

TORAHSCOPE: Shemini (Eighth)

by Mark Huey posted 17 April, 2009 www.outreachisrael.net

Leviticus 9:1-11:47
2 Samuel 6:1-7:17

"Be Ye Holy"

"For I am the LORD your God. **Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.** And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth. For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; **thus you shall be holy, for I am holy**" (Leviticus 11:44-45).

This week, *Shemini* coincidentally comes after the conclusion of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. For the past few weeks, we have been mentally and spiritually preparing for the remembrance of Passover. The previous seven Sabbaths prior to Passover have been emphasizing various aspects of faith in a concerted effort to strengthen our celebration of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The *Shabbats* of *HaShekalim*, *Zachor*, *Parah*, *HaChodesh*, and culminating in *Shabbat HaGadol*, are all used to instill compliance with the commandment to remember the deliverance of Israel from the bondage of slavery in Egypt.

Now that the Feast of Unleavened Bread has been completed, and the second high Sabbath of the Spring holidays has been observed, the return to the weekly study of the Torah continues in the Book of Leviticus. We see that Aaron and his sons have completed the seven days of consecration for the priests of Israel, the title for this portion is found:

"Now it came about **on the eighth day** that Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel" (Leviticus 9:1).

Aaron and his sons have been consecrated to God and they can begin to offer up the various sacrifices for themselves and the Israelites. Further on, we read that after the different sacrifices are made on the altar, the glory of God appears among the people of Israel:

"Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after making the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. **When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Then fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat on the altar;** and when all the people saw *it*, **they shouted and fell on their faces**" (Leviticus 9:22-24).

In an awesome display of His holiness, Aaron, the high priest, blesses the people and a fire consumes the burnt offering. At this point, the Israelites shout and fall on their faces. Apparently, the Lord was pleased with their obedience and He accepts their offerings.

Within some undetermined amount of time, tragedy comes upon the House of Aaron. For unknown reasons, Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's two sons, take unauthorized fire before the Lord. In His displeasure He consumes them with a fire from the altar. When you reflect on the descriptive verses, you can readily conclude that reverence, respect, and awe for the God of Israel are things that He requires of His servants:

"Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered **strange fire** before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. **And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD**" (Leviticus 10:1-2).

Nadab and Abihu did something that God considered disrespectful of His holiness. This is explained to Aaron, who in his pain of loss simply remains silent:

"Then Moses said to Aaron, 'It is what the LORD spoke, saying, **"By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored."**' So Aaron, therefore, kept silent" (Leviticus 10:3).

However, within a few short verses, the text turns to the problem of serving the Lord while under the intoxicating influence of "wine or other fermented drink" (NIV). Many Biblical

scholars conclude that it is conceivable that Nadab and Abihu could have been intoxicated or drunk, and that they simply did not show a reverent fear of God. As an example for eternity, the dramatic loss of their lives by a consuming fire has indelibly reminded people in positions of spiritual responsibility that the Lord requires absolute sobriety when one is conducting ministerial duties:

“Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you will not die—it is a perpetual statute throughout your generations—and so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean” (Leviticus 10:9-10).

Separation Unto Him

Continuing the story, a linkage is made to the requirement to make a distinction between the holy and profane, and the clean and unclean. This is where the balance of the portion begins to rivet our attention. The Hebrew verb *badal* (בָּדַל), generally meaning “be divided, separate” (BDB),¹ is frequently used, and becomes the primary emphasis of thought. The royal priesthood, the nation of priests, and all the community of Israel who have been called out to be, as Isaiah declares centuries later, a “light unto the nations” (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), are commanded to make a distinction between the holy and profane, and to understand the difference between the clean and unclean.

When you examine a cursory usage of the verb *badal*, you discover that it is used in the Hebrew Scriptures in a total of 41 verses.² Interestingly enough, it is used three times at the beginning of Genesis. Its high occurrence in the opening statements of the Torah is something to take note of:

“God saw that the light was good; and God **separated** [*badal*] the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. Then God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it **separate** [*badal*] the waters from the waters.’ God made the expanse, and **separated** [*badal*] the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so” (Genesis 1:4-7).

Here, we see a major description of the separation of light from darkness. **How more vivid a picture would you like to see of separation?** *Badal* is used to make the distinction between the dry expanse and the waters, and finally the separation between Heaven and Earth. When we move forward to this week’s Torah portion, the concept of understanding the difference between the holy and profane, and the clean and unclean, is about as stark a contrast as the human mind can possibly fathom. **Consequently, we are to be a people who should be able to determine what is holy and what is clean.**

In His mercy God has chosen Israel to communicate the requirement to separate the things that are holy from the things that are profane. The Lord made this clear to Moses as the Ancient Israelites left Egypt and were preparing to receive the Ten Commandments:

“Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; **and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.** These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel” (Exodus 19:5-6).

