

The Deaths of Nadav & Avihu

A Punishment of Yesterday Serves as a Warning to the Present

Commentary to Parashat Shimini

*By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok.
Copyright © 1995 by Ariel Bar Tzadok. All rights reserved.*

***“And the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan,
placed within it fire and placed incense upon it.
And they [thus] offered a “strange” fire before HaShem,
one that He did not command of them.
And a fire came forth from before HaShem
and devoured them and they died before HaShem.”
(Lev. 10:1-2)***

It appears evident that HaShem struck down Nadav and Avihu because they committed the sin of “offering a strange fire before HaShem.”

Yet, the nature of this “strange fire” brings up some very important questions:

1. What type of strange fire did they offer?
2. Even if it was “strange” so what? What made it so bad that it cost Nadav and Avihu their lives?
3. What can we learn from this lesson to avoid repeating the same mistake?

Hazal gives many reasons for what happened to these two sons of Aharon. The well-known reasons for their punishment include:

- a) that they acted arrogantly in the presence of Moshe (deciding a Halakha in his presence),
- b) did an act that their father Aharon the High Priest was supposed to do,
- c) they were drunk with wine,
- d) they were not married and thus not worthy to make such an offering.

According to pshat, Rabbeynu Bahya, in his commentary of this episode states that the “strange fire” is rather evident. Nadav and Avihu were supposed to ignite the incense offering using the fire from the altar. Apparently they used another fire source. This then was the strange fire.

Rabbeynu Bahya then continues to offer a Kabbalistic reason. He states that Nadav and Avihu saw the descent of fire from Heaven upon the altar. They recognized that this fire emanated from the

supernal place of Judgement. Their concern was that judgement would pass throughout the camp with devastating effects. They thus ran to offer to incense, which was ordained specifically to appease the forces of judgement. Yet, they made one great error.

Whenever one wishes to avert the supernal forces of judgement, it is not enough that one tries to appease them directly. For who has the power to appease the wrath of G-d? Rather, one must supplicate and depend upon Divine mercy. What one must do then is to call upon the holy essential Name Havaya (YHVH) and not attempt to go through other channels. This then was their sin. They did the right thing, but did it in the wrong way. In other words, they had good intentions. They just had bad actions. How G-d judges in an instant like this is clearly evident.

This reminds me of an old saying, *“the right means in the wrong hands causes the right means to work in the wrong way.”* This very much appears to be what happened here. This should serve as a lesson to all those who wish to study Kabbalah before being ready for it.

Rabbi Moshe David Valle, the top student of the RaMHaL writes in his commentary to Vayikra (Avodat HaKodesh) that the essential sin of Nadav and Avihu was that they made light of Divine service.

After all, fire had just come down from heaven to ignite the altar. These two young men stood in the presence of their elders Moshe and Aharon. They were not running to offer incense. Nadav and Avihu were not commanded to do anything. Yet, they took the initiative on their own. Nadav and Avihu did what they thought was right, without first checking with the established authorities of their father Aharon and uncle Moshe. While some might interpret this as a good thing. It is evident that G-d did not!

It was this presumption on their parts that Rabbi Valle interprets as Nadav and Avihu making light of Divine service. Rabbi Valle states that as leaders of the people, Nadav and Avihu were closely watched by the masses. What they did, the masses followed. This could have had disastrous results.

If the whole people were to act presumptuously, they might all perish. Therefore, to instruct the people of Israel about the sanctity of Divine service, these two sons of Aharon were struck down. This was a lesson that no one should repeat the mistake of presumptuousness, to act in a manner other than that specifically prescribed by the authorities, regardless of the motivation. Again, *“the right means in the wrong hands causes the right means to work in the wrong way.”*

Even Moshe Rabbeynu learned this severe lesson when he did not do exactly as HaShem commanded him and struck the rock instead of speaking to it.

The method of their death is interesting to note. Rabbeynu Bahya states that two thin threads of fire came forth from the Holy Place, (most likely from the Ark of the Covenant) and entered into their noses, thus removing (i.e., burning) their souls. The implication is that physically nothing had happened to them. Although it states, *“a fire came forth from before HaShem and devoured them”* there was no evidence of any fire or of anything being burned.

The Komarno Rebbe in his Hechal Berecha notes that the souls of Nadav and Avihu left their bodies in a state of union with HaShem and that they ascended above to cling to the Tree of Life. Therefore, although the actions of Nadav and Avihu were incorrect, their intentions were pure. They were

punished for their wrong actions here in this world and rewarded for their pure intentions in the world to come.

This can be a very confusing lesson for people to learn. Sometimes we are motivated to do a certain thing, whereas our Torah and conscience tells us that such an action is wrong. Often we convince ourselves that it is all right to do such and such a wrong thing, because we “feel” it to be right.

We say to ourselves, *“after all, G-d is loving and forgiving. He knows that I have nothing but good intentions in my heart. Therefore, although it is written not to do such and such a thing, in this instance, I am sure that even G-d will say it’s OK, because I really feel it’s right!”*

I wonder if these were not the exact words in the minds of Nadav and Avihu just seconds before they were struck dead.

It is clear then that the “strange fire” offered by Nadav and Avihu was both ritually impure and spiritually impure. In order that we would learn from their mistake, not to repeat it, G-d took their lives. These are the answers to the first two questions posed above. Now to address the third: what can we learn from this lesson to avoid repeating the same mistake?

The sin of presumptuousness is all too prevalent today, especially in certain sectors of the Orthodox community. Yet, rather than point finger at this or that group or practice, I believe it to be more constructive to rather address an attitude. I wish to explain why I believe presumptuousness exists and what we can do to deal with it.

Presumptuousness is present when “I” decides that “I” know what is best under the circumstances, even if the Halakha says otherwise.

Presumptuousness exists when “I” believe that certain moral or Halakhic compromises may be acceptable because they serve to create a “higher good.”

Presumptuousness exists when “I” convert into action my personal emotional convictions expecting them to be acceptable to all, including G-d.

These three definitions of presumptuousness are all too common amongst us. Indeed, if we look into our own hearts we will discover that each one of us is individually tempted by these attitudes.

Yet, there are two things in common amongst all these three. One, there is no mention of G-d. Two, there are all too many mentions of “I.” Herein now lies the secret meaning of presumptuousness. Presumptuousness exists when I am full of myself. For one who is full of self, must by definition, be void of G-d. Only one who is full of G-d can be void of self and thus safe from the sin of presumptuousness.

This now, in my opinion, is the problem faced today in many Jewish communities. Barukh HaShem we have more people studying Torah now more than ever. Old yeshivot are full and new ones are opening. Barukh HaShem. Yet, at the same time some horrible is happening in our sacred study halls.

While more and more Torah is being learned, less and less Yirat Shamayim and Derekh Eretz are manifesting in the hearts of the Benei Torah. I am not alone in this observation. Almost every

Orthodox Rabbi I know, here in the US and in Israel agree. We all see that many are bonding with Torah and mitzvot, yet few are bonding directly with HaShem. Many are following the easy mitzvot of Talmud Torah and the mitzvot ha'hitzoniyim (external observances). All too few are fulfilling the hard mitzvot, the mitzvot ha'penimiyim (inner mitzvot) of rectifying negative personality traits, guarding one's tongue from improper speech, guarding one's eyes and mind from exposure to improper education and materials which create philosophies contradictory to pure Torah. It is so hard today to be a Kosher Jew in such an unkosher world like we all live in. Even living in an orthodox Jewish neighborhood is no protection from the encroachments that attack us psychologically every day.

How many of you reading this have responded quickly and defensively saying, "Not Me!"

In this lies the sin of presumptuousness. Worse than this, there is the sin of denial. Denial means that we are not willing to tell the truth about ourselves to ourselves. Granted our personal boosha (shame) is best left between HaShem and us. It is not meant for public consumption. Nevertheless, who among us is so arrogant to say, "I have done nothing wrong."

I know of Rabbanim, Admorim, who enjoy a great wealth of Torah knowledge and have much Kavod (honor) and many students. Yet, they act with such presumptuousness in that they consider themselves to be so infallible and others to be so fallible. In this lies the sin of presumptuousness.

Rabbi Haim Vital wrote his sefer