Leviticus

Lesson #6

Nadab and Abihu Toasted!

(Leviticus 10: 1-20)

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Review

In Lesson #5 we saw Aaron and his four sons—Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar—ordained for the priesthood, and we learned the importance of ritual in establishing the significance of their ordination and of emblazoning it on our collective memory.

We also learned that the priestly ordination followed a 3-stage movement:

1) **Rite of separation from the previous state;**
2) **Interval (a 7-day period of isolation in the Tent of Meeting); and**
3) **Full exercise of priestly functions and obligations.**

When Aaron and his sons emerge from their 7-day isolation in the Tent of Meeting they are full-fledged priests, and the offerings they make on the altar are consumed by a flash of divine fire from the "glory of the Lord" that hovers over the Holy of Holies. With that act, the Tabernacle and the priesthood are fully operational, and the gap between sinful humanity and God is bridged.

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Preview

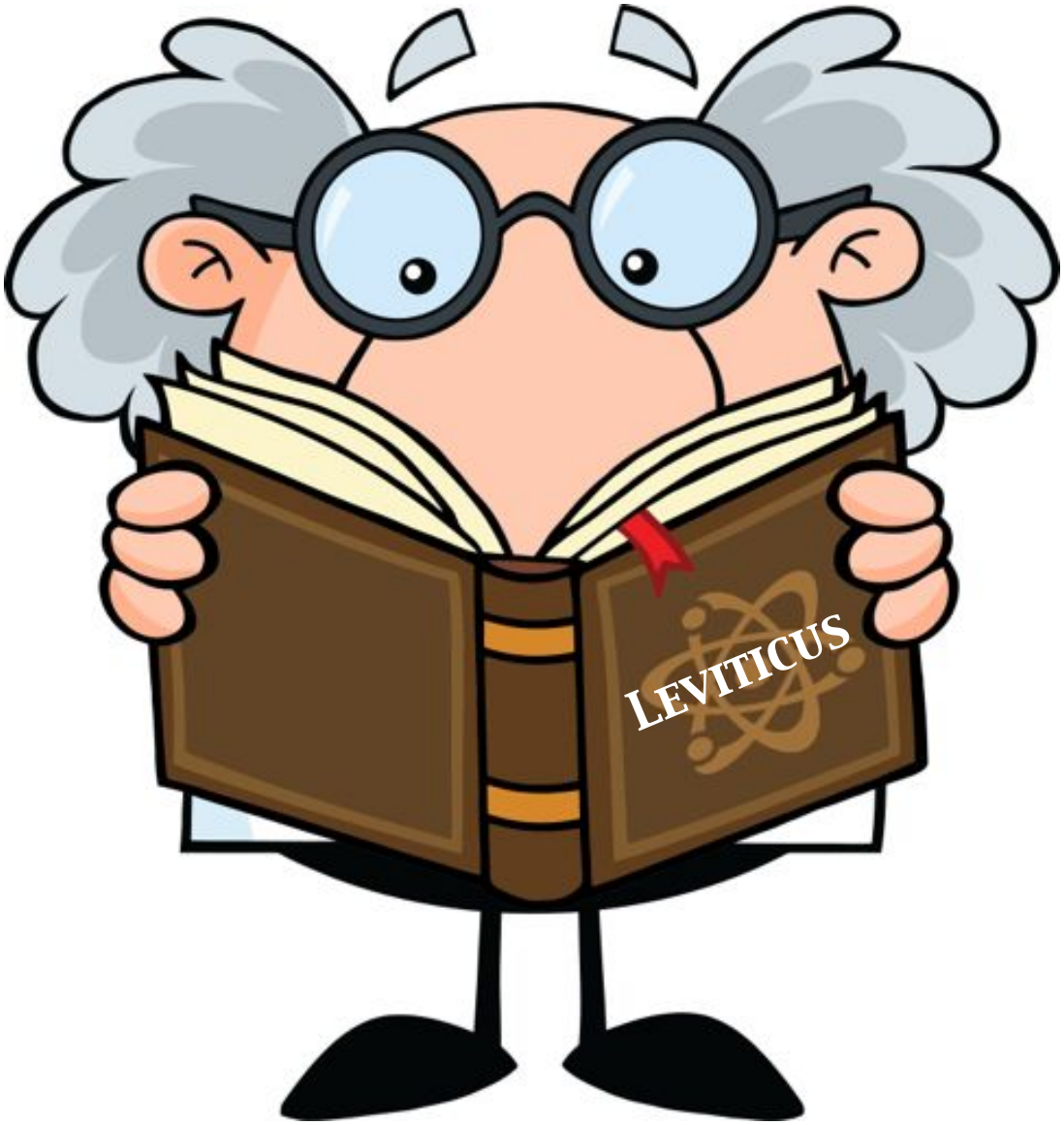
Nadab & Abihu

Approaching God as a representative of the people requires meticulous attention to form and ritual, following *exactly* the procedures that God has established. One does not enter God's sacred space lightly!

