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The Pillar of Cloud and Fire

9: 15-23

The pillar of cloud and fire DIG: Why were there no atheists in the camp of Isra'el? How does the pillar of cloud and fire symbolize the Word of God? How many times and ways does this passage refer to the fire-cloud above the Tabernacle? How would this fire-cloud help Moshe lead the people?

REFLECT: Are you patient enough to wait on the Lord? Or do you rush ahead? How is that working for you? What does it mean to “walk in the light” and “walk in the darkness?” How important is it to stop and remember the goodness of God? How does ADONAI guide spiritual leaders today?

Just as the Cloud marked a new chapter in Isra'el's life in the Exodus, so too the appearance of the Cloud motif after the Second Passover marked a new and pivotal transition in the life of Isra'el.

Throughout these early chapters of **Numbers** there is a topical presentation rather than a chronological arrangement of the material. They have been telling us the story of **the Israelite's** preparations to leave Mount Sinai. In the first four chapters of **Numbers**, they took a census (to see link click [An](#) - **The Levitical Census**) and assigned **the Levites** to **their** various tasks (see [Ar](#) - **The Four Camps of Levites**). **Numbers 7-10** is a flashback and relates how **Isra'el** was ready to depart from Mount Sinai. **Chapters 9 and 10** tell of the final preparation before the departure **from Saini** as a flashback **on the twentieth of the second month of the second year (10:11)**; the observance of **the second Passover** six days earlier (**9:1-14**); **the pillar cloud and fire** as a guide (**9:15-23**); **the trumpet signals** for assembling **the people** and **its leaders** and for breaking camp (**10:1-10**); the order of march (**10:11-28**), and a narrative relating a different marching order (**10:29-36**).¹⁴⁵



As the Torah prepares us for the departure from Mount Sinai, we are reminded about **the pillar of cloud and fire** that led **them** through the wilderness. **The Sh'khinah glory** was the visual manifestation of **YHVH**. It is the same **Presence** that led **them** forth from Egypt, interposed itself between the Egyptians and **the Israelites** at the Sea of Reeds, and led them to Mount Sinai. It is the same **Cloud** that descended upon Mount Sinai, out of which they heard the voice of **God** and into which **Moshe** ascended when **he** climbed that mountain. When **the Tabernacle** was erected on **the first day of the first month**, **the Sh'khinah glory** descended from Mount Sinai and settled upon **the Tabernacle**, signifying that **the Divine Presence** had taken up residence within **the Tabernacle**. No one doubted that **God** was in their midst.

The book of **Exodus** ended with elevated prose, expressing the excitement of the moment, regarding **the Cloud of glory**. **In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the Tabernacle, they would set out. But if the fire-cloud did not lift, they did not set out - until the day it lifted. So the fire-cloud of ADONAI was over the Tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the houses of Isra'el during their travels (Ex 40:36-38).** This elevated prose is now expanded upon in **Numbers 9**. It is as if the interlude which began with **Leviticus 1** has been completed, and we are now able to return to the subject we left off with in **Exodus 40**. When **YHVH** deemed it was time to break camp; disassemble **the Tabernacle** and move forward, **He** signaled **His** intent by lifting **the pillar of cloud and fire** from upon **the Tabernacle**.¹⁴⁶

In this anticipatory passage (see [Ac - Numbers from a Messianic Jewish Perspective: Anticipatory Passages](#)) **Isra'el's** guidance in **the wilderness** by **God's Presence** as condensed in **the pillar of cloud and fire** has already been anticipated in **the Second Book of Moshe** (see the commentary on **Exodus Hh - The Glory of the LORD Filled the Tabernacle**), and later explained on by **Isaiah** (see the commentary on **Isaiah Ay - A Cloud of Smoke by Day and a Glow of Fire by Night**). To see a short video of this **pillar**

of cloud and fire click [here](#).

On the day the Tabernacle was put up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, that is, the Tent of the testimony. And in the evening, over the Tabernacle was what appeared to be fire, which remained until morning. So, it was continuously, cloud by day and it looked like fire at night (9:15-16). It must have been an extraordinary sight - that mystic **cloud**, that **fiery** heaviness, that enveloping **Presence**. **God led Isra'el in its wilderness march not by His voice commands, but by His appointed sign, a cloud-imbedded with fire. During the day only the cloud was visible, the fire, presumably dimmed by the sunlight. But night rendered the cloud invisible, and the luminous fire could be clearly seen.**¹⁴⁷ These were symbols one would not . . . could not ignore. **They** were awesome and eerie, unnatural and unexpected, comforting and protective. This was a very practical function for **the fire-cloud**. During **the daytime, the cloud** provided essential protection from the dangerous brilliant desert sun beating down upon the fragile elderly and the vulnerable young. At **night, the fire** would provide much needed heat from the cold chill which characterizes such arid climates. **Ha'Shem** thinks of everything!¹⁴⁸

Whenever the fire-cloud was taken up from above the Tabernacle, the people of Isra'el continued their travels; and they camped wherever the fire-cloud settled (9:17). Two significant verbs are used to describe **its** presence as the symbol of **God's** nearness. One is the verb meaning *to cover* in **verse 15** above; the other is the verb meaning *to settle*. The expression **wherever the fire-cloud settled** uses the significant verb *sakan*, which gives us the basis for the idea of **the Sh'khinah glory**. Surprisingly, **Sh'khinah** is not a biblical word. It is built on the verb meaning *to dwell*, the idea of **the** abiding presence of **ADONAI** among **His people**. The Hebrew text rings with the sound of *sakan* as this verb is also the basis for the term **Tabernacle, miskan**. This phrasing symbolizes both **God's** nearness and **His** remoteness. **He** is present as **a cloud**, but **He** hovers above; **He** is near as **a fire**, but one cannot get too close. For **He** is **YHVH**!

The Sh'khinah also appeared in the B'rit Chadashah. **And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby [Jerusalem], keeping watch over their flocks at night.** Some were probably dozing, a few were watching, when the night sky was unexpectedly split apart. Heaven and earth seemed to merge when suddenly **an angel of ADONAI appeared to them, and the Sh'khinah glory of the LORD**, the visible manifestation of **His** presence, **shone around them**. It was brighter than day, more like staring at the noon sun; and the sleeping **shepherds** awakened and, in fear, hid **their** eyes in the folds of **their** coats because **they were terrified (Luke 2:9)**. Sensing this, **their** sheep may have begun

to run in circles because they too were afraid. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today, in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah (Luke 2:8-11).

The Sh’khinah also reappeared during His life affirming that Yeshua is the Messiah. We can see this in the transfiguration (see [The Life of Christ Gb - Jesus went up a High Mountain where He was Transfigured](#)). As Jesus was praying the appearance of His face changed and shone like the sun (Luke 9:29a). This is very similar to the experience of Moshe on Mount Sinai (see [Exodus Hd - The Radiant Face of Moses](#)). The difference was that the shining of the face of Moses was a reflection, like the shining of the moon is a reflection of the sun. In this case Messiah is the Sh’khinah glory (see [Isaiah Ju - The Glory of the LORD Rises Upon You](#)). As a result, the shining of His face was much greater than Moses’ face. Christ’s veiled glory was unveiled. And when the three apostles . . . saw His glory (Matthew 17:2b; Luke 9:29b and 32b). And out of the cloud, that same cloud, the bat-kol, a divine voice, literally “daughter of a voice” said: This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased (Matthew 17:5b).

From the wilderness in Numbers, to the Gospels, there is a great truth that we should not miss. This cloud, the Sh’khinah glory of ADONAI, is coming back. But when? For the Lord Himself will come down with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Messiah will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the cloud, this same Sh’khinah glory, to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (First Thessalonians 4:16-17).¹⁴⁹

At the command of ADONAI, the people of Isra’el traveled; at the order of ADONAI, they camped; and as long as the cloud stayed over the Tabernacle, they stayed in camp (9:18). The phrase at the command of ADONAI, is more literally, *by the mouth of ADONAI*. The fire-cloud was one of the ways in which the LORD spoke to His people. The identification of the lifting and settling of the fire-cloud and the command of ADONAI was made sure in this and the following verses. The fire-cloud was the means God used to direct the movements and the resting times of His people Isra’el.

