the phrase translated as “impure for you” (v. 4) imply?
 - c. According to the Central Commentary on verse 7, how do we know that the prohibition against eating swine is very ancient?
 - d. According to the Central Commentary on verse 8, how does anthropologist Mary Douglas interpret the prohibition against touching the carcasses of inedible mammals? How does this compare with the Rabbis’ interpretation of this prohibition (see Leviticus 22:8)?
 - e. According to the Central Commentary (p. 624), preparing food—as well as the tasks associated with getting food ready for preparation—was the domain of women in ancient Israel. What does this tell us about who had the responsibility for maintaining the dietary laws outlined in this parashah?

2. Read Leviticus 11:29–36, which describes additional laws regarding forbidden foods and laws concerning containers that come into contact with impurities.
 - a. What creatures that swarm on the earth are forbidden (vv. 29–31)? According to the Central Commentary on these verses, to what specific group of creatures does this prohibition refer? Why do you think such creatures might be forbidden in the biblical world?
 - b. According to verse 32, what additional impurities can result from the creatures listed in verses 29–31 when they die? To what specific surfaces does this impurity apply? According to the Central Commentary on this verse, to what surfaces does this prohibition not apply? In your view, what accounts for this difference?
 - c. What is the procedure for an earthenware vessel into which the carcass of a prohibited animal falls (v. 33)? What is the reason for this procedure? According to the Central Commentary on this verse, what is the difference between what must be done with the container in this circumstance and a situation in which the carcass touches only the outside of the vessel? What accounts for this difference?
 - d. According to the Central Commentary on verse 34, under what circumstances may liquids that come into contact with the carcass of one of the forbidden animals in verses 29–30 be drunk?

- e. In your view, what accounts for the differences in purity between an object on which the carcass of an impure animal falls (v. 35) and a spring or cistern into which such a carcass falls (v. 36)?
 - f. How does the description of the form and construction of cisterns in the Land of Israel (Central Commentary on v. 36) help you to understand the rules regarding purity and impurity outlined in verse 36? What impact might cisterns built near households have had on the lives of women in ancient Israel?
3. Read Leviticus 11:44–47, which provides a summary statement and rationale for the dietary restrictions.
- a. What is the relationship between God’s holiness and God’s command that the Israelites must sanctify themselves (v. 44)?
 - b. How does God’s command that the Israelites should not make themselves impure through any swarming things that move on the earth provide a rationale for the dietary laws?
 - c. According to the Central Commentary, what parallel does verse 45 suggest between what the Israelites offer to God and what the Israelites must do to become holy? In your view, what are the reasons that striving toward holiness requires both keeping separate from impurities as well as not committing transgressions?
4. Read *Another View* by Diane M. Sharon (p. 630).
- a. According to anthropologist Mary Douglas, what is the basis for the Torah’s distinctions between pure and impure animals? On what do these categories rely?
 - b. What is the relationship, according to Douglas, between biblical food prohibitions and the wider historical and sociological realities of the Israelites and Jews throughout their history?
 - c. What is the relationship between the boundaries imposed on Jews by dietary restrictions and their desire to be set apart?
 - d. How do the food prohibitions in this parashah reflect Israel’s preoccupation with clearly defined categories?
 - e. What do you think is the relationship between these boundaries and holiness?
 - f. In your view, how do Jewish rituals and practices set Jews apart from the majority culture? Can you think of a situation in which your observance of a Jewish ritual or custom set you apart? How did you feel about that experience?
5. Read *Post-biblical Interpretations* by Carol Selkin Wise on pages 630–31 (“a spring or cistern in which water is collected shall be pure” [11:36]). The Rabbis

used this verse as a basis for linking the Torah's ritual purity system, including the dietary laws, to the system they established for required immersion in the *mikveh*, the ritual bathing pool.

- a. The phrase *mikvei-mayim* (translated as "a cistern in which water is collected") also appears in Genesis 1:10 (translated as "collected waters") and Exodus 7:19 (translated as "bodies of water"). What do we learn from these three verses about *mikvei-mayim*?
 - b. What assumption did the Rabbis make about the biblical commandments for ritual purification? How does this differ from what we know about whether the earliest Israelites carried out the purifying washings described in the Torah? How might such immersions have been carried out?
 - c. What was the function and practice connected with *mikva'ot* (the plural of *mikveh*, the ritual bathing pool) during the Second Temple period? What does archeological evidence help us understand about whether or not there was uniformity of opinion as to *mikveh* requirements during this period?
 - d. According to the Mishnah and other rabbinic sources, what are the requirements for constructing a *mikveh*? What are the stipulations regarding the water in the *mikveh*?
 - e. What shift occurred after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., when the biblically commanded laws of ritual purity could no longer be practiced? Since that time, who immerses in the *mikveh* and on what occasions?
 - f. According to Selkin Wise, how do rabbinic efforts to justify immersion indicate that the rationale was secondary to the practice of the ritual? How does Midrash *Sifra* connect the ritual immersion of a vessel to the purification requirement of waiting for the sun to set?
 - g. In your view, what is the relationship between the concept of *mikveh* and the dietary laws in this parashah?
 - h. Have you had any experience with *mikveh* in your own life? If so, what significance did these experiences have for you? If you have relatives or friends who use or used the *mikveh*, how do you understand the meaning of this experience for them?
6. Read "Inheritance" by Sue Hubbard, in *Voices* (p. 636).
- a. What scene does the poet describe in the first ten lines of the poem?
 - b. To what do the "strained lacunae" refer? How does the poet's use of the image of thin slices of roast beef help you to understand this phrase?
 - c. In your view, why do grandma's visits produce air "sharp as English mustard"?
 - d. How does the poet's description of her family's home and its furnishings contrast with what her grandma brings?

- e. What “clouded memories” does the poet’s question to her grandmother about her mother’s non-kosher food unlock?
- f. What is the “elastic tennis-club smile” that the poet learns to “stitch on” in her childhood home? In your view, why is the poet’s knowledge that she is a Jew “slow dawning,” and why must she cover it?
- g. How are the laws of kashrut part of your inheritance as a Jew? In what ways can this inheritance be a source of meaning in your life?

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. Can you think of a time in your own life when you were confronted with the sudden, unexplained death of someone close to you? In what ways did you try to understand and make sense of this terrible event? What has this experience taught you about comforting mourners who have had similar experiences?
2. In recent years there has been an increased interest in kashrut among Reform Jews. In your view, what accounts for this? What are the opportunities this increased interest in kashrut presents? What are the challenges? What aspects of the dietary laws, if any, do you observe? If you do observe aspects of kashrut, how did you decide which parts of dietary laws to observe?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today’s study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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