In Lesson #6 Nadab and Abihu do . . . and they suffer the consequences.

As we enter Leviticus 10, it is still the 8th day, the octave of Aaron and his four sons' ordination. Aaron and sons are now full-fledged priests, and they have begun their duties, having offered the prescribed sacrifices for the first time, initiating the priesthood and the sacrificial system.

And then disaster strikes!



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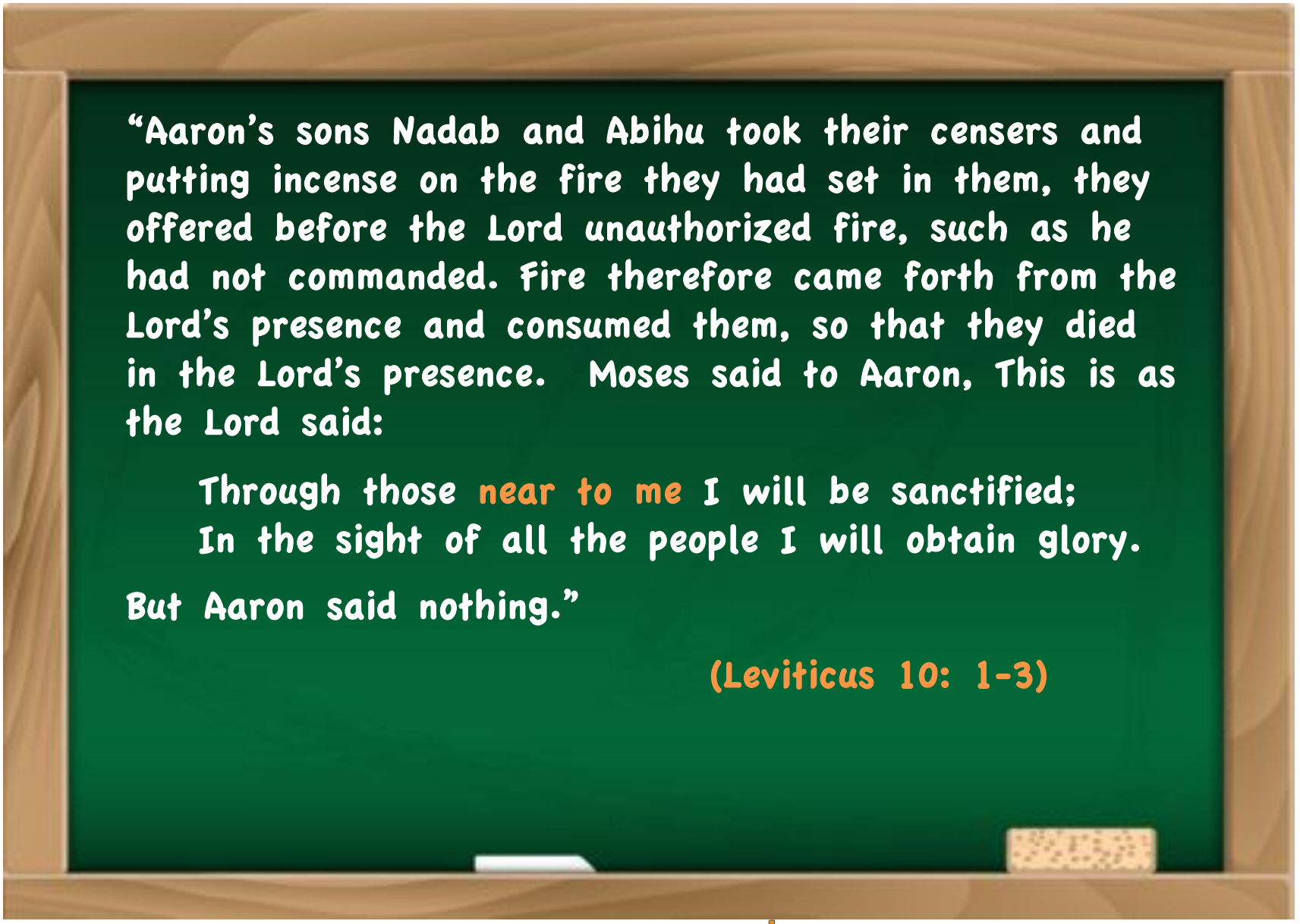
"Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers and putting incense on the fire they had set in them, they offered before the Lord unauthorized fire, such as he had not commanded. Fire therefore came forth from the Lord's presence and consumed them, so that they died in the Lord's presence. Moses said to Aaron, This is as the Lord said:

