

Tzav	Command
Torah:	Leviticus 5:26 (6:8)-8:36
Haftarah:	Jeremiah 7:21-8:3; 9:23, 24(22, 23)
Brit Chadashah:	Hebrews 9:11-28

This Torah Portion deals with the perpetual fire on the copper altar, who may eat which part of various sacrifices and the consecration of Aaron and his sons. This first consecration of the High Priest and his sons comes after the Tabernacle is all put together and the people get prepared to offer their first set of sacrifices under the Aaronic priesthood. Some things are mentioned more than once in various portions of the Torah and this was intentional so that we could see important events in the context they were operating in.

As concerns the perpetual fire on the copper altar, there are two possible ways of understanding the meaning of perpetual. In Lev. 6:2 it says that burnt offerings were allowed to burn all night, until they were completely reduced to ashes. Each day these ashes were removed and a new fire was kindled on the altar. Here's the rub. Did the fire burn perpetually on the altar, or did it just burn until the sacrifice was completely turned to ashes?

Years ago when I went camping with my family, as long as we were in the same campsite, the fire was allowed to burn itself out and was rekindled in the morning. One morning, there was still some smoke coming from the ashes, so my brother and I stirred them up as we put fresh wood on the fire. The ashes kindled into a new fire and this might have been the case on the copper altar.

Otherwise, the second possibility was that each morning, after the burnt offering was reduced to ashes, these ashes were removed and a completely new fire was kindled. This procedure would have allowed the entire sacrifice to be reduced to ashes, leaving nothing which could be eaten or used for other purposes.

You know that the Talmud often indulges in flights of fancy by adding content to the text of the Bible which were neither intended, nor part of the original text. The Talmud says that the altar built under the supervision of Moses was used for around 116 years: 39 years in the wilderness, 14 years in Gilgal, 13 in Nob and 50 years in Gibeon. They claim that during this time, the fire on the altar was never extinguished. My question is how could the altar have been wrapped up if it was still burning and why is there no mention of a fire being transported along with the parts of the tabernacle and sanctuary?

The best way to understand this is to say that the fire was allowed to burn all night until the sacrifice was completely reduced to ashes. In the morning, these were removed and a new fire was kindled for the daily sacrifices. In fact, the second part of Lev. 6:5 states that the priest would kindle fresh wood, and arrange the burnt offering upon it. Lev. 6:6 says the fire burned continually and was never extinguished. If it literally burned continually, the priest would have no need to kindle a new fire.

The portion goes on to mention two kinds of offerings, made from both meat and grain.

There were those which were completely consumed by fire and turned to ashes and there were those in which a portion of the whole of an offering was eaten, sometimes just by the priests and at other times by the worshippers as well. As well, since the burnt offerings and the other offerings were skinned before they were offered, the priests were allowed to keep the hides of the burnt offerings. It is reasonable to assume that the hides of other animals were kept by those doing the offerings, unless they were also burned.

The people are reminded not to eat any of the fat of any of the burnt offerings. When an animal was found dead and torn up, it could be used for any purpose, but could not be eaten. The blood of birds was not to be eaten, but, again, this may refer to the blood of sacrificial birds, which was placed on two sides of the altar. The life of all animals is found in their blood and could not be consumed while the animal was still alive, as was the pagan practice of the idolatrous Canaanites. They were trying to eat both the flesh of the animal as well as its life force or spirit.

And just as a review, let me say that all of the blood of all sacrificial animals was to be offered to YHVH and could not be eaten. No animal, sacrificial or otherwise could be eaten alive and the question of consuming the blood of an animal which you have butchered is not something the Bible goes into. Eating the blood of a sacrificial animal is forbidden. Eating the blood of any living animal was also forbidden. Even with kosher meat, you cannot get all the blood out, as is especially the case with liver and kidneys.

All blood is not red, but orthodox Jews consider that all body fluids are blood and must be drained. Some even refuse to eat steak because it is so juicy and the juice is considered blood. Imagine a whole life with no gravy of any kind?

