

# Parashat Shemini שמיני

Torah: Leviticus 9:1–11:47

Haftarah: 2 Samuel 6:1–7:17

## The Fire of Glory

### General Overview

It is about to begin. God revealed. Moshe taught. The people listened. Aaron and his sons obeyed. Now, on the eighth day (9:1) since Aaron and his sons have been consecrated and set apart, Moshe calls an assembly and begins the perpetual daily sacrifices. Everyone with a few glaring exceptions is about to begin to practise daily what Moshe had been teaching them. This is the main thrust of this week's parasha as it opens in chapter 9. By the time this sidra ends we will have seen the Lord's fire and examined the Lord's food.

### Exposition

Let us begin. As we do, we will use this outline:

- I. Fire of Glory
- II. Fearsome Fire
- III. Family Foods

In this excerpt from Parashat Shemini, we will focus on section I, The Fire of Glory.

#### I. The Fire of Glory

To begin the daily sacrifices, Moshe instructed Aaron to offer an *olah* and a *hatat* offering for himself, and to tell the people to bring *olah*, *hatat*, *shlamim*, and *minkha* offerings (9:1–4). This was going to be a memorable occasion, not only because it would begin the daily offerings, but also because something very special would happen. Moshe told Aaron in verse 4, “For today the Lord will appear to you.” He rephrases it in verse 6 to say, “the glory of the Lord may appear to you.” Then, in 9:24, the only special appearance from the Lord that was seen was fire coming down from heaven to the altar. The three are linked. How? What was Moshe talking about?

##### A. A Slight Interpretative Problem

These phrases have stumped many commentators. For one thing, the grammar in verse 4 is a little unusual. Specifically, there seems to be an irregularity in the formation of the Hebrew word “appears.” For you Hebrew experts, there is a *kamatz* under the *alef* instead of a *segol* as we would expect. Commentators say that this form leaves us questioning what exactly would appear to the people (“to you” is in the plural). Nechama Leibowitz, agreeing with and citing Luzzatto, suggests that the grammar would lead us to believe that the fire is being referred to specifically. Thus, it would read, “the fire of the Lord will be seen by the people.” However, verse 6 then tells us that the glory of the Lord would appear to them. Leibowitz connects the two, “seeing that all visible miracles display ‘the

sight of the glory of the Lord,' as in 'and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord" (Exodus 16:7) which referred to none else but to the manna."<sup>1</sup>

Taking all three references together, what we have here is that a miracle would happen. Special fire would come down from heaven in the sight of all the people. This fire was also called a manifestation of the Lord, and a manifestation of the Lord's glory. Moreover, the same type of phraseology is also used on other occasions in Torah (Exodus 19:7) when a miracle happened.

### ***B. The Glory of the Messiah***

This is important because it provides us with another helpful way to understand the manifestation of the Lord in Messiah Yeshua. When Yeshua came, John 1:14 states, "We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." We have already used this verse in comparing the manifestation of the Shekinah in the Mishkan with the manifestation of the Son of God on planet earth. Now, in this sidra we can see another illustration of what John meant when he said "we beheld His glory." If seeing a miracle from heaven is likened to seeing the glory of the Lord in Leviticus 9, then how much more would seeing the multitudinous miracles from Messiah Yeshua also be likened to seeing more of the glory of the Lord?

Furthermore, in both instances (Leviticus 9 and John 1), we are told that seeing the glory of the Lord is likened to seeing an appearance of the Holy One Himself! Thus, based on what happened in Leviticus chapter 9, we can now understand a little more of how the Eternal One was revealed in the person of Yeshua.

### ***C. Friendly Fire***

Chapter 9 stands out as one of the most memorable occasions in the life of the children of Israel. One reason for this is that the Shekinah appeared again in the Mishkan (9:23). He was last seen in Exodus 40 when the Mishkan was finished. The setting was now even more complete, for the Mishkan was about to be used in its fullest, as the sacrificial system was about to begin. Moshe, Aaron, and Aaron's sons did everything exactly as the Holy One had told them and because of that several events of the day stand worthy of comment.

First, when he had finished making the offerings, Aaron blessed the people (9:22). In fact, the text seems to imply that he blessed them twice, once in verse 22 after the offerings had been sacrificed, and again after he and Moshe went into and emerged from the Tent (verses 23–24). We do not know the exact content of the blessing but most commentators suggest that the Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6 was used.<sup>2</sup> Whatever was used, it must have been a comforting feeling of unity for the children of Israel to have the two brothers, the two leaders of the nation, join together in blessing them (9:23).