> Through those near to me I will be sanctified;
> In the sight of all the people I will obtain glory.

But Aaron said nothing."

(Leviticus 10: 1-3)



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The sacred zone where the "divine presence" dwells is intrinsically dangerous. Just as the front lines in battle are exposed to greater danger, so are those closest to the sacred precincts exposed to greater danger.

- **Nadab and Abihu offer "unauthorized fire," not fire from the sacred altar, but presumably fire from an outside, profane source—and at a time of their own choosing.**
- **Following the principle of *lex talionis* (an "eye for an eye"), having offered unauthorized fire, divine fire blazes forth from the Lord's presence and incinerates Nadab and Abihu.**
- **The rather cryptic, one-line poem Moses quotes suggests that God will be glorified through "those near to me," the priests, and specifically in this case, Nadab and Abihu.**

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Aaron is stunned at the dramatic deaths of his sons, Nadab and Abihu, and his silence shimmers off the shards of his shattered heart.

From a literary perspective, Aaron's silence is amplified by its juxtaposition to the people "[shouting] with joy" only three verses earlier.

This is REALLY fine writing!

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But what would motivate Nadab and Abihu to offer “unauthorized fire” in the first place, and especially at a time of their own choosing?
Beats me!
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Perhaps we have a hint in 10: 8-9 . . .

"The Lord said to Aaron: When you are to go to the tent of meeting, you and your sons are forbidden, by a perpetual statute throughout your generations, to drink any wine or strong drink, lest you die."

Could it be that after Aaron and his sons offer the prescribed sacrifices, initiating the Tabernacle and the priesthood—with the spectacular pyrotechnic display of divine fire igniting the wood and meat on the altar—that Nadab and Abihu have a few drinks back at their tent . . . and decide on their own accord to do it again?

