

Haftarat Shemini שמיני

Torah: Leviticus 9:1–11:47

Haftarah: 2 Samuel 6:1–7:17

Acknowledging God's Order

General Overview

The star player in this *parasha* is the Ark of the Covenant. The entire *haftarah* is devoted to relating some of the final “adventures” of the Ark and the people related to it before it found its permanent resting place in the First Temple. Accordingly, when the haftarah opens, we find King David deciding to bring the Ark up to the City of David from its temporary location in Baale Judah. It had remained there for a while in the house of Obed-edom because of David's reluctance to move it further following the unfortunate incident involving Uzzah.

When it was time for the Ark to move on, our passage records how David had it carried to the City of David. Along the way, we are told how, upon seeing the king dance before the Lord, Michal made fun of David.

Finally, this haftarah's climax is when, after the Ark found its resting place in the City of David, the Lord moved upon the heart of the king to build a house for the Ark, a Temple. It was after expressing this desire that we find the record of the covenant that God made with David to make his house the one from whom King Messiah would come.

Connection to the Parasha

Parashat Shemini recounts the story of the mishaps of Nadav and Avihu, who were two sons of Aaron who brought a strange fire to the Lord in the Mishkan. The point of their story is to teach us that God cannot be worshipped in just any manner. He has a set order that must be followed. He has an established way in which He is to be approached. When people do not adhere to that pattern, they are liable to judgement.

This certainly happened to Nadav and Avihu — they lost their lives over their sin of presumptuousness.

It was the same way with one incident in this haftarah. When the Ark of the Covenant was being carried in a cart and it looked like it was going to fall, Uzzah reached out to help prevent it from falling. In doing so, he touched the Ark. However sincere this action may have been, it was against God's set order which dictated that only the priests were permitted to handle the Ark when it was being moved. Consequently, like Nadav and Avihu, Uzzah also lost his life.

This episode, then, is a commentary on the parasha, providing another example of what happens when man takes matters into his own hands and ignores God's stated order for things.

Exposition

There are many ways to approach this story. One of the main features of this episode in Israel's history is to observe what happens when people are devoted to the Holy One. "Devotion" is defined as "ardent attachment or loyalty."¹ This passage relates for us different ways of being loyal to the Lord — or not being loyal, as one case will be. Consequently, we can learn many things about devotion from this haftarah. Thus, we will see that...

- I. Devotion Has Guidelines — Uzzah
- II. Devotion Brings Blessing — Obed-edom
- III. Devotion Has Enemies — Michal
- IV. Devotion Results in Honour — David

In this excerpt from Haftarat Shemini, we will focus on the first section.

I. Devotion Has Guidelines — Uzzah

It is wonderful to be completely devoted to the Lord. That is certainly what every new creation desires in his regenerated heart. Strange as it may seem, however, devotion to the Lord involves much more than a desire in one's heart to be ardently attached to Him. The Holy One has laid out specific directions about what it means to be devoted to Him. Desire is one thing, but doing it God's way is another. This is where we come in to the first part of our haftarah. We read about a man who, although he may have meant well, did not follow the Lord's instructions about how to express his devotion to God.

The text opens by telling us that the Ark of the Covenant was in Baale-Judah. According to Joshua 15:9, this is another name for Kiryat Yearim. According to architect/archaeologist, Leen Ritmeyer,

The site of Kiriath-jearim was originally known as Kiryat el-Anab and in 1838 identified by Edward Robinson as the hill where the Ark was kept for twenty years after being brought up from Beth-shemesh (1 Samuel 6:1–2). Other sites vie for the same identification but this site with its remnant of the woods that are implicit in the name Kiriath-Yearim ("Town of the Woods") has won general acceptance.²

This site, located about 8 miles west of Jerusalem is also close to other ancient Gibeonite towns and is located on the border between Judah and Benjamin. This is where the Ark was brought to after it left the possession of the Philistines, following a brief lay over in Bet Shemesh.

We are told that David employed "30,000 choice men of Israel." The Hebrew word "choice" is the correct translation as opposed to "young men" that some Bible versions use. This was not to be a one-man show. The king wanted the bringing up of the Ark so that it would be something that would unite all of Israel. This desire is expressed in the parallel account of this event, in 1 Chronicles 13:1–2 informs us that,

David conferred with each of his officers, the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. He then said to the whole assembly of Israel. "If it seems good to you and if it is the will of the Lord our God, let us send word far and wide to the rest of our brothers throughout the territories of Israel, and also to the priests and Levites who are with them in their towns and pasturelands, to come and join us."

