

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, please visit  
[www.jtsa.edu/an-offering-of-love](http://www.jtsa.edu/an-offering-of-love)

Shemini 5781

שמיני תשפ"א



## The Seed of the Rabbinic Revolution

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How important is intention in Jewish law? Do I need to be mentally present when performing commandments, or is it enough to go through the motions and get it done? How often does the Torah care about what I'm thinking? For many of us the answers to these questions would seem obvious: Of course, God demands active engagement with the commandments! Why are mitzvot worth doing if I'm not going to be mindful in their performance? In reality, these answers are a product of the revolutionary interpretations of the Torah by the early rabbinic sages.

Indeed, the Torah itself focuses on questions of intent when distinguishing between levels of culpability in violations of the law. For example, sacrifices can be offered for accidental violations of the law while more severe penalties are reserved for intentional transgressions. The Rabbis, however, explore the question of intent in numerous situations that are not explicitly stated in the Torah. In a recent article entitled "The Mishnaic Mental Revolution: A Reassessment," Ishai Rosen Zvi of Tel Aviv University demonstrates this innovation with various examples including the performance of commandments, validity of sacrifice, and the application of purity laws (*The Journal of Jewish Studies*, 66:1 [2015], 36–58). It is this final category that is of particular interest for our parashah.

The lengthy description of the Israelite dietary laws, found in chapter 11 of Leviticus, includes a section about the purity of items that come into contact with "impure" creatures: if an article of clothing, an earthenware vessel, a stove, or other item touches the carcass of one of the eight creatures enumerated in Lev. 11:29–30, it becomes impure. The passage

explains further that these creatures even have the ability to defile seeds that will be planted: “If such a carcass falls upon seed grain that is to be sown, it is clean; but if water is put on the seed and any part of a carcass falls upon it, it shall be unclean for you” (Lev. 11:37–38). Paradoxically, the very substance—water—which is used to purify allows for the dry seed to become susceptible to the impurity of the carcass.

These two brief verses unlock a myriad of questions in the rabbinic mind such as: *Does this apply only to water or do all liquids make an object susceptible to impurity?*; *Does this law apply only to seeds or are all types of produce included?*; and *Is there anything that can be done to prevent susceptibility to impurity?* As a matter of fact, an entire tractate of the Mishnah (Makshirin) is dedicated to exploring these and other issues.

The rabbinic interpretive revolution at the core of this issue is the stipulation that an object can only become susceptible to impurity when it comes into contact with a liquid through an event that is acceptable to the owner. In other words, if the owner of the produce, clothing, or vessel did not want them to get wet then they cannot become impure. The Rabbis derive this principle from the unusual passive form of the verb “if water is put” found in Lev. 11: 38: יָתַן. The word is pronounced *yuttan* but appears in the Torah without the *vav* that would have definitively determined this pronunciation (יִיתַן), and thus it could be read in the active form *yitten*, “if one places water.” Therefore, the Rabbis compare these two terms and conclude “just as the term *places* [*yitten*] indicates that it was beneficial [to the owner for the item to become wet], so too, the term *is placed* [*yuttan*] means that it must be beneficial [to the owner for the item to become wet] in order for it to become susceptible to impurity (BT Kiddushin 59b).

The implications of this teaching are quite profound. The rabbinic interpretation restores a person’s control over her property. For example, if there was a rainstorm and a pile of freshly picked produce got wet, according to the simple meaning of the Torah, it would now all be under threat of becoming impure. Although it might not seem like a big deal to us, in a world that places great emphasis on purity laws this scenario could be cause for a significant financial loss. The rabbinic interpretation, however, allows for the owner to declare that she had no

desire for her produce to get wet and therefore contact with an impure object is of no significance. Incredibly, the rabbinic law allows for a state of mind, the dissatisfaction with the moisture, to override the empirical fact that the produce is wet and should indeed be susceptible to impurity.

This shift described above, from a focus on objective reality to subjective states of mind when determining law, is a hallmark of the legacy of rabbinic thought. In stark contrast to the rigid Second Temple era interpreters of the Torah, like the Sadducees and the Dead Sea sect, who constantly strive to engage with empirical truth, the Rabbis champion a more flexible interpretation of the law. The Rabbis demand engagement with the mental state of the individual and a sensitivity to the circumstances surrounding each case before determining the outcome of the law.

This legacy of legal creativity and flexibility has been the backbone of rabbinic Judaism and its interpretation of the Torah since its inception. The tradition of interpretative flexibility has allowed rabbinic leaders to realize the timelessness—and timeliness—of Torah as it evolves in every generation.

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## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



### An Offering of Love

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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.