

## CNS Drash on Parashat Shmini – Peretz Wolf-Prusan

This past week we observed Yom HaShoah. I'd like to share a few words about Professor Ben Zion Wacholder, scholar of Talmud and Rabbinics. I was a student of his at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Like the millions of people fleeing senseless violence today, in 1942 he had fled the home of his family, Ozarow, Poland, the night the Nazis murdered all the Jews in his town.

A brilliant Talmud student in his youth, he was now a refugee, living as a Christian under an Aryan name and working in a Polish labor camp in Germany until the war ended. All was lost, except for his mind and passion for learning. He moved to Paris and later Bogota, Colombia, and finally immigrated to the United States in 1947 to resume his education. He became a Rabbi and obtained an undergraduate degree in New York, a Ph.D. in Classics from UCLA, and eventually became a professor at HUC-JIR in LA and then Cincinnati. I learned some Talmud and Zohar from him.

Dr. Wacholder had a radical mind. He saw things (although for most of his adult life he was going blind) in the Dead Sea Scrolls no one else saw.

A colleague wrote of him, “He was known as a kind and thoughtful teacher, who encouraged students even as he challenged them not to rely on secondary literature or conventional interpretations, but to analyze the primary sources first and foremost and to seek their own conclusions.”

My own daughter Tali, made a conclusion when she learned that her Bat Mitzvah Torah portion was Shmini: with its elaborate sacrificial rites performed on the eighth day of the dedication of the Tabernacle, the laws regarding kosher and non-kosher animals, and the inexplicable death of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, who brought “strange fire.”

She concluded that I, her father who was directing the B’nai Mitzvah program, had done her wrong. “If you are in charge of this place, why did I get a Torah portion like this?”

I explained, you were born in in the Spring of 1987, and this is the Torah portion of your 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, and every parasha is a good parasha. It wasn't.

*And the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu took each of them his fire-pan and put fire in it, and placed incense upon it and brought forward alien fire before the Lord, which He had not charged them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and before they died the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying,*

*"Through those close to Me shall I be hallowed  
And in all the people's presence shall I be honored."*

*And Aaron was silent. (Vayikra 10:1-3)*

In those days I was much too busy being me. I forgot the teachings of Dr. Wacholder and Tali and I wasted time on secondary literature and conventional interpretations.

They were drunk (Rashi). Where did they get the booze?

They were in revolt against Moses and Aaron. Right after Aaron calls down divine fire?

Sforno, the 16th century Italian commentator, explained that Aaron's silence was proof of having comforted himself with the belief that his sons' death sanctified God. Really? That went nowhere.

They brought the wrong kind of fire.

They were off schedule.

And so, we abandoned Nadab and Abihu. Tali had a good Bat Mitzvah, I hope. She is a licensed therapist now, so she can deal with it. Although, now, in retrospect, this might be why she is a therapist.

**Now**, 25 years later, I'm not so busy being me. Remembering Dr. Wacholder I'm thinking about the names:

Nadab (Nadav) kindness. Abihu (Avihu) “he’s, my dad.”

Kindness and Joy run headlong into oblivion.

**When? On Shemini, the 8<sup>th</sup> day. There should be a warning.**

What happens on the 8<sup>th</sup> day in the Hebrew Literature?

After their first Shabbat, Adam and Eve leave Gan Eden.

Brit Milah, circumcision.

Shemini Atzeret, the concluding day of Sukkot, a festival of "dwelling" that signifies the ongoing presence of God.

Inauguration of the Mishkan

To the Jewish Christians Jesus' resurrection was referred to as the "eighth day," a new pattern within the fabric of time—the weekly cross-pollination of the old creation with the new.

The Eighth Day is a day out of the regular seven-day cycle.  
Our texts says:

***“And in all the people’s presence shall I be honored.”***

**What did the people see?**

In a heart-beat:

Nadab and Abihu running with fire and consumed by fire and  
Moses dispassionately explaining it all away, while Aaron,  
observes, silent.

The polarities of passionate expression and stabilizing ritual:

Ecstasy and Formality

Passion and Routine

The Sound and The Silence

The year my Tali was born, 1987, Amy Elizabeth Ray, age 23, was a religion major at Emory College in Atlanta Georgia. She read widely all the books of the Bible. She was a song writer and with her close friend Emily Saliers formed a band called the Indigo Girls. You should know them:

*Galileo*

*Closer to Fine (The Barbie Movie)*

*Power of Two (every wedding)*

The opening and title track of the Indigo Girls' debut album is...  
***Strange Fire by Amy Ray***, the Religion major.

*"I come to you with strange fire*

*I make an offering of love*

*The incense of my soul is burned*

*By the fire in my blood*

*I come with a softer answer*

*To the questions that lie in your path*

*I want to harbor you from the anger*

*Find a refuge from the wrath"*

And the chorus:

*This is a message  
A message of love  
Love that moves from the inside out  
Love that never grows tired  
I come to you with strange fire*

*Mercenaries of the shrine  
Now who are you to speak for God?  
With haughty eyes and lying tongues  
And hands that shed innocent blood  
Now who delivered you the power  
To interpret Calvary?  
You gamble away our freedom  
To gain your own authority*

Now I don't know what this means, exactly. And neither does Amy Ray! She was a better student of Wacholder than I was. She took it all in and put it all out.



Now this is what I see, looking past the conventional interpretations: What might the people see: From now on, this is how it is going to happen. Between Egypt and the Promised Land, after the Sacred and before the mundane, there will moments like this, on eighth days, where the smooth cycle of time is disrupted and a rough hour arrives and kindness and joy are consumed like Nadab and Abihu, and some will preach like Moses and some, will stand silent with Aaron, and hold the mystery.

Shabbat Shalom