

MARCH 31, 2013

Parashat Shemini

Forbidden Fire

A strange fire (Leviticus 10:1)

אש זרה (ויקרא י:א)

According to the text, the fire that Dathan and Abiram offered was “strange.” This was a fire “[the Lord] had not commanded them” (10:1). Ba’al Haturim explains the phrase, “a strange fire,” to mean that this was a fire, “About which ‘No’ (*asher ‘lo*) had been commanded to them.” It wasn’t that they had not been instructed about the strange fire. Rather, they had been explicitly warned not to use a source of fire in religious service that had not emanated from the Tabernacle. When they ignored this warning, they suffered terrible, tragic consequences.

Dathan and Abiram ignored an overt warning not to utilize strange fires in the Tabernacle and thus suffered the consequences. Today, Syria must learn from this lesson and avoid a different forbidden fire.

Recently [Reuters](#) reported that, “U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has named Swedish scientist Ake Sellstrom to head a U.N. investigation into allegations that chemical weapons were used in Syria.” The Syrian government and Syrian rebels traded accusations about a lethal attack in the northern province of Aleppo, in which each side in the country’s two-year-old conflict said the other had used chemical weapons. Syria, which has the largest known [stockpile of chemical weapons](#) in the Middle East, produces four types of chemical weapons including nerve gas and mustard blistering gas, which are spread across 49 known chemical and/or biological weapons storage facilities throughout the country. The issue of the control and potential use of Syrian chemical weapons has also been a major concern in Israel, prompting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to reach out to Turkey in an effort to restore relations between the two countries. Netanyahu explained on his [Facebook page](#) that as both Israel and Turkey border Syria, they need to communicate with each other. “The Syrian ‘crisis’ and the possibility that al-Qaida-linked groups could acquire chemical weapons was ‘the main consideration,’ in restoring ties.” President Barack Obama has also said that a chemical attack by the Syrian government would cross a “red line” that could prompt military intervention by the United States. The international community must emphasize to both the Assad regime and rebel forces the grave threat these weapons present to the entire region and the harsh consequences that would ensue should they be utilized in the Syrian conflict. For more on Syria, click [here](#).

When Dathan and Abiram ignored the explicit warning against utilizing a strange fire, they experienced tragic consequences. Syria must take the world’s similar warning seriously and avoid bringing strange and illegal firearms into the bloody civil war. ■

The Task of Mourning

Your brothers, the whole house of Israel... (Leviticus 10:6)

ואחיכם כל בית ישראל (ויקרא י:ו)

While Moses forbade Aaron’s immediate family from exhibiting signs of mourning over the tragic deaths of Dathan and Abiram, he told them that in their stead, “your brothers, the whole house of Israel, will wail the burning which the Lord has kindled” (10:6). Yet, should the nation not also have avoided mourning during the inauguration of the priests? Rabbi Shalom Noah Barzovsky, author of *Netivot Shalom*, explained that while Aaron and his sons were commanded to sublimate their personal observances of mourning, for the rest of the nation the tragedy was not

personal, but communal and national. Thus, while Aaron was forbidden from mourning, the nation itself could not allow the tragedy of their deaths to pass without mention and the task of mourning was left to the entire nation.

The Jewish nation mourned the tragedy of Aaron's fallen children. As ranks of Holocaust survivors dwindle, we as Jews must do all we can to ensure that future generations remember and mourn the Jewish tragedy that was the Shoah.

On the Thursday before Passover, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, the "Rabbi Who Cried to the Jews of Buchenwald: 'You Are Free'" died at the age of 95. According to [The New York Times](#), Rabbi Schacter was the first Jewish U.S. Army chaplain to enter the horror of the concentration camps and then spent the following months "tending to survivors, leading religious services in a former Nazi recreation hall and eventually helping to resettle thousands of Jews." His passing represents yet another mark in the loss of not only the survivors of the Holocaust, but also the witnesses who experienced the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis first-hand. Since those who suffered at the hands of the Nazis will soon no longer be alive to tell their stories, it is up to us to take up the mantle of mourning from them. On Monday April 8 during Holocaust Remembrance Day, sirens will blare across the state of Israel as citizens pause for a moment of silence, mourning and reflection, contemplating the brutal murder of six million souls whose only crime was being born a Jew. Today, when an Iranian regime hoping to wipe Israel "off the map" denies the Holocaust, we must commit ourselves to ensuring that Holocaust Remembrance Day is observed not just by survivors and not just for the state of Israel, but by the world, this year and for every year to come.

Very soon, those who experienced the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis will no longer be with us. We must follow the example of the Children of Israel in the desert, who could not allow the tragedy of Dathan and Abiram's deaths to pass without mention, and continue to honor the memory of the six million lives lost. ■

True Kindness

And the *chassidah*... (Leviticus 11:19)

ואת החסידה (ויקרא יא:יט)

According to the Torah, while the vast majority of bird species are technically *kosher* and permitted for consumption, the text provides a short list of bird species classified as *non-kosher*. The *chassidah* (often translated as the stork) is included in this list. The Talmud (Hullin 63) explains that this bird is called the *chassidah* "because she performs acts of kindness (*chessed*) with her friends." Why then is this seemingly laudatory bird not kosher? Rabbi Isaac Meir of Gur suggested that the bird is not kosher precisely because she only performs acts of kindness with her friends and not with those outside of her close circle. True kindness is helping anyone in need—whether friend or foe.

By listing the *chassidah* as *non-kosher*, we are reminded of how important it is to perform acts of kindness both for those who are friends, and those who are not—a mission that Israel fulfills on a regular basis.

During the the second day of President Barack Obama's recent visit to Israel, militant terrorists based in Gaza fired two rockets that landed seconds later in the city of Sderot, Israel, making news across the world. What failed to make the news was that while Israel closed the Keren Shalom crossing in response to the attacks, the Erez crossing remained open, and on that very same day [the IDF](#) "facilitated the transfer of 208 trucks with 5,496 tons of goods and gas to Gaza, including 440 tons of fruit." In addition, [Haaretz](#) recently reported that Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Benny Gantz allowed local medics to treat seven wounded Syrians who came to the Golan Heights border. While one died of his wounds, two were taken to Israeli hospitals for treatment while the others were treated and released. In February, Israel treated seven wounded Syrian fighters and later repatriated them "at an undisclosed location for their own safety." Israel offered the fighters treatment (and protection) despite the fact that "Israel and Syria are technically at war, and some anti-Assad rebels are jihadists hostile to Israel."

The Torah declared the *chassidah* non-kosher to remind us to act compassionately to every person from our closest friends to strangers and to everyone in between. Time after time, Israel has demonstrated this by performing acts of kindness for all, regardless of their view of the Jewish state. ■