After the blessing, two events took place that Moshe, Aaron, and the people could not manufacture, nor did they deserve. First, the Shekinah reappeared (9:23). As if that were not enough, a fire descended from heaven upon the altar and consumed all that was on it (9:24). How are we to understand the significance of that fire?

One way is to look at it the way the Talmud does. According to the Talmud, when the fire came from heaven, it performed five miracles:<sup>3</sup>

- 1) It crouched over the altar majestically like a lion.
- 2) It was clear as sunlight.
- 3) Its flame was of a solid substance.
- 4) It devoured wet wood like dry wood.
- 5) It caused no smoke to arise from it.

According to the Talmud then, this fire not only miraculously came from heaven to alight upon the altar, but it also came with certain miraculous qualities. To Rabbi Judah haNasi, whose ideas are expressed in the above passage, it was such an impressive fire that all one could say was that it had to have come from God Himself.

As far as the Torah text itself is concerned, all it says is, “Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar” (9:24). It was miraculous in that it was not expected, it came to a specific place, accomplished a specific purpose, and it did not happen every time. In fact, it only happened on three other occasions. All of these were times when God showed approval by sending a fire to consume an offering:

- 1) The announcement of the birth of Samson (Judges 13)
- 2) When Solomon dedicated the First Temple (2 Chronicles 7)
- 3) When Elijah challenged the prophets of Ba’al on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18)

#### ***D. The People Were Set Ablaze!***

No matter when God’s fire came from heaven to consume an offering, it always produced the same reactions from the people. The divine fire was a “sign that the sacrifice and what it denoted found favour in the sight of God.”<sup>4</sup> Between the fire and the blessings, the children of Israel must have felt so accepted and intimate with the Lord that it is no wonder that when, “the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell face down” (9:24).

The Hebrew text tells us that “all” the people saw the fire and the glory. The Hebrew idiom, “all,” means the vast majority, not necessarily every single individual. Nevertheless, the fire was such that it made an impression on the entire nation. Neither could it have been just a small fire on the altar if all the people saw it. It had to have been visible even on its way down from the Lord in order for a crowd of some 2–3 million people to see it!

Then we are told that the people “shouted for joy.” The Hebrew word translated “shouted” is *yaronnu* (ירנו) from *r-n-n* (ר-נ-ן). It has been used elsewhere to denote “ringing cries,” especially in supplication and joy.<sup>5</sup> Targum Onkelos renders it, “and they praised.” Putting it all together, it seems that when all the people saw the Shekinah and the fire, they made a great noise of praise and worship, a sound of joy.

Finally, they “fell on their faces” in gratitude and worship.<sup>6</sup> They worshipped with the same fervency as when they first came out of Egypt. It truly was a time of national unity in their devotion to the God who had redeemed them and entered into a personal relationship with them. Rabbi Elie Munk offers a summary of this wonderful moment in Israel’s history:

The goal which God set for Israel in the words, “Let them build Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell among them,” was achieved at last. The appearance of the Divine Majesty within the Sanctuary and the descent of heavenly fire were the culmination of the dazzling fashion these miraculous events signified, that intimacy had once again been established between the nation of Israel and God. The supreme dignity of Israel as the chosen people was here being confirmed by God Himself.<sup>7</sup>

### **E. The Fire of Tongues**

There were two other times in Israel's history when special fire came from God in a miraculous way. The occurrence is found in the story of Elijah and prophets of Ba'al (1 Kings 18). The second reference is in Acts 2. This is the reference on which we will focus.

The occasion for these events is Shavuot (Pentecost) when the people of Israel were worshipping at the Temple (also offering the prescribed sacrifices) when

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1–4)

This fire was the visible manifestation of the coming of the Spirit of God in order to empower the Jewish believers in Yeshua to share the Good News of Messiah with thousands of other Jews who were there from all over the *Diaspora* celebrating Shavuot. As a result, because God gave the Jewish believers a supernatural ability to speak in the languages of the worshippers from all over the world, about 3000 Jewish people came to have their sins atoned for by trusting in Yeshua the Messiah. On this occasion, as in Leviticus 9, fire miraculously came from the Lord, there was atonement for sins, and great blessing came upon the people of Israel.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, 99.

<sup>2</sup> See *Rashi: Vayikra*, ArtScroll Edition, 99 and Wenham, *Leviticus (NICOT)*, 149–150.

<sup>3</sup> B Yoma 21b

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 445.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (“BDB”), 943.

<sup>6</sup> Hertz, *op. cit.*, 445.

<sup>7</sup> Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra*, 83–84.