



## 5 thoughts

Inspired by traditional Jewish approaches to Scripture, here we explore five details of the disturbing story of the deaths of Aaron's sons in Leviticus 10.

### 1. Association with other texts.

Nadab and Abihu appear to be of high status, judging by the fact that they are specifically named among the leaders chosen to ascend Mt Sinai with Moses in Exodus 24:1,9-11.

### 2. Curious details.

Although slain by fire, the clothes of the two dead men remain intact. See Lev. 10:5: their brothers *"carried them out of the camp by their tunics."* Why didn't their clothes disintegrate in the fire? What might the strange detail in the Torah be saying to us?

### 3. Question.

Moses tells Aaron and his remaining sons to refrain from the usual customs of mourning the dead. *"Do not bare your heads and do not*

*rend your clothes..."* (10:6). Which leads us to wonder 'Why not?' How does this verse affect your overall interpretation of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu?

### 4. Proximity.

Is there a connection between the deaths of Aaron's sons and the passage immediately following where the Lord warns Aaron: *"Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die..."* (10:8-9)?

### 5. Silence.

*"Aaron was silent"* (10:3). The fact that the text makes a point of telling us this calls for interpretation. What is Aaron/Torah 'saying' through silence?

# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

Our weekly *Light of Torah* series encourages Christians (especially its main target audience which is Catholic parishioners) to read the Hebrew Scriptures which form part of the Church's bible too. It also helps them to engage with the biblical insights of 'living' Judaism. By this latter statement we recognize that, like Christianity, Judaism has evolved from its biblical roots through centuries of living, praying, studying and interpreting its faith traditions. Judaism of today cannot be equated with the Israelites of the Hebrew Scriptures just as the Church of today cannot simply be equated with Christian life in St Paul's epistles. While the roots of each religion are profoundly biblical, the understandings and practices of each have developed. Beyond scripture, each looks to a locus of holy people, teachings and sacred practices that guide and shape its path. Each week in *Light of Torah* we hear from Jewish voices which have helped to shape Judaism through history. We listen and engage as we explore shared texts and ponder faith in God. In this way we seek to learn from Jewish wisdom and build interfaith bridges for today.



Leviticus 9:1—11:47

*Shemini: 'eighth'*



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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Leviticus 9:1—11:47

As this week's Torah portion opens it is the eighth and final day of the consecration of the Tabernacle. This is the day that Aaron begins to officiate as high priest. He and his sons take up their priestly duties in what begins as a solemn and exhilarating occasion.

But something appears to go terribly wrong, ending in the deaths of two of Aaron's sons. Read and ponder this tragic story in Leviticus 10. (Read too the build up to it in chapter 9.) Then let's explore it in conversation with the Jewish sages.

## Tasting Torah

Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the LORD alien fire, which had not been enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the LORD and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD meant by saying: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people." And Aaron was silent.

(Leviticus 10:1-3)

What happened to warrant the deaths of these two newly-ordained Israelite priests? Is it some kind of divine accident? Or did they get what they deserved? And if the two did do something wrong, did the punishment fit the crime? Discuss and debate this in havrutah (Note: see back page for further comment).

## Touching Torah

If you feel uneasy about this story, know that the Jewish sages share your concerns!<sup>1</sup> Alarmed at the fate of two respected Israelites, and convinced that God is never unjust, they seek to explain the text in diverse ways. Some propose that Nadab and Abihu were in fact guilty of sin: drunkenness, arrogance, irreverence. Too proud to ask the advice of the 'old man' Moses or even their father the high priest, they brought the disaster upon themselves. Some say that similar transgressions had already occurred when they were up on Mt Sinai with Moses. There they had infringed the boundaries set by God, but God had given them a reprieve.

## Depthing Torah

Others approach the problem very differently. They defend the virtue of Aaron's sons. They note that each time their deaths are mentioned in scripture it is in relation to "alien fire." Thus their sin was nothing more than a religious ritual performed incorrectly, with pure motives but excessive enthusiasm. According to this view the severity of the punishment reflects the heights of the spiritual status of Aaron's sons! God's awesome display of power is a response to Nadab and Abihu at a level which most people do not attain. [Think of a class of gifted students of whom more is expected than the average student.] Does this help to make sense of the Lord's words (quoted by Moses in v.3): "Through those near to Me I show Myself holy..."

Yet another view, from a contemporary source:<sup>2</sup> Perhaps what we see in Nadab and Abihu is a superficial attempt to imitate the greatness of their father and uncle whom they saw negotiating the Lord's fiery presence on Mt Sinai and here at the consecration of the Tabernacle. The ceremony and celestial fireworks are all very exciting. But what they fail to appreciate is that the greatness of Moses and Aaron is hard won—authentic humility born in the crucible of adversity. By contrast, the action of Nadab and Abihu is the pursuit of a 'photo-op'. The fires that were a blessing now become fires of catastrophe. Aaron's 'silence' is the pain of a parent, looking on sadly as his children make poor choices which contradict parental example.

With reference to the text, ponder and discuss these diverse views. Which do you favor, and why? What questions and insights do you bring to this Torah discussion?



## Faith & life

"And Aaron was silent" (Lev. 10:3). This brief verse (just two Hebrew words) is packed with human and spiritual meaning... How often do we find that 'there are no words' to respond to pain, to tragedy, to God's mysterious ways and to life's enormous questions? Think of a time when you, like Aaron, 'fell silent.'

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (London/NY: Soncino, 1983); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1992); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006) Scripture: NJPS

1. The midrashic opinions that follow are discussed by Plaut and Munk who refer in particular to Leviticus Rabbah and Sifra.

2. Gratitude to Rabbi Dr Pesach Schindler for sharing this interpretation with our readers.