The mixing of dairy and meat was only restricted to the flesh of a new born kid which the Canaanites boiled in its mother's milk. This was to get at the life force of the kid and the sexual power of the mother. Food is only for nourishment, spiritual power comes solely from the exercise of faith and obedience, nothing more, nothing less. Only the flesh and milk of a kid and its mother is mentioned and not other kinds of meat. The mixing of meat and dairy is not forbidden when we consume: mutton, beef, chicken, venison and fish which are not used for ritual purposes. As long as the animal is kosher and as long as the milk comes from a kosher animal, it can be eaten. The only exceptions are locusts and honey from bees. Bees are not kosher, but their honey is and while they taste gross, locusts and other insects which crawl and hop can be eaten.

The portion ends with a description of the first consecration of Aaron and his sons. These people are first washed – all over and not just a portion of the body. Then they are dressed in their tunics. Once they were fully dressed, they were anointed with scented oil, after all the the sanctuary were first anointed seven times. Then Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the atonement bull and on the head of the burnt offering ram. These two were then cut up and sacrificed on the copper altar.

They then laid hands on the consecration ram and after it was slaughtered, Moses put its blood on three parts of the priests body: the right ear lobe, the right thumb and the right big toe. The ram was then cut up and a basket of unleavened grain was brought forward and both of these were burnt on the copper altar as a consecration offering. As this was a seven day process, some of the ram and some of the bread was eaten by the priestss at the entrance to the holy place.

Sermon: Courage Under Fire: The Story of Esther

Esther is one of the most unique books in the Bible for several reasons. First of all, it tells the story of Esther, but is not written by her. It covers a period of about ten years when Jews lived throughout the vast Persian Empire and it deals with one more attempt by the enemy to annihilate our people for no good reason. During the early years of the captivity, our people went from being a mostly a rural agricultural people to become urban traders, craftsmen and civil servants.

The Persian Empire had reached its greatest extent under King Darius, but was never able to subdue the Greeks who lived on its western frontiers. The Persian King in our story has been identified as Xerxes who organized another failed attempt to conquer the Greeks. Military technology is always changing and the Greeks had both better weapons and better battle techniques and beat the Persians both on land and at sea.

When Xerxes returned from his latest failed attempt to conquer the Greeks, he settled into his very sumptuous court and in the third year of his reign, held a party that lasted several months. All the leaders of the 127 Persian provinces attended. He wanted to show off the magnificence and wonder of his kingdom over a celebration period of some 180 days.

He was trying to forget his defeat and spent the rest of his life involved in various Harem intrigues among his many wives and concubines. As the story opens, his current favourite, Queen Vashti is ordered to leave the Harem and dazzle the party guests with her great beauty. This was a serious breach of Harem protocols, because she was usually only permitted to leave the Harem to visit the King and the only men who were allowed to see her, besides the many eunuchs who guarded the Harem, were special envoys on the business of the King. She was never to be displayed in public and was well within her rights to refuse to appear before the King's drunken party guests.

Her position of prominence was due to her great beauty, but the sight of that great beauty was to be viewed only by a very select group of men. For this refusal to indulge the King's whim, she was demoted from her position as principle wife or concubine. While the King was hosting his magnificent festival, Vashti was hosting one for her women. It was while the King was drunk on the seventh day of his party that Xerxes ordered the seven chief eunuchs to bring the queen all decked out in her royal splendour and there is some indication that this appearance would have involved dancing for the guests.

The King lost a great deal of prestige by her refusal and his advisors recommended that she no longer be considered the Queen. She would not have been removed from the Harem, which was usually a life sentence and she either had to live in seclusion, out of the King's favour or was sent to one of the minor royal residences where the King would never have to see her again.

An empire wide beauty contest was held to find a suitable replacement. The reason given for this contest to replace Vashti is expressed in the first of several idiomatic expressions found in the book. It says that a man should be the master of his household and speak the language of his people. This meant that he should be able to say whatever he wanted and was always to be obeyed by the females in his household. His defeat at the hands of the Greeks is not mentioned, but it likely played a role in the severity of his behaviour.

The selection process was not a quick one and every candidate had to go through a ritual cleansing process which lasted a whole year before the new wife was considered worthy of becoming the new queen. The account records that the process took until the seventh year of Xerxes reign, so it took four years to find a suitable replacement.