Moses will repeat these same declarations to the Israelites as he summarizes the works that God has performed for them, prior to their entry into the Promised Land:

“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 7:6).

The Prophet Isaiah reiterates the call of Israel to be a nation of priests unto the Lord:

¹ BDB, 95.

² This figure was determined using a root search of the Hebrew Tanakh (WTT) in BibleWorks 5.0.

“But you will be called the priests of the LORD; you will be spoken of as ministers of our God. You will eat the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast” (Isaiah 61:6).

Finally, in the Apostolic Scriptures, we see that the Apostle Peter appropriates the declarations of Moses as he exhorts Believers in Yeshua to be who they have been called to be. He emphasizes his point by writing that people in the Messiah have been brought out of darkness and into the light of God:

“But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Clean and Unclean

Moving through *Shemini*, the balance of the narrative goes into great detail discussing the kosher dietary laws that define what God considers clean and unclean animals for human consumption. Moses categorically lists what the Father considers to be edible and inedible, in terms of what is clean and unclean.

As you read Leviticus 11, in light of just having participated in a Passover *seder*, or having just completed the Festival of Unleavened Bread, you are probably not having any problems with believing that the Holy One of Israel absolutely knows what is best for the human diet. Compliance with these dietary requirements is usually not a problem for those who are following the other commandments. But as we are quick to note, this has not necessarily always been the attitude of all in the community of faith. In the centuries following the death of the Apostles, a large influx of non-Jews into the emerging Christian Church caused it to separate from its Hebraic Roots. The kosher dietary laws were quickly dispensed with as being a symbol of “Old Covenant Israel,” and not something for the new Christian Church to follow or benefit from.

In spite of any claims that the dietary laws are unimportant, the Biblical requirement to be holy just as God is holy still remains. **This admonition happens to come from the very text that summarizes the importance of eating kosher.** When Peter quotes from Leviticus 11, is he emphasizing the need to be holy by eating *kashrut*?

“For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth. For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44-45).

“Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Yeshua the Messiah. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY’” (1 Peter 4:13-16).

Here in these verses, Peter applies the principles we see in *Shemini* into a short admonition to direct his audience to see the bankruptcy of their sinful behavior prior to their conversion. He directs them to “not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance” (RSV). He wants them to turn from any sin present in their lives and turn toward godly and holy behavior. It just so happens that the text he quotes relates to eating kosher.

There is a distinct link in Peter’s words to the possible problem that Nadab and Abihu had with alcohol. Peter reminds his readers to be sober, employing the verb *nēphō* (νῆφω), “to drink no wine” (LS).³ Furthermore, we need to understand that many in Peter’s Diaspora audience were from cultures where unclean things were eaten. When he talks about the cravings that they experienced as sinners, could this likewise pertain to what they would eat? Keep in mind the fact that at many Roman parties, people would sit and drink, consume so-called “delicacies” (unclean

³ LS, 532.

things), and frequently engage in group-related sexual activities. How many of us ever connect drinking, eating, and ungodly sex? In the First Century, it was a bit more common than it is today.

Timing in Everything

It is very intriguing to note that the events in *Shemini* happen to be occurring after what is considered by many followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be one of the most significant times of reflection. Each of us has had to consider the deliverance of Ancient Israel from Egypt, and the resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah. **The fact that many of us have spent some time in the past few weeks reflecting on some aspects of the separation from the bondage of sin should be very thought provoking.**

Some of you who might be reading this Torah commentary may have not yet concluded that the kosher dietary laws apply to you. I would ask you to give the words of Moses, Peter, and others some consideration. After all, as God's people and representatives in the world, **we are commanded to be holy or separated out.** Whether this is accomplished by obeying the command to not eat leaven during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, or to only eat what God considers clean meat, we are a nation of priests who are to demonstrate to the whole world the difference between the holy and profane—between what is acceptable and unacceptable. **If we cannot control our intake of alcohol or our choice of animals we eat, then is it possible that He will chastise us or remove us as His designated representatives?** I pray that you would consider these things as you approach the Lord this week in prayer and study of His Word.

It is very important for each one of us to seek a holiness that comes by obeying God's commandments. By obeying God, we have been designed as a holy and set-apart people for His own possession. Once you truly recognize that you are His and blessings can abound by obeying Him, pleasing Him via a Spirit-led obedience is a delight beyond all of the desires or cravings of the flesh. **I urge you: be ye holy!**

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