

Parashat Shemini

You will recall that in Exodus 3, whilst tending his father-in-law's sheep, Moses saw the burning bush which was not being burned up. "At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God." Personal contact with God is awe-inspiring. Moses saw a burning bush and spoke with God. Abraham saw the smoking fire pot and flaming torch; Jacob wrestled with a man. When the slaves were freed from Egypt, God led them by pillars of cloud and fire. At God's command, Moses removed his shoes and covered his face. Taking off his shoes was an act of reverence, conveying his own unworthiness before God. God is our friend, and we must never forget that, but He is also our sovereign Lord. He is something more than an amiable Father Christmas. To approach Him frivolously shows a lack of respect and sincerity. For instance, when you come to God in worship, do you approach Him casually - snooze over-much when you get bored, fiddle with your mobile, go out too much to the rest-room, sing songs aimlessly, 'switch-off' during prayers? Or, do you come as though you were an invited guest before a king? We all must all work at our obedience so as to adjust our attitude, that might be suitable for approaching a holy God.

As a youngster, back in days when light pollution was much less than today, on a clear summer night over Great Yarmouth's fabulous Breydon Water, I could see a spectacular star display, even in the UK. The heavens were absolutely starry. The silent vastness declared the work of God's hands. What struck me then, is that all I could see belonged to just our own galaxy. There are hundreds more, maybe thousands more, beyond ours. Astronomers are convinced there are twenty galaxies within two and a half million light years; and many, many more beyond that. Even in our own galaxy, if you travelled at the speed of light, the moon would be reached in 1 and a 1/2 seconds, but the nearest star would take 4 years. The mind-boggled mind leads to a bended knee before God - an awesome God.

Leviticus 10 contains one of the strangest incidents in scripture. It is the sad tale of Aaron's two older priestly sons, Nadab and Abihu. Why such death-dealing anger from God on the pair of them? What was their sin? Was it really so serious as to deserve a death sentence? We know that it was part of the daily work of the priestly sons to take some burning coals from the Great Altar in front of the Tabernacle and light the fire in the small golden Altar of Incense, which stood in the Holy Place. These young men had been drinking wine, and their heads were not clear. They were probably woozy and didn't think out what they were doing. Instead of taking the fire from the Great Altar, they took some other fire and went in to the Holy Place, to burn incense on the Altar of Incense. Perhaps they arrogantly did it at the wrong time of day? God was angry with these two priests for coming into His sanctuary drunk and for doing what He had forbade them to do, namely, no fire except that from the Great Altar - 'foreign' fire was a total 'no-no.'

While they were standing there, scripture says, "Fire came forth from the presence of Adonai, so that they died in the presence of Adonai." When Moses got to hear of it, he said, "This is the sign that God's house is holy. And God will make people fear Him because He is holy."

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Moses would not allow Aaron, the father of the two men, to touch their dead bodies. He said, "You have on the robes of the High Priest, and you are leading the service of worship. God's work must go on, and you must not stop for your trouble, great as it is." Aaron stood by the altar and offered the sacrifice, though his heart was breaking. You can empathise with him. Aaron's cousins carried out the dead bodies. Nadab and Abihu were buried outside the camp. Then, Moses said, "After this, let no priest drink wine or strong drink before he enters the Tabernacle. Be sober when you are leading the worship of the people, so that you will know the difference between things that are holy and those that are common, and so you may teach the people all the laws the Lord has given them." The rule that Moses gave to the priests is a good rule for everyone to keep, not only when worshipping God but at all times. I am sure that the two younger sons of Aaron, Eleazar and Ithamar, who took the dead brothers' place, were understandably careful to be obedient to God's rules. Well saith the Psalmist, in Psalm 47, "For Adonai Elyon is awesome, a great king over all the earth." Sadly, Nadab and Abihu were guilty of misrepresenting God, whom the priests were charged to represent before the people, and this is a severe transgression indeed. The Lord has to be sanctified through those who are close to Him, and He must be honoured before all people. Put another way, those who are chosen to represent God must take great care in how they speak of divine matters. Dwelling near to the 'fire' of God requires respect.

Our portion from 2 Samuel 6:1-10 also shows a deviation from clear, God-given instructions. For the snoozers amongst us, let's recall the story (I jest, of course). King David decides to bring the Ark from the house of Abinadab that was at Gibeah, to Jerusalem. Accompanied by a large group of people he comes to Gibeah; the Ark is placed on a new cart, and two sons of Abinadab drive off towards Jerusalem. At Nacon's threshing floor Uzzar puts out his hand and steadies the Ark. As scripture has it, " ...for the oxen shook it, and he was afraid the Ark might fall to the ground. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error (that is, for touching the Ark, for he was not a Levite) and there he died by the Ark of God." Sadly, Uzzar's intentions were good, but he broke God's clear prohibition. Thus, David's first attempt to move the Ark failed but he had learnt an important lesson: when God gives specific instructions, it is wise to follow them. The next time removal time came round, David saw to it that the Levites carried that Ark. We see, again, that there is need for precision and accuracy in all that concerns the Law of God, and we may not depart to the right or left, however good our intention, or motive might be.

Let us finish on a huge plus with regard to our obedience, and that plus is.....that freedom to obey God's commands comes through God's grace. Once Yeshua within lifts you into God's presence, you are free to obey - out of love, not necessity, and through God's power coupled with your will power. You know that if you stumble, you will not fall back to ground. Instead, you will be caught and held in Yeshua's loving arms. As is written in Romans 5:20, "The Ten Commandments were given so that all could see the extent of their failure to obey God's laws. But the more we see our sinfulness, the more we see God's abounding grace forgiving us." Closing, let us say with the noble Oswald Chambers, "We have to form habits that

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express what God's grace has done in us. It is not a question of being saved from hell, but of being saved in order to exhibit the life of the Son of God in our mortal flesh, and it is the disagreeable things which make us exhibit whether or not we are manifesting His life.....No matter how disagreeable or tiresome or trivial a thing may be, say - "Lord, I am delighted to obey Thee in this matter," and instantly the Son of God will press to the front, and there will be manifested in my human life that which glorifies Yeshua."