

Shimini – Heart, Spirit, and Fire / Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Dear Friends,

This week we delve into an amazing Torah portion. The colors are significant: **the synopsis of the parasha is in purple**, **food for thought is in orange**, **the meaning of red will become apparent**, and the blue will balance the red.

Shimini (which means, "the eighth"), is the third portion in Leviticus. Its name is taken from the dramatic description of the eighth day of the dedication of the tabernacle in the desert, following seven days of preparation. Aharon and his sons prepare and lay out the sacrifices upon the altar as prescribed. As Moses and Aharon are leaving the Tent of Meeting in order to bless the people, God reveals himself to all of the People of Israel in the form of a fire which sets the altar aflame and burns the sacrifices. The atmosphere is one of excitement, of ecstasy, and then, in the midst of the celebration, a crisis: Nadav and Avihu, two of Aharon's four sons, take an incense pan and sacrifice "a strange (or alien) fire before God." The outcome is immediate: the same divine fire that consumed the sacrifices reaches out and consumes both of these priests. Aharon and his remaining sons are commanded by Moses to continue the ceremony. They are forbidden to mourn. Nadav and Avihu are buried and mourned by everyone else.

The ceremony continues, but is again disturbed by another occurrence: Moses tells Aharon and his remaining sons to eat from the Sin sacrifice, which they have burned in the name of the people as is the custom, but they burn it entirely, leaving nothing to eat, as is done with the Olah sacrifice. Moses scolds them severely, but Aharon responds that having lost his sons on that day, and given his emotional state, it would not be appropriate to eat a holy sacrifice. Moses accepts this explanation.

In the second half of the parasha an apparently new subject appears: the laws of kashrut, detailing which animals, birds and fish are forbidden to eat. At the end of the parasha there is a short list of the laws of purity and impurity.

I must admit – this is one of my favorite Torah portions: a strange fire that God did not request. An alien fire – what a wonderful term!

So much has been written about this unknown fire. Already in the biblical story itself hints are given (some of them contradictory) as to its nature (Aharon's sons were drunk; they were too enthusiastic; their hair was uncovered; they were not respectful of Moses and Aharon; they thought they and not God were the focus of the ceremony, etc). There are other arguments, though, that suggest they were not to blame at all. For example, (Leviticus 10:3) "Then Moses said unto Aaron: **This is what the Lord meant when He said : Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people". And Aaron was silent**". In other words, these priests who perished were dear to me, and I will be sanctified through them. Interesting to note, that in the Greek translation, the incident is called a Holocaust!

The Meta theme throughout Leviticus, is summed up in the word accuracy! Leviticus, after all, is the "manual" for the Cohanim. The system of animal slaughter and sacrifice, the laws of forbidden foods, the laws of purity and impurity, leprosy and other skin ailments, the laws of holiness – all of these focus on minute details, and demand extreme accuracy, as if everything depend on what takes place in the sanctuary.

The formula, then, is: holiness=accuracy! The degree of holiness is determined by the degree of accuracy.

In two weeks we will read the Torah portion of "Achre Mot", which is also read on Yom Kippur. In it we read the minute details of the Cohen Gadol's safe entry and exit from the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. Not only his own safety, but the absolution of the sins of the entire people is dependent on the accuracy of his actions.

What is this accuracy and how do we know if something is accurate or not?

Accuracy requires attention.

When we feel unwell we go to the doctor who puts a stethoscope to our chest and listens to the beat of our heart. Our heart pumps lifeblood throughout our body, but it also tells us something about the pace of our life. Even when we don't know what to tell the doctor about ourselves, our heart says it all. Sometimes all it takes to begin the process of healing is having the undivided, caring attention of a doctor.

Our heart beats faster during physical or emotional exertion, and is affected by illness. These "external" circumstances impact our heartbeat. But there is another, more personal one. There is our own unique rhythm, beat, pulse. Some of us are naturally energetic while others are more laid back. One person is quick to anger and another person remains calm even in the midst of a crisis. This is a matter of temperament.

According to Chinese medicine there are at least 28 different pulses!! The Chinese healer checks the tongue first, then takes our hand and listens carefully. Sometimes he closes his eyes in order to focus more fully. He is listening to our pulses. He uses the information to diagnose our mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing.

This is the art of accuracy: the careful, experienced listening to our inner rhythms! Healing happens through attention, by adapting our lifestyles to the beating of our heart, to our inner rhythm, to our own temperament.

So if new revisit our accuracy formula, what we get is:
holiness=accuracy=rhythm=health=life!

We live in an extremely noisy, hectic, tense culture, which is only getting more so. The technological revolution has connected us to one another and each to our own gadgets in an amazing and unprecedented way, but it has also disconnected us

entirely from the beating of our own heart and from the ability to hear our inner rhythm with accuracy.

Even those of us who are aware of the holiness present when we live our lives in tune with our inner unique heartbeat (all 28 beats), we still find it challenging to maintain that attunement.

We are driven and confused by an alien fire which God did not command us. It is the fire of excessive progress, of the burning desire for self-realization. It is the fire of Mad Men and Super Woman. It is a fire that is entirely fed by cultural brainwashing. This fire consumes everything gentle and worthy. There is no conspiracy here, only a trap - it is not the plot of someone in particular who wishes us evil. We all create the fire and we are all burned by it. It is a hungry fire which demands constant feeding, constant sacrifices. We think that the sacrifice is our time, our health and the like. But it is much more dramatic than that: we are the sacrifices, and it seems that we cannot get out of this self-destructing situation.

But what if we learn to return to ourselves, to listen to our heart beat, to identify our personal rhythm?

Do we remember the way back to sanity? Do we remember what our heartbeat even sounds like? Do we remember how to listen?

This week's Torah portion is an invitation to accuracy. It asks us to pay attention to the fire that is burning inside and around us and notice whether it is a strange fire that burns and maims, or a life giving, holy fire which sanctifies life and heals? The Torah portion invites us to become familiar with the 28 ways in which our heart can beat; to return to ourselves, to our bodies; to respect our own rhythms.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha