

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



An Offering of Love

**Dr. Alisa Braun, Academic Director,
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What does a feminist reworking of Leviticus 10 sound like? The Indigo Girls song “Strange Fire” (1987) beautifully illustrates how biblical images and stories weave their way into our lives and the art we create. The song exemplifies their signature style: a second-wave feminist message wrapped in a spare acoustic sound, strong rhythms, and soft harmonies. The lyrics allude to the actions of Aaron’s sons as a way of critiquing those within organized religion who wield power and seek to silence voices of personal spiritual expression.

I come to you with strange fire, I make an offering of love,
the incense of my soil 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.

Most commentaries on Leviticus 10 have focused on God’s response toward Nadab and Abihu—what specifically caused God’s wrath and how to justify it. Yet in the Indigo Girls’ creative interpretation, God is absent and the focus shifts to the individual who gives the gift of “strange fire,” a spiritual fervor that resides in the heart of any passionate believer. Her intent is pure, to bring into this world love, safety, and mercy—soft answers—rather than hard and inflexible rules. Attacking the “mercenaries of the shrine” who “gamble away our freedom to gain your authority,” the lyrics critique the rigid boundaries of organized religious life in favor of the love we can offer each other.

To hear “Strange Fire” by the Indigo Girls, visit
www.jtsa.edu/an-offering-of-love



Shabbat Parah
Shemini 5779

שבת פרה
שמיני תשע"ט



The Promise of a New Heart and a New Spirit: *Lev Hadash Veruah Hadashah*

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This Shabbat is Shabbat Parah, the Shabbat of the Red Heifer. The special Torah reading for this Shabbat, in Numbers 19, addresses the defilement of coming into contact with the dead. The *Parah Adumah* section makes clear that contact with the dead disrupts our ability to function, and that we must engage in a ritual in order to be restored into society and into proper relationship with God. And anyone who is involved with the ritual that purifies others will become impure in the process; there is no way to eradicate the impurity absolutely.

Death’s power is palpable and any encounter with death must be mediated through communal traditions. While these rituals demonstrate that those who have encountered the dead must exist on the margins, that status is temporary, and the path to returning to the community is clear. In a sense, the ritual normalizes the experience of death and provides clear guidance to all about how to navigate it. If death is a tearing apart, the ritual binds us up and offers hope of restoration.

By pairing the special Torah reading with the haftarah from Ezekiel 36, the Rabbis are moving away from physical defilement to spiritual defilement. Within the haftarah we hear echoes of the Red Heifer ritual. “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean” (Ezek. 36:25). But then the text moves into new territory: “And I will give you a new heart, (לב חדש) and put a new spirit (רוח חדשה) into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh; and I will put My spirit into you. Thus I will cause you to follow My laws and faithfully to observe

My rules” (vv. 26–27). The implication of these verses is that the purification is needed not because of the taint of death, but because of a moral taint. We need a new heart and a new spirit. The old is being rejected and something new must take its place. The imagery here conveys that God is in charge of these actions. God does the removing and God does the putting in. We might wonder about the role human beings play in the process.

The medieval commentator Rashi says that *lev hadash*, a new heart, is “the inclination that was renewed for good.” This inclination, *yetzer*, can be an inclination for evil or an inclination for good. Human beings are created with the capacity for both, which is why life involves endless choice. Rashi uses a reflexive verb form (נִתְחַדֵּשׁ) to shift the meaning of the words from “a new heart” to “a renewed heart.” The process of renewal is not the same as putting in something new. When we renew, we actually take something old and make it new again, we restore it. In a sense, it echoes the process of taking something that was made impure and purifying it. We don’t begin at the very beginning; we salvage what we have by finding the new in the old. The very imagery that was at work in the verse has been turned upside down. It’s not as clean as swapping out the damaged one for perfect new one. The renewal depends on probing the good in what was deemed bad, which I believe is a hopeful stance about the capacity for redemption.

Psalms 51 builds on the same theme when it says: “Fashion a pure heart for me, O God; create in me a steadfast spirit” (Ps. 51:12–13). While the translation uses the verb “create,” the Hebrew is “*hadash*,” more literally translated “renew.” Although God is the speaker in the Ezekiel passage, here the Psalmist is the speaker. The Psalmist is not passive, even daring to make a demand. The conjugation of the verbs conveys that the Psalmist is instructing, even ordering, God. While this could be seen as impudent, I choose to understand the Psalmist as being desperate. Somehow the speaker is depending on this pure heart, on this steadfast spirit. As we move to the next verse in the psalm we arrive at the final plea: “Do not cast me out of Your Presence, or take Your holy spirit away from me.” Without that renewed heart, the Psalmist will be cast out, will die. The greatest threat that torments the Psalmist is the threat of exile, an absence of Presence, which is the same as death.

Each of us possesses the ability to know when our heart is in need of renewal. It’s not just God who makes the determination that the old must be refashioned. We must follow the Psalmist’s lead and recognize when we need help from the Divine to reset our course. The fact that we need to be renewed is not the problem; that is an expected part of the human journey. The challenge is whether we will be emboldened enough to insist on help from the Divine. The stakes are high.

This week’s liturgy gives us another boost. This Shabbat is also *Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh*, the Shabbat on which we say the blessing for the coming month (now the month of Nisan) which begins in the next week. Every month, this amazing blessing echoes the prayers that are associated with Rosh Hashanah. We pray that our lives will be renewed. In a sense, the new month reminds us all to focus on the possibility of the new heart and the new spirit. The liminal space of the new moon helps us to recognize the liminal spaces that we live in, wakes us out of any complacency that might have attached itself to us, and helps awaken our yearning for a new heart. The prayer reminds us to ask for that renewal, to know that it is always possible.

May this month be full of unexpected blessings of renewal in each of our lives.

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