We know from history that all the young girls were taken into the Harem and became permanent members of the King's household, even if they did not qualify to assume the position of queen. There would have been hundreds or thousands of women in the Harem, each waiting for a chance to please the King. All the children born to these unlucky ladies would be considered princes and princesses and either the eldest child or the child of one of the King's favourites, would be considered the King's heir. The rest remained part of the royal elite and served the King in any number of roles.

In our day, this system still exists among the elite of several Muslim countries, and it is estimated that the Saudi royal family now numbers over 60,000. They are either the direct descendants of the current Saudi King or from his brothers, children or nephews (or even great nephews and grandchildren). So you see the substantial Harem which Solomon had was not unusual for the time and there were likely other harems with many more women than those under Solomon's care. David himself had many wives and at least seventy sons.

In the case of the contest to replace Vashti, the King would have had relations with each candidate and she would only be considered for the role as Queen if she pleased the King. So as part of the process, Esther would have been obliged to sleep with the King and evidently her performance pleased this strange man and she was given her own royal household. This elevation took place on the tenth of Tevet of the seventh year of the reign of the King (2:16). Xerxes was so pleased with Esther that he did not require that any more ladies would have to compete for his pleasure.

This is recorded euphemistically, when it is said Xerxes gave rest to his provinces and sent out many royal gifts to demonstrate his pleasure in his new Queen. As Esther was being considered, Mordecai kept an eye on what was happening, but warned Esther not to reveal her Jewishness. As he was doing so, he overheard a plot on the King's life by two of his disgruntled eunuch guards. He revealed the plot to Esther, through intermediaries and not directly, and she told the King. The would be assassins were executed, but apparently Mordecai was not rewarded for his role in uncovering the plot.

Right after this, we are introduced to Haman the Agagite, who was one of the King's new Favourites among his officials. He is considered to be an Amalekite whose family apparently survived the slaughter of his people by Saul and Samuel. The Persians promoted people from many races into positions of prominence. Such was his prominence that the King ordered everybody to kneel and prostrate themselves when he passed by. Mordecai refused, which was probably his right as a minor court official, but when Haman discovered he was a Jew, he began to plot his revenge by arranging for the genocide of the entire Jewish people.

Sadly, these kinds of cruelty were not uncommon in the ancient world and when a Chinese Kingdom refused to submit to Genghis Khan, he ordered the whole nation slaughtered. Some of the rabbis have attempted to say that Hitler was a distant relative of the Amalekites and say that his attempted genocide was a continuation of a generational war between YHVH and Satan. Sadly Hitler had one Jewish grandmother, so he was slaughtering his own people.

Haman was a superstitious man and he rolled dice to see when the best time would be for his projected slaughter of the empire's Jewish population. The twelfth month, the month of Adar, was selected and he began to make plans for a huge slaughter. Traditionally, Purim is considered a joyful festival and many Jewish people dress up and hold parades as they tell the story. But it was a sinister plot to wipe us out and much of the joyfulness may be relief that, once again, YHVH delivered us from our enemies.

There is another unique feature of this book. The name of YHVH is not mentioned, not even once throughout the whole account. It was about this time that our people were adopting some Babylonian and Persian habits. Along with the royal Aramaic alphabet, the name of G-d was considered too sacred to even say or write down. He is referred to throughout the book, in round about ways, but not being mentioned by name is not a mistake or evidence that the book is not inspired. The hand of G-d is indeed very active throughout the events of the story, but is only referred to indirectly.

Haman offered a considerable bribe to the King, so he could be adequately compensated for the loss of some of his most useful servants. All of this began to be set in place in the twelfth year of Xerxes reign, so there was a considerable period of time between Esther's elevation to Queen and the attempted destruction of the Jewish people.

When the decree which called for the total destruction of the Jewish people went out to the whole empire, Mordecai implores Esther to go in to the King and ask for mercy for her people. She is at first afraid to do so, because anyone who was not summoned by the King, faced instant death for their impertinence. Mordecai reminds Esther that she has come to the throne for such a time as this and if she declined, deliverance for the Jews would come from somewhere else (4:4). She agreed and asked Mordecai to get the city's Jewish population to fast so that she would succeed in her dangerous endeavour. She makes a very spiritual statement when she said that if she must die, then she shall die.

