

Torah Thoughts Shemini

5778:

How long does it take for something new to lose its luster? I learned when my children were young that too often a new ‘thing’ that they would bring home – whether from a birthday party, a zoo gift shop or elsewhere – somehow started off as the most important thing in the world, before they had it, then almost immediately becomes neglected. The transition from “Must have it” to “Where is it?” was often quite abrupt.

That holds true not only for things but for tasks we perform and the status that we attain. Graduations, weddings and births fill us with joy and pride, but soon enough we must return to our usual schedules and go on with daily life. But what if daily life involves interacting with God, personally? In this week’s Torah portion, Shemini, we see what may be the result of taking that daily activity too lightly. The word *shemini* means ‘eighth,’ and here refers to the eighth day of the ceremonies in which Aaron and his sons were ordained as *kohanim* to serve God. Upon being elevated to the position of priest, two of Aaron’s sons bring ‘alien fire’ to God’s altar, some kind of offering that God did not command. Their punishment was swift and dramatic: God strikes them dead with heavenly fire.

One possible explanation for this incident is that the two brothers took to their identities as *kohanim* too easily, without consideration for the seriousness of their actions. Having been ordained by Moses, they quickly forgot how meticulously God expected them to behave, and brought offerings that did not comport with God’s rules. The newness of their role quickly gave way to feelings and actions inappropriate to that role. They forgot why they had been ordained in the first place, and it cost them dearly. They went from the thrill of a new, sacred role to the mundane repetition of tasks too quickly.

We struggle daily to remember who we are and how to faithfully fulfill our responsibilities. As children, parents, siblings, workers, spouses, we have so many commitments to others that we can easily lose track of just how important each of our daily responsibilities are. We need to remember that these roles matter and that there can be disastrous consequences when we treat them as if they don’t. And if we come into a new status, we must strive to maintain the dignity and responsibility that that status accords us, even when the day to day tasks become routine. As difficult as it sometimes is, we have to be able to treat the mundane as if it has the capacity for sanctity, every time.

Shabbat shalom.