

Parashat Tzav צו

Torah: Leviticus 6:1(8)–8:36

Haftarah: Jeremiah 7:21–8:3 9:22–23 (23–24)

It Is In The Blood

General Overview

R. Assi said: “Why do young children commence with the Book of the Law of the priests, and not with the Book of Genesis? Surely it is because young children are pure, and the sacrifices are pure; so let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure.” (Leviticus Rabbah 7.3)

What was it like to be a priest of Israel? Imagine waking up every morning and facing a day of tossing blood on altars, washing gall bladders, and coming home every night smelling like smoke! This week in our Torah portion we shall attempt to look a little closer at the work of the priest.

Exposition

We shall try to put ourselves at the priest’s side so that we might get a feel for some of the things he was called by God to do. Here is our plan to accomplish this:

- I. The Daily Grind
- II. A Continual Flow of Blood
- III. Times of Refreshing
- IV. Call in the Reinforcements!
- V. The Installation Service

In this excerpt from Parashat Tzav, we will focus on section II, A Continual Flow of Blood.

II. A Continual Flow of Blood

One thing that certainly stands out from Parashat Tzav is the frequent mention of blood. Blood is mentioned at least 14 times in this parasha. One gets the impression that during the average day, the typical priest virtually saw a continuous flow of deep red blood.

A. No Blood Drinks!

There are at least two main teachings regarding blood. The first is that blood was not to be consumed. We read in 7:27, “If anyone eats blood, that person must be cut off from his people.” Later in Torah (Deuteronomy 12:23) God explains why he did not want them to consume blood. At this point in the life of the community, they just had to accept the prohibition by faith. After all, Moshe could not explain everything at once, nor could they understand it all at once!

B. For Cleansing and Atonement

The second teaching about the blood in this sidra undoubtedly helped the children of Israel understand a little as to why no blood at all was permitted to be consumed. Instead of drinking it like idolaters did, the blood was to be used for

atonement and cleansing, and it was only when the blood was used for atonement that cleansing occurred. An accidental or misuse of blood rendered one *tamei* (ritually unclean,) instead of putting one in a *tahor* (ritually clean) status.

C. Blood, Blood Everywhere

Because of the continual flow of blood sacrifices, the priests were always handling blood. Sometimes it was carried into the Tent of Meeting (6:30). Sometimes it was sprinkled against the wall of the altar (5:9). Sometimes (in the case of a fowl) the blood was squeezed out toward the base of the altar (5:10). At other times the blood was poured at the base of the altar (4:25). Frequently, the priest dipped his finger in the blood and rubbed it onto the horns of the altar or sprinkled it toward the curtain in the Holy Place.

Even at the beginning of their ministry, the priests were around blood, for in order to get things started, our present parasha tells us that Moshe threw blood on some of the Mishkan furniture and put blood on the priests' ears, thumbs, and feet (8:22–29). For the priests, it was blood, blood, and more blood all day long!

1. The Horrors of Idolatry

What are some of the things the priests could have been learning from all this exposure to blood? According to the Rambam, it would have taught them some of the horrors of idolatry, serving as a continual reminder to them — and subsequently to the rest of the people — to keep away from the gods of the nations. He says,

The Torah. . . forbade the eating of blood and emphasized the prohibition in exactly the same terms as it emphasizes idolatry. [The consequences were the same for both.]¹

His reasoning was that since idolaters drank blood in their worship and, therefore, participated in the life of their gods, then true worship not only prohibits drinking blood, but turns the defiling blood into that which cleanses.

2. Our Horrible Sin

According to Nachmanides (the Ramban), the blood would have reminded the priests (and, hence, the people) of the intrinsic value of life, both animal and human.² Continuing along these lines, it would have also reminded them that sin was horrible. To atone for it costs an innocent victim his life, represented by the blood. Thus, the continual flow and use of blood on a daily basis was a constant reminder to the priest that sin was to be avoided, for it costs lives and separates people from God.

Is it, then, any wonder that Yeshua told his followers in Luke 24 that Moshe spoke of Him? When these *talmidim* [students] had the red image of the scourging and the crucifixion fresh in their minds, they would have understood in a very vivid way how the teachings of Moshe concerning the blood sacrifices spoke volumes about the sacrificial blood atonement of Yeshua.

3. “In My Blood”

There is yet a third lesson the Lord might have been teaching the people through the emphasis on blood. The Holy One might have been preparing His people to have a clearer understanding of Yeshua's words in Matthew 26:27–28, which He

spoke the night before He was crucified. During that Pesach meal, He took a cup of wine (the traditional third cup)

And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.

There are several points to be made from this passage. Firstly, when Yeshua told them to drink the wine, the wine did not literally change to blood. For drinking it would have seriously violated the Torah’s injunctions against drinking blood. Rather, Yeshua was in the realm of symbolism. The cup of wine symbolized His blood.

Secondly, Yeshua said it was the “blood of the covenant.” The reference to the covenant would most likely have been in reference to the renewed covenant. Covenants were often ratified by the participants sharing in a covenant meal whose main course was a sacrificial animal. In this case, Yeshua would be that sacrifice. To “eat” Him would mean to take Him into our lives, not to literally consume his body and blood. This would have been signified by His instructions to drink the wine, a symbol of his blood (and in the same context, to eat the unleavened bread, a symbol for His body).

Lastly, note that Yeshua said that His blood is that which would effect forgiveness for many (those who would trust Him). This is made comprehensible in light of the teachings in the Torah on the sacrificial and atonement process described in Leviticus.

¹ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, 88–89.

² *Ibid.*