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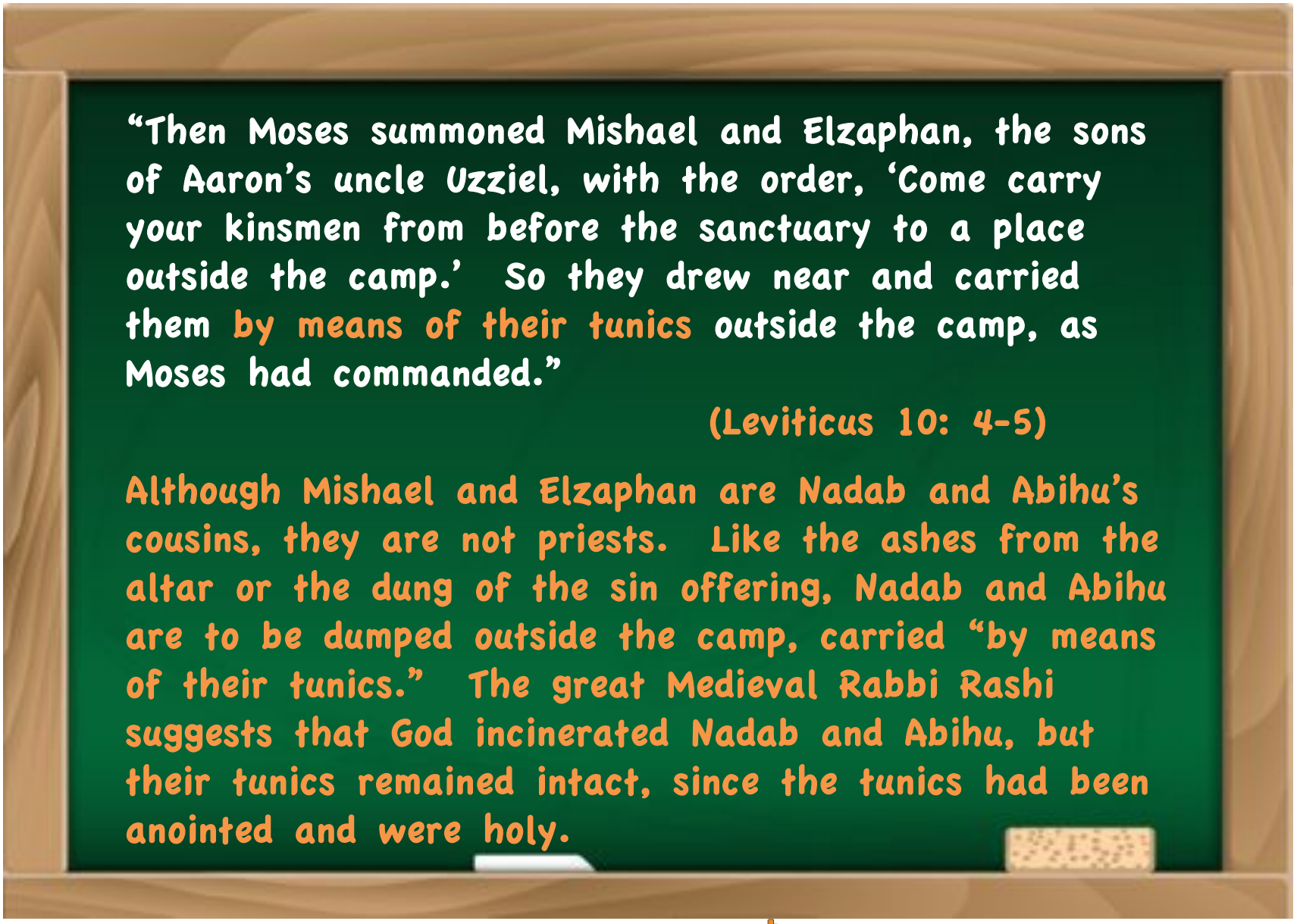
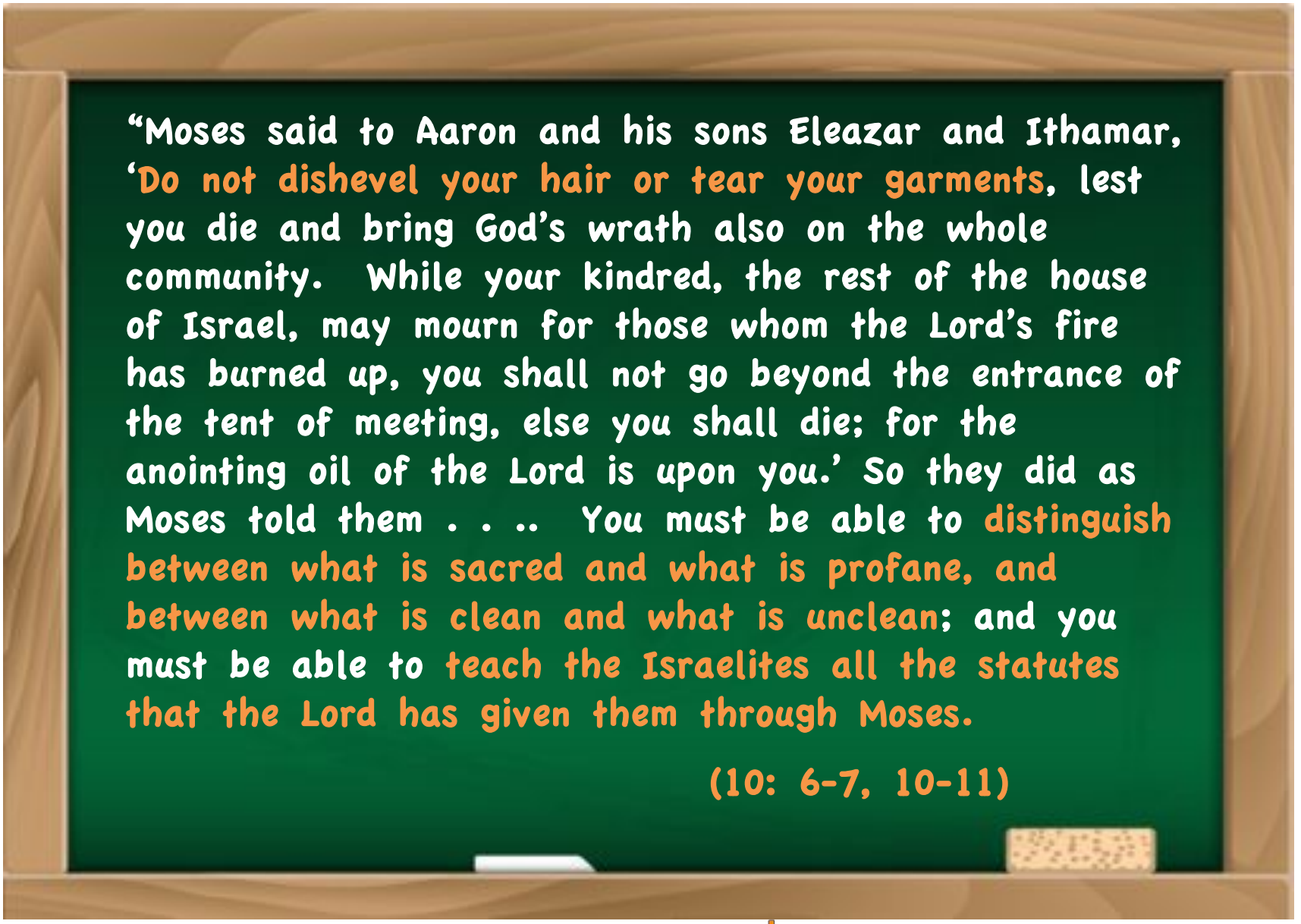

