



Around the Shabbat Table

**Shabbat Shemini 5763
March 2003**

This week's writer: Janet Bienenfeld is Director of Connections, a program of UJA-Federation dedicated to providing opportunities for families on Long Island to strengthen their Jewish identity and knowledge.

Shalom!

Introduction

This week's *parasha*, *Shemini*, is from the Book of Leviticus, Chapters 9 -11. The *parasha* opens with the last rituals involved in the consecration of the priesthood. The chapter describes the detailed requirements for the sin-offering, burnt-offering, and meal-offering that Aaron and his sons were required to prepare, in order to initiate them in their roles as priests. These rituals were performed on the eighth day (*Shemini* means eighth in Hebrew), and, once completed, they were able to discharge their sacred responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the community.

The *parasha* then describes an offering of "strange fire" which Aaron's priestly sons, Nadav and Avihu, offer to God. God had not commanded them to make this offering, and the text then tells us that Nadav and Avihu are consumed by fire, and died before God.

The text then switches to a list of "unclean" and "clean" animals, designating which animals, fowl, fish and creeping creatures are considered Kosher, and may be eaten, and which are forbidden. Unclean animals are classified as follows: quadrupeds that do not both cleave the foot entirely and chew the cud; carnivorous birds; winged insects; fish and other water creatures that do not have both fins and scales; and small creeping things.

The *parasha* concludes with a rationale for refraining from eating creeping things. In the last sentences of Parsha Shemini, God says "I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am holy...for I am the Lord that brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."



Questions for your Family's Discussion

1. The *parasha* tells us that the consecration rituals for Aaron and his sons occurred on the eighth day. What other special ritual in Jewish life occurs on the eighth day? In what way is the *Brit Milah* (circumcision) similar to the priestly rites?
2. Traditionally, *Kashrut* is understood as a way to make people holy. How might restricting what one eats make a person holy? What might some other benefits of keeping Kosher be? Can you think of some other ways in which we can add a measure of holiness into our everyday lives?
3. Many Jews keep Kosher at home, but not outside the home. What do you think of this? What might their rationale be?
4. The 10 Commandments--actually 10 Statements--contain the central precepts of Jewish life. What might be the reasons that the laws of *Kashrut* are not included among them?
5. The word "Kosher" (*kasher*, in Hebrew) means "fit." Does it only apply to food? How else might the word "Kosher" be used?

Texts to Wrestle With

1. This *parasha* speaks about both the priestly responsibility to distinguish between clean and unclean, and the individual's responsibility to make that distinction. If our spiritual leaders have the responsibility to bring holiness to our people, shouldn't that be enough for us as a Jewish people? What does this *parasha* teach us about the responsibility each of us has to elevate our behavior?
2. In Leviticus 9:22, at the conclusion of the priestly consecration, it says that "Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them..." While the Torah does not tell us what blessing is recited here, most commentators suggest that he used the priestly blessing that is found in

the book of Numbers (*Bamidbar*) and in the *Siddur* (prayer book). It is recited as part of many services. In some synagogues in Israel, there is a priestly blessing service called *Duhan* (*platform*) that is recited each day. The text appears below. Does it have special meaning for us, today, in light of the difficulties in the world?

May God bless and keep You. May God shine on you and be gracious to you. May God shine within you and bring you peace.

3. Leviticus 11:45 says, "I am God, who led you up from out of the land of Egypt, to be God to you; therefore be holy, for I am holy. Why do we need to be reminded that God took us out of Egypt? How do we, as parents, establish our authority, when we are about to ask our children to do something for us?"



Towards an Action Agenda

1. Jewish tradition teaches us that the laws of *Kashrut* are intended to elevate our physical appetites to a holy level. Before you eat, try to remember to make a *beracha*-- blessing-- over food. See if this makes the act of eating feel any different.

2. Did you know there are supermarkets in Queens and LI that exclusively sell kosher food? Take a family excursion to Mazur's in Little Neck, Supersol on Main street in Queens, or Brach's in Lawrence, (or one of the other kosher markets in or area) to see the wide variety of available Kosher foods.

Dine out at a kosher restaurant in the metropolitan area. Visit www.shamash.org for suggestions, or see the Dining Out Guide in the Jewish Week.

3. Long Island has been in the news recently because of controversy regarding New York state's laws about Kosher certification. You can learn about this issue by reading a recent article in the Jewish Week:

<http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=7484>

Shabbat Shalom!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: <http://www.bjeny.org/>

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