

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Shemini

24 Nissan, 5786 – April 11, 2026

Compiled from the works of
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**An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi
Parshas Shemini**

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Rashi in His Own Words

ויקרא י', ב': וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלְּפָנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וּגו'

רש"י ד"ה ותצא אש: רבי אליעזר אומר לא מתו בני אהרן אלא על ידי שהורו הלכה בפני משה רבן. רבי ישמעאל אומר שתויי יין נכנסו למקדש, תדע שאחר מיתתן הזהיר הנותרים שלא יכנסו שתויי יין למקדש. משל למלך, שהיה לו בן בית וכו', כדאיתא בויקרא רבה:

Vayikroh 10:2: And fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them.

Rashi Heading: And fire went forth: Rabbi Eliezer says, "Aharon's sons died, only because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe, their teacher (by offering incense on their own)." Rabbi Yishmoel says, "(They died because) they had entered the Sanctuary after drinking wine. The proof is that after their death, (the Torah) warned the survivors that they may not enter the Sanctuary after having drunk wine. This is analogous to a king with a faithful attendant, as told in Vayikroh Rabbah¹."

Synopsis

This week's Torah portion, Shemini, tells us of a celebration that took a tragic turn. At the end of the book of Shemos, the Jewish people spent a great deal of time and effort building the "Mishkan – Tabernacle." We then spent seven days dedicating it. Each day, Moshe would erect and dismantle the Mishkan. Finally, on the eighth day (the first day of the month of Nissan), the Mishkan was constructed for real. Hashem's presence would rest in this world, and Aharon would take his rightful place as High Priest. However, during this celebration, something went wrong. Two of Aharon's sons brought a strange fire before Hashem. The Torah tells us², "Fire went forth before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before Hashem." Rashi cites two opinions of our Sages regarding the reason for their untimely deaths. Rabbi Eliezer says that Aharon's sons died because they rendered a halachic decision in Moshe's presence. Rabbi Yishmoel says that they died because they entered the Sanctuary after having drunk wine.

The Rebbe asks, among other questions, why Rashi needs to explain the reason for their death; the Torah explicitly says that they died because they³ "brought a foreign fire before Hashem, which He had not commanded them (to bring)." Furthermore, we know that Rashi always explains each verse's simple meaning; the reasons he cites from the Midrash do not seem to be the simple meaning at all!

The answer is as follows. As we have stated many times, Rashi is extremely precise with every word he writes, including the headings of each explanation. The title that he chooses for his comments is the words, "and a fire went

1. Midrash Rabbah, Vayikroh 12, 1.
2. Our Parshah, Vayikroh 10:2.
3. Ibid, Vayikroh 10:1.

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forth – וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ." In other words, the difficulty he is explaining lies in those words. G-d punishes measure for measure. Because they brought a "foreign fire," they were punished by a fire that went forth. However, two verses earlier,⁴ we saw the exact words used to describe a great reward. "A fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering..." This made it clear that G-d's presence rested upon the Mishkan. It was a revelation of G-dliness. We therefore know that the "fire going forth" from the incense that Nodov and Avihu offered was also holy; it was also a sign of a revelation of G-dliness. This being the case, we need to understand why they were punished! Therefore, Rashi explains that their punishment stemmed from a deficiency in their service of Hashem. Of course, whatever the problem was, it was considered a sin only concerning their high level and stature.

Rashi's Explanation

This week's Torah portion, Shemini, tells us of a celebration that took a tragic turn. After completing the building of the "Mishkan – Tabernacle," we spent seven days dedicating it. Each day, Moshe would erect and dismantle the Mishkan. Finally, on the eighth day, the Mishkan was ready. It would begin serving as Hashem's dwelling place in this world. Aharon would take his rightful place as the High Priest. However, during the celebration, something went awry. The Torah tells us⁵, "Aaron's sons, Nodov and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, placed incense upon it, and brought a foreign fire before Hashem which He had not commanded them (to bring)." We are then told⁶, "Fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before Hashem." Rashi cites two reasons for their untimely death. Rabbi Eliezer says that Aharon's sons died because they rendered a halachic decision in their teacher's presence; Rabbi Yishmoel says that they died because they entered the Sanctuary after having drunk wine. Rabbi Yishmoel cites proof for his opinion that after their death, (the Torah) warned the survivors that they may not enter the Sanctuary after having drunk wine. This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant, etc. Rashi cites the Midrash⁷ as his source for this. However, as we shall see later, Rashi leaves out the content of Rabbi Yishmoel's proof.

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

The reason for the deaths of Nodov and Avihu is explicitly stated in the previous verse: "They offered a strange fire which Hashem did not command them to bring." Why does Rashi need to offer any explanation whatsoever? We know that, first and foremost, Rashi always explains Peshat, the simple meaning of the verse. However, in our case, the reasons he offers seem to have nothing to do with the verses' literal meaning; instead, they are drawn from a Midrash.

Rashi is always extremely precise with the words he chooses for the heading of each of his explanations. The words in his comments header are the words he is explaining. Since Rashi explains why they died, one would expect

4. Ibid, Vayikroh 9:24.

5. Ibid, Vayikroh 10:1.

6. Ibid, Vayikroh 10:2.

7. Vayikroh Rabbah 12, 1.

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the heading to be, "and they died" rather than "a fire went forth."

When Rashi gives two explanations, neither explains all the details he discusses, according to Peshat. Each explanation has its difficulties; however, the first explanation he cites is closer to the verse's simple explanation. We need to understand the problems with each of Rashi's explanations and why the first is more comparable to Peshat.

It is unusual for Rashi to cite a teaching in the name of the Sage who initially said it, and on those occasions, he does so because it provides additional understanding to a sharp student. We need to understand why the fact that Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yishmoel said these two explanations adds to our understanding.

As previously said, Rashi's language is exact. Why does he tell us, "This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant ... as told in Vayikroh Rabbah?" If he wanted to tell us the location of the Midrash so that we could look at it ourselves, he could have just stated that "this is analogous to a king... as told in Vayikroh Rabbah." Why does he mention the faithful attendant without telling us the entire analogy? We must say that the "faithful attendant" is an essential part of Rashi's explanation. What do these few words add to our understanding?

The Explanation

We must understand Rashi's explanation from the proper perspective to understand the answers to our questions. We assumed that Rashi explained why Aharon's sons died, but that is untrue. As noted previously, if Rashi had explained the reason for the punishment of Nodov and Avihu, the heading of his commentary would have been the words from the verse, "and they died," rather than "a fire went forth."

Rashi's difficulty with our verse is something different. We know that G-d repays a person measure for measure. At first glance, it makes perfect sense to say that since Nodov and Avihu brought a "foreign fire," fire went out and consumed them. However, this cannot be the case. We saw the words "a fire went out" used to describe a grand reward two verses earlier! "A fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering..." This "fire going out" showed us that G-d's presence rested on the Mishkan. The people rejoiced. Therefore, Rashi understands that the "fire going forth" from the incense offered by Nodov and Avihu was also holy; it was a sign of Hashem's presence among the Jews. This being the case, why were Nodov and Avihu punished? They were not penalized for bringing incense. Instead, they were punished because of some impropriety on their part, given their excellent level.

That is why Rashi begins his explanation by saying, "Rabbi Eliezer says, 'Aharon's sons died, only because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe, their teacher.' In other words, Rashi is making it quite clear that they did not die as a result of bringing a strange fire. This does not contradict the fact that it says that they brought a "foreign fire which they were not commanded to bring." On the contrary, *they* were not commanded to bring it but took it upon themselves. According to this opinion, the only thing they did wrong was deciding what to offer and where to offer it. They should have relied upon their teacher, Moshe.

According to Peshat, it is difficult to say that such a seemingly minor infraction should warrant such a severe punishment. Rashi alludes to the answer to this question by stating that Rabbi Eliezer said it.

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Throughout the works of the Sages, we find incredibly high praise heaped upon Rabbi Eliezer, particularly regarding his fantastic knowledge of the Torah⁸. Nevertheless, he said, "Whoever says words of Torah which he did not hear from his teacher causes G-d's presence to depart from Israel⁹." From this, we can see that it is even worse to say something one did not hear from one's teacher in front of that *teacher*! This explains the severity of their punishment.

However, this explanation also raises a question. How can we say that the actions of Nodov and Avihu brought the Divine presence into the world when, according to Rabbi Eliezer, their efforts should have *removed* the Divine presence? Therefore, Rashi quotes a second reason for their entering the Sanctuary while inebriated. This was not yet prohibited, so it was not considered a sin.

Consequently, it could bring G-d's presence into this world. That is why Rashi says, "After their death, (the Torah) warned the survivors that they may not enter the sanctuary after having drunk wine." Rashi points out that they did not disobey any commandments.

However, this leaves us with a different problem. If they broke no law, why would they deserve punishment? They certainly should not deserve such a severe punishment! Rashi answers this by adding, "This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant ... as told in Vayikroh Rabbah¹⁰." The Midrash follows these words by saying, "When he found him standing at tavern entrances, he severed his head in silence and appointed another attendant in his place. We would not know why he executed the first, but for his commanding the second one, 'You must not enter the doorway of taverns,' from which we know that for such a reason he had put the first one to death."

From the Midrash, we understand that even though the king never commanded his first servant not to frequent taverns, he should have realized this on his own. After all, he was the king's trusted servant! The same is true regarding Nodov and Avihu; even though they transgressed no commandment, as Hashem's trusted servants, they should have understood that it was improper to enter the Sanctuary intoxicated. However, a difficulty remains. Even though Aharon's eldest sons should have known better, why should that warrant the death penalty?

To answer this question, Rashi adds that this explanation came from Rabbi Yishmoel. Our Sages say that Rabbi Yishmoel¹¹ is a Kohen (actually, he was a High Priest – Kohen Gadol) and helped Kohanim." Rashi's commentary in the Talmud¹² explains that he helped Kohanim, i.e., he always seeks leniencies for them. Therefore, according to Rabbi Yishmoel's explanation, Nodov and Avihu did not sin. He would not explain their actions in such a way that would make these two Kohanim guilty of transgressing any commandment.

However, according to Rabbi Yishmoel, how is this punishment measure for measure if they did not sin with

8. One notable example of many is found in Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1, 3. "The stone upon which Rabbi Eliezer sits is comparable to Mount Sinai, and he himself is comparable to the Ark of the Covenant."

9. Talmud Berachos 27, b. See also Yoma 66, b and Sukkah 26, b.

10. Midrash Rabbah Vayikroh 12, 1.

11. Talmud Chullin 49, a.

12. *Ibid.*

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fire? Why did a fire go forth and consume them? For this reason, Rashi quotes Rabbi Yishmoel as his second explanation.

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

Although Nodov and Avihu were at an incredibly lofty level, they received a most severe punishment for failing to display proper subservience to their teacher. We find the same to be true concerning Rabbi Eliezer. Although his greatness in Torah is described above, he said, "One who says a Torah teaching which he did not hear from his teacher, causes G-d's presence to depart from the world." In other words, being subservient to one's teacher concerns the Divine revelation to the entire Jewish nation!

From here, one must not say he is a great Torah scholar and does not need to depend on someone else for a halachic decision. Likewise, one can think that he does not need a guide in life choices when serving Hashem, and that he can decide right or wrong for himself.

That is what Rashi is teaching us. None of us is as high as Nodov and Avihu; however, "Aharon's sons *only* died because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe, their teacher." Not only did their lack of subjugation bring punishment upon themselves, but it also affected the entire world.

At the same time, we must also use our faculties to learn Torah. We must grasp the Torah with our intellect to the extent that it becomes absorbed.

One might ask how it is possible to use all of one's understanding to the fullest while simultaneously subjugating one's entire being to Hashem. We find the answer to this in Rashi as well. "This is analogous to a king who had a *faithful attendant* ..." Since we are discussing the Jewish people, G-d's "faithful attendant," He allows us to connect both opposites. We can employ our understanding to learn Torah and be subservient to Hashem simultaneously. Through this, we can establish a connection between the world and G-dliness; the world will be conducted according to the halachic rulings of the Torah. This will hasten the promise that ⁷ "the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh together shall see that the mouth of the Lord spoke."

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Shemini, Mevorchim Hachodesh Iyar 5726)

I hope you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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May they merit to be a source of Chassidic pride
to their family and a Torah light to their community

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in health, happiness, Torah, and mitzvot

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