"Then Moses summoned Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Aaron's uncle Uzziel, with the order, 'Come carry your kinsmen from before the sanctuary to a place outside the camp.' So they drew near and carried them by means of their tunics outside the camp, as Moses had commanded."
(Leviticus 10: 4-5)
Although Mishael and Elzaphan are Nadab and Abihu's cousins, they are not priests. Like the ashes from the altar or the dung of the sin offering, Nadab and Abihu are to be dumped outside the camp, carried "by means of their tunics." The great Medieval Rabbi Rashi suggests that God incinerated Nadab and Abihu, but their tunics remained intact, since the tunics had been anointed and were holy.



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Aaron and his surviving sons are not permitted to mourn for their toasted brothers, for they perished in violating the very trust of the sanctuary that had been given to them; Aaron, Eleazer and Ithamar are priests first and foremost and they must continue to perform their duties, not being made "unclean" by contact with the dead or by allowing their personal feelings to affect their duties.

In a very real sense, Moses' seemingly harsh command highlights the intense struggle between the sacred and profane, between life and death.

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“Division” is a major theme that runs throughout the fabric of Scripture: the tripartite nature of the cosmos, Mt. Sinai and the Tabernacle; sacred/ profane; life/death; light/dark; saved/ lost.

Distinguishing between sacred and profane, clean and unclean comprises the core of a priest’s duties and obligations.

Recognizing these distinctions produces in the priests an obligation to “*teach the Israelites all the statutes that the Lord has given them through Moses.*”

Later in Scripture, Ezra the priest is a perfect example of this.

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Pedro Berruguete. *Ezra*
(oil on board), c. 1495.
Diocesan Museum of Palencia, Spain.

After the Babylonian captivity (586-539 B.C.), Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458. He was *"well-versed in the law of Moses given by the Lord, the God of Israel"* (Ezra 7: 6). In Jerusalem, on October 8, 445 B.C.

"Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the occasion . . .. Ezra opened the scroll so that all the people might see it, for he was standing higher than any of the people. When he opened it, all the people stood. Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people, their hands raised high, answered, 'Amen, amen!' . . . Ezra read clearly from the book of the law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read."

(Nehemiah 8: 4, 5-6, 8)

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Dr. Creasy teaching the story of David and King Saul at Ein Gedi, Israel.

Ezra is the Patron Saint of Bible Teachers!

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Thoroughly chastised over the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron and his surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, resume their duties. They are to eat their portion of the people's grain offering and the leg and breast portions of the people's peace offerings.

Read the text carefully (10: 12-15)!

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On close examination, Moses learns that the priests' portion of the sin offering, however, has *not* been eaten—and Moses is furious!

Should Aaron and his sons have eaten their portion of the sin offering, given all that has happened?

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Hummm.
?
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Questions for discussion and thought

1. Why does God incinerate Nadab and Abihu?
2. What argument might you make on their behalf?
3. After the death of his two sons, why does Aaron remain silent?
4. What is the lesson in the death of Nadab and Abihu?
5. Once Aaron explains why he and his two remaining sons have not eaten their portion of the people's sin offering, Moses anger dissolves. Why?

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