She goes into the King's presence and he lifts his golden sceptre as a sign she has his approval and will not be put to death. When he asks her what she wants, he uses another idiomatic expression by saying that he will grant her request, even if it amounts to half of his considerable kingdom. All this means is that he is not placing any limits on what she can ask. She uses quite a bit of stealth in the lead up to her request by asking that both the King and Haman come to a feast in her quarters of the Harem. This would be considered a great honour for Haman and it is unlikely he has ever been in the Harem before.

He goes home and prepares a gallows in his garden. The date for the destruction of the Jewish people is still along way off and it is likely that other gallows were going to be erected in cities throughout the empire. His gallows was very large and could be seen outside the confines of his garden. That night, Xerxes is unable to sleep so he reads through some of the chronicles that recorded important events in his reign. He probably skipped over the section which dealt with his defeat at the hands of the Greeks.

He is reminded about the great service Mordecai did for him and, even though it is late in the night, he summons Haman who has already come, so that he could personally demand that Mordecai be hung. Mordecai's status as a palace civil servant may have exempt him from the fate reserved for his people. Xerxes asks what Haman would do for someone who has greatly pleased the King.

Haman thinks the King is talking about him and goes for the highest honour possible. The favoured one would be dressed in the King's own royal robes and paraded through the city as servants announced that this is what the King did for those who pleased him. To his horror, he is ordered to personally parade his enemy, Mordecai, through the streets. Not only was he angry because of what he had to do, his wife tells him that it is now impossible for him to ask the King for permission to hang Mordecai.

He is summoned for a second banquet in Esther's quarters and she springs that trap. The King repeats that she can ask for anything and will not be denied. She reveals that she is Jewish and that Haman's decree also put her life at risk. This enrages the King who goes into Esther's gardens to cool off. Haman realizes the danger he is in, and plops down on Esther's reclining chair to plead for his life. It looks like Haman is trying to rape the Queen and when Xerxes is told about the gallows Haman has prepared for Mordecai, he orders that Haman be hung on his own gallows. This appears to appease the King's wrath.

But since no law declared in the name of the King could be rescinded or set aside, the Jewish people still have a problem. Haman's evil decree still stood and would still be carried out. The people are happy that Mordecai takes over both Haman's house and his position with the King. Not even the King can rescind a law which he has made, so when Esther again asks for the King's mercy for the Jewish people, another solution has to be found. On the 23rd day of the month of Sivan, which is around seven months before Haman's decree was to be carried out, the King issues another decree.

The Jewish people are allowed to arm themselves and one day before Haman's decree came into effect, they had permission to attack those who were getting ready to attack them. We learn later that some 75,000 enemies of the Jewish people are killed and that the ten sons of Haman, were to be hung on a gallows, even though they were already dead. The King was out some 10,000 talents of silver, but his grateful Jewish subjects provided him with a solution. While the Jews would not have been allowed to take possession of the lands of the people they killed, they did not pillage any of their goods. By association, both their lands and their considerable possessions would become the property of the King.

The Jews asked for an extra day for the citizens of Susa to finish off their enemies and so one day after Purim, Shushan Purim, commemorates the extra day. Mordecai and Esther ordain that this festival should be celebrated annually by all Jews everywhere and that they should send gifts of food to the less fortunate in their midst. While Purim is not one of the seven Festivals of the Lord, it is still celebrated by Jews all over the world.

Something else happened while the Jews were getting ready to take vengeance on their enemies. Masses of people throughout the empire converted to Judaism,, so instead of suffering annihilation, the ranks of the Jews were swelled by these new converts. This is the second mention of a mass conversion to Judaism, after the mixed multitude of Egyptians also joined our ranks. Under the Maccabees, both the Philistines and the Edomites also converted to Judaism in mass and until the second rebellion against Rome, thousands of people throughout the Roman empire also converted.

G-d will always place us in a position to do His will and His protection over His people will prevent them from ever being totally destroyed through genocide. History is full of many attempted Genocides against our people but we can still say Am Yisrael Chai.