Even when the cloud remained on the Tabernacle for a long time, the people of Isra’el did what ADONAI had charged them to do and did not travel. The movement of the cloud-fire was unpredictable. This was to impress on the people the sense that it was Ha’Shem who was leading them, not some force of nature. Sometimes the fire-

cloud was a few days over the Tabernacle; according to ADONAI's order, they remained in camp; and according to ADONAI's order, they traveled. Sometimes the fire-cloud was there only from evening until morning; so that when the cloud was taken up in the morning, they traveled. Or even if it continued up both day and night, when the cloud was up, they traveled. Whatever the duration, the people were to move or encamp based on the movement or settling of the fire-cloud. Whether it was two days, a month or a year that the fire-cloud remained over the Tabernacle, staying on it, the people of Isra'el remained in camp and did not travel; but as soon as it was taken up, they traveled (9:19-22). Both the Israelites then, and us today, need to wait on the Lord and be patient.

They obeyed ADONAI's order, they camped; and at ADONAI's order, they traveled - they did what ADONAI had charged them to do through Moshe (9:23). This is a beautiful illustration of a people following their God, they obeyed ADONAI's order. The repetitious nature of this file enhances the expectation of continued obedience to the sure direction of the LORD in Isra'el's movements through the wilderness. The role of Moses is mentioned for balance. Moshe was God's agent who interpreted the movement of the fire-cloud as signaling the movement of the people. The level of the tragedy of their subsequent disobedience is heightened by this paragraph of great obedience.¹⁵⁰

It is interesting to note that the miraculous pillar of cloud and fire brought light to the Israelites but darkness to their enemies. Next, the Angel of ADONAI, who was going ahead of the camp of Isra'el, moved away and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved away from in front of them and stood behind them. It stationed itself between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Isra'el - there was cloud and darkness here, but light by night there; so that the one did not come near the other all night long (Exodus 14:19-20). In this respect, it symbolizes the Word of God, because those who don't know Messiah by faith simply can't understand what the Word is saying (see the commentary on [Second Corinthians Aw - Veiling and Unveiling](#)). In order to know the mind of YHVH, we must submit to the will of God, and the first step is to put saving faith in Yeshua Messiah (Ephesians 2:8-9). Then you move out of the darkness and into God's wonderful light (John 3:18-21; First Peter 2:9; Second Corinthians 4:6, and Colossians 1:13).

The priests, who lived near the Tabernacle, probably assigned Levites to keep watch day and night so they would know when the pillar of cloud and fire was moving. If we sincerely want to do the will of God, we must keep our eyes open and be alert at all times. The B'rit Chadashah word for this attitude of alertness and expectancy is watch (Matthew

24:42 and 25:13; 1 Corinthians 16:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:6; First Peter 4:7).

Yeshua called **Himself the light of the world (John 8:12)**, and **He** promised those who had faith, trust, or belief (Greek: *pisteo*) in **Him** that they would never walk in **darkness**. It's a great privilege to **walk in the light** and enjoy fellowship with **God** and **His people (First John 1:4-10)**. To walk in **darkness** means to be out of the will of **Ha'Shem**, apart from the blessing of **God**, and in danger of the discipline of **the LORD** (see the commentary on **Hebrews Cz - God Disciplines His Children**). Why live in the shadows or in **darkness** when you can have **ADONAI's** smiling face shining on you (**Numbers 6:24-26**).¹⁵¹

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** so much for not only saving me from sin's punishment, but **You** also so graciously are always there within me to guide me. **Your** guidance is always the wisest thing to do, for **You** are all wise and omniscient, seeing clearly all that will happen in the future (**Dani'el Chapters 2 and 7**). **Your** wisdom extends to the details of life, putting events and people together. No detail misses **Your** attention, just as **Your** careful attention to the creation of huge galaxies and also to the tiny atom's parts with microscopic electrons, protons and neutrons. No worry for **You** to guide me. **You** are both **Sovereign Ruler** of the world (**Isaiah 7:7, 25:8, 28:16, 30:15, 40:10, 38:16, 49:22, 50:4,5,7,9, 51:22, 52:4, 56:8, 61:1,11, 65:13,15**) ; and live within me to see and understand all that is happening to me. **Yeshua answered and said to him: If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word. My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our dwelling with him (John 14:23)**. **Your** abiding presence (**John 14:23**) is such a comfort even in the hardest of times! I love **You** and seek to follow closely **Your** guidance in **Your Word** and by **Your Spirit**. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*