



5 ritual images

In Leviticus 8, the details of the priestly ordination ceremony, such as the five mentioned below, are impressive.

1. Washed. When the community leadership is assembled, the ceremony begins with an act of purification, a ritual washing of Aaron and his sons. (Lev. 8:6)

2. Clothed. Moses places the vestments, one by one, on Aaron (8:7-9). Later (8:13) Aaron's sons are clothed. The English terms 'vested', 'investiture', reflect such acts of formal dressing for a sacred purpose.

3. Anointed. Next, Moses anoints the Tabernacle, its contents, the altar, Aaron and his sons. (8:10-12, 30). This no dab on the forehead! This is heavy-duty sprinkling, smearing, pouring in the process of consecration.

4. Sacrificed (bull, rams). Moses is described as personally conducting the sacrificial actions in the ordination ceremony. But from now on Aaron and his sons will perform the priestly activities.

5. Raised. The breads, combined with other elements, are placed on the hands of Aaron and his sons who raise them before the Lord. Moses then places these items in the fire. (8:26-29)

Note: Some of these ancient traditions linger on in observant Jewish homes; e.g., the dining room table takes on the status of the sacred altar. Prior to breaking bread the family and guests wash their hands in a prescribed pattern raising them in thanks to God echoing the 'Washed' and 'Raised' themes mentioned above.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

As we read the Book of Leviticus we are struck by the earthiness, the sensuality of the imagery. Take for instance, chapter 8. As the ordination rites of Aaron and his sons are described, we 'see' bulls slaughtered, their entrails burned, blood sprinkled, oil poured, elaborate vestments laid... When we slow down our reading, pronounce the words aloud and allow them to resonate within, we get a sense too of the Hebraic poetry, rhythms and 'music' of the text. (Helpful in appreciating this latter point is the translation by Everett Fox: *The Five Books of Moses*, Schocken Books, 1995.)

This is all part of the richness of reflecting on Torah (the first five books of the bible). Leviticus expands our biblical horizons, takes us beyond our comfort zone, and presents us with a view of divine truths becoming known in human history.

As Judaism and Christianity evolved they both transposed the sacrificial laws of the bible into a new key of spiritual meaning and (bloodless) ritual. These ancient texts remain a foundation stone for both traditions. In our *Light of Torah* leaflet this week, we join the Jewish sages in exploring Leviticus 8 in ways which may surprise us.



Leviticus 6:1—8:36

Tzav:
'issue a command'



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www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 6:1—8:36

Our focus for this week's Torah portion is the priestly ordination rite for Aaron and his sons.

Read Leviticus 8. Then, with the help of the sages, let's take a closer look at 8:1. We are drawn into a concentrated focus on a particular word. We are reminded that even a little bit of knowledge of the Hebrew language can greatly assist our appreciation of the biblical text.

Tasting Torah

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Take Aaron and his sons with him, the vestments, the anointing oil, the bull of sin offering, the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; and assemble the whole congregation at the entrance of the tent of meeting (Lev. 8:1-3).

'Take Aaron' says the text. The sages seize upon a tiny detail and creatively ponder its significance. Is Aaron simply one element among others listed, or is there something noteworthy about the Lord directing Moses to 'take' Aaron? Discuss this with a friend. What intriguing path is the rabbinic mind opening up here?

Touching Torah

'Take Aaron.' Rashi¹ interprets this to mean: *"Take him with words, and persuade him."* Here Rashi is noting that the Hebrew word used here for 'take' usually refers to moving an object physically. Because the text applies it to a person Rashi understands the term to refer to the act of persuasion. In other words, the text doesn't say "Tell Aaron" or 'Speak to Aaron and say..' or 'Call Aaron to the tent of meeting.' Rather, it says, *'Take Aaron'*, i.e., 'persuade him to come and take his part in the rites of ordination.' But why does Aaron need to be persuaded? Surely to be ordained a priest of Israel is a great honor. What do you make of Rashi's interpretation, and how does it correspond to or contrast with your own reflection on this verse?

Depthing Torah

Rashi's approach appears again in the next chapter (9:7) where Moses says to Aaron, 'Draw near to the altar.' Again, Rashi interprets Moses as persuading Aaron: *'For Aaron was embarrassed and afraid to approach.'* Whereupon Moses said to him *'Why are you embarrassed? This is what you were selected for.'*

According to this view, Aaron felt unworthy because of his part in the sin of the Golden Calf. It deeply troubled him, so Moses calmed him and reassured him that he remained God's choice for a special service. Further, the midrash speculates that Moses himself would have liked the honor of the priestly role. Yet he accepted the divine choice of his brother, lovingly drawing out Aaron from his hesitancy and confusion.

The sages describe a poignant interaction between brothers, between partners-in-mission. Lest we think of Leviticus as a 'dry' text, the Jewish sages teach us otherwise, creatively mining it for insights into the human fragility of leaders, into divine compassion, perseverance in vocation, and brotherly love.

Doing Torah

Then again, an alternative view of Aaron's resistance suggests a subconscious resentment towards Moses in whose shadow Aaron stands (despite Aaron being the older sibling). Which interpretation do you favor, and why? What insights do you bring to this Torah discussion?



Faith & life

Rashi draws us into a discussion about vocation, God's call. We see from the Moses-Aaron interaction that divine choice is the starting point for vocation, but human support and encouragement are essential for it to take root and thrive. With reference to the text, the tradition, and your own life experience, share your thoughts on this subject.

1. Rashi: considered the greatest of Torah scholars; 11th century, France.

Bibliography: Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY: URJ, 2008); Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (London/NY: Soncino, 1983); Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1994, 1999); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1992). Scripture: NRSV