All of this was fine. It was good that David had rallied all of Israel to desire to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. It was also wonderful that he had many different people involved in such a momentous event. However, in their zeal, several fatal mistakes were made.

First, 2 Samuel 6:5 indicates that, along the way, "David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord with all kinds of [instruments made of] fir wood, and with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals." Again, there was nothing wrong with such a celebration, although there are some who would take issue with this statement. For example, Rabbi Moshe Sosevsky noticed that, "numerous transgressions took place in the course of this merrymaking."³ For example, he says that the music should have been provided only by the Levites instead of all Israel. In addition, he contends that, "they made merry in a frivolous manner when a more serious form of rejoicing would have been more appropriate."⁴

Rabbi Sosevsky's points could be debated. But the text describes for us a truly serious problem that occurred. 2 Samuel 6:6–7 relates how,

when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen nearly upset [it]. And the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God.

Why was God so angry? Was not Uzzah merely trying to save the Ark from falling onto the ground and possibly becoming damaged? The fact is that both David and Uzzah had made two costly errors in handling the Ark.

A. *Presumption*

First, according to Numbers 4:15 ff, the task of caring for the Ark was given to the kohanim (priests). Quite possibly Uzzah was not a kohen. He may have been a Levite, but even the Levites were not permitted to touch the Ark. Uzzah's sin, therefore, was that, although he may have had great zeal in his desire to protect the Ark, he acted presumptuously in touching it.

There are some who think that there was more to his sin than mere presumption. For example, Keil and Delitzsch suggest that Uzzah's offence consisted in the fact that he had touched the Ark with profane feelings, although with good intentions, namely to prevent its rolling over and falling from the cart.⁵ However, since the Bible does not tell us that, to suggest what might have been going on in him is mere presumption itself!

It was unfortunate for Uzzah that he did not take the time to think and act in accordance with the revealed will of God. It would have been better to have let

the Ark fall than to violate the expressed command of God. The teaching in Numbers said that the correct handling of the Ark was a matter of life or death. Uzzah presumed that God was not going to protect the Ark and in his presumption, he clearly violated the Torah.

Uzzah was, therefore, a type of all who with good intentions, humanly speaking, yet with unsanctified minds, interfere in the affairs of the kingdom of God, from the notion that they are in danger, and with the hope of saving them.⁶

Thus, Uzzah may have been devoted to God, but this devotion must be an “educated devotion.” Those who are rightly devoted to God know the Word of God to be true and allow its teachings and promises to be kept steadfast by God.

B. The Disastrous Threshing Floor

The death of Uzzah was not the only disaster that happened in this otherwise happy occasion. King David also made some grievous mistakes that day. We are told in 6:8-9,

And David became angry because of the Lord’s outburst against Uzzah, and that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. So David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, “How can the ark of the Lord come to me?”

It was obvious that Uzzah’s death made David angry. But the text does not say that he was angry with the Lord. We would suggest he was angry with himself for at least two reasons. First, he should have realized that the Torah expressly forbade the Ark be carried in a cart. Rather, it teaches that the Ark was to have been carried by the kohanim. (See Numbers 7:9 and 4:15.) Somehow David ignored this and had it carried in the cart.

Secondly, David may have been angry that he did not prepare the way better on which the Ark was to be transported,

as he had not only resolved upon the removal of the Ark, but had also planned the way in which it should be taken to Jerusalem [therefore] he could not, trace the occasion of Uzzah’s death to any other cause than his own plane.⁷

Again, even as far as King David is concerned, mere devotion was not good enough. Devotion had to blend with knowledge. Devotion without knowledge can be disastrous. Knowledge without devotion is vanity. The desire to be loyal to God must be tempered with the knowledge of how God expects us to be loyal to him. Serving God just any old way will not do. God gave specific instructions that govern how to be devoted to Him.

¹ “Devotion” as defined according to the *Webster’s II New Riverside University Dictionary*.

² Leen and Kathleen Ritmeyer, *From Sinai to Jerusalem: The Wanderings of the Holy Ark*, p. 45.

³ Moshe Sosevesky, *The Book of Samuel 2*, p. 289.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ C.F.Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, vol II*, p. 333.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.