

TORAH SPARKS

TRANSITIONS

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt
Dvar Parashah

And on the eighth day, after all the inauguration, after all the sacrifices have been offered, Aaron raises his hands, blesses the people, and... God does not appear in the Mishkan. Moses **had told** us that God would. After all, all this time, we have been building Him a dwelling place. And since Leviticus began, we have been transitioning from the momentous one-time revelation of Sinai to the daily, continuous revelation of the Mishkan. We have been transitioning from Moses as revolutionary leader to Aaron and sons as institutionalized, ritualistic leadership. And in the moment—the big moment—it doesn't quite work. Aaron raises his hands and God does not come. So he goes down, gets Moses, and they try together. Once again, they bless the people. And then, with Moses present, God appears.

We're echoing the final parashah of Exodus. The Mishkan had been built and Moses blessed the people. As I wrote for **Pekudei**, we had made up for the one sin of the golden calf by building the *mishkan* instead. But we had not made up for the mistake of thinking we need Moses as leader rather than Torah and tradition. We cannot imagine life without Moses, **the man** who brought us out of Egypt. It's not till the end of Deuteronomy and the imminent death of Moses that he gives us the ability to move on, to embrace Torah as our conduit to God rather than himself.

Here in *Shemini*, we still aren't quite there. We've built the infrastructure of the *kohanim*, but we don't trust them yet. And God does not yet fully trust them. Aaron is inaugurated, Aaron blesses, and yet God does not appear until Aaron gets Moses to help him call God down.

Why doesn't the first blessing work? Why is Moses needed? The text itself suggests that Aaron's act, while sincere, is premature. Aaron had not been commanded to bless the people. From his own initiative, he chooses to offer a blessing. While the words of the blessing are not recorded here in the text, most commentators think that the words Aaron spoke were those of the priestly blessing. But God does not command us concerning the priestly blessing until a whole other book, until **Numbers 6:23**. In our parashah, standing in full regalia in front of the nation, Aaron oversteps, initiating his own blessing.

This moment echoes the dynamic of his earlier role in the Golden Calf—stepping into leadership when Moses is absent, attempting to respond to the people's need for immediacy without the full structure in place. And the parallel becomes even sharper when we see what follows. Nadav and Avihu offer their own "strange fire," uncommanded, and are consumed. Their action is not so different from Aaron's—an attempt to invoke presence, to meet God where they think He might be.

The shift from Moses to Aaron, from prophetic fire to priestly form, is not clean. The change from a leader who can speak with God face to face to a structure that can hold God's presence is messy. Aaron and his sons must follow a different model. Ritual replaces immediacy. Instruction replaces instinct.

This is part of a long arc that began at Sinai and only fully resolves at the end of Deuteronomy, when Moses steps aside—not with his presence, but with his Torah. For now, in Shemini, we are still the first generation—haunted by the immediacy of Sinai, shaken by even temporary distance from Moses. We have the *mishkan*, but we don't yet know how to dwell in it. We have priests, but we don't yet trust their voices. We still need Moses to bless with us, speak with us, summon God with us.

The second generation—born in the wilderness—will learn a different language. They will not have stood at Sinai. They will not have watched Moses descend from the cloud. For them, God will be encountered not through fire and thunder, but through structure and story, Torah and blessing. They will hear the priestly words and know: the fire can descend even without Moses. The blessing can flow through others. Torah—not the man who held it—will become their lifeline. And when the structure is right—when blessing is spoken by many voices, when presence is borne by ritual, when fire is met not with pride but with preparation—then God chooses to dwell among us. And we begin, finally, to trust that He will.

THE FORGOTTEN HOME OF THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

Jonathan Lipnick

Exploring the Parashah



*In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.

OF JOY, WHAT DOES IT ACCOMPLISH?

Ilana Kurshan

White Fire: Poetry on the Parashah

Elisheva bat Aminadav experienced four celebrations on one day: Moses, her brother-in-law, was king; Nahshon, her brother, was the prince who was head of all the princes; Aaron, her husband, was the [High] Priest wearing the ephod stones; and her two sons were deputy High Priests. But when they entered [the Tabernacle] to burn incense without permission, they were burned and her celebration was transformed to mourning. That is, “And of joy, what does it accomplish,” as it is stated: “After the death of the two sons of Aaron...” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 2:2)

The finished Mishkan opened. Finally!
 The joy I knew that day was boundless, vast
 For there we stood, my family, at its heart
 I never thought that joy would be my last.

My husband’s brother Moses was the first
 To go inside, when God said, “Please come in.”
 My husband, high priest Aaron, supervised,
 The rituals to heal and cleanse from sin.

My brother Nachshon, first of all the chiefs
 To bring the sacred gifts for all his tribe:
 A bowl, a basin, flour, incense, spoon,
 The goats, I knew, would not come out alive.

But goats are not my sons. All four would serve
 Beside their father in the sacred shrine.
 An honor, I thought then, and well-deserved
 My sons were loyal lads, upright and fine.

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The Talmud teaches that the Torah was given in black fire on white fire (Y. Shekalim 6:1). The black fire is the letters of the Torah scroll, and the white fire is the parchment background. In this column, consisting of a poem on each parashah, I will try to illuminate the white fire of Torah – the midrashim, stories, and interpretations that carve out the negative space of the letters and give them shape.

O joyous day, I thought. But I thought wrong.
 When Aaron came toward me, he spoke no words.

My smile froze. My laughter made my choke,
 My soul fled from my chest, a winged bird.

Nadav and Avihu, now charred in flame.
 To think, they lost their lives that festive morn
 That day of so much promise, so much joy
 With Aaron numb and silent, I would mourn.

Since then, my world’s gone dark, there’s no relief.

The Mishkan heals from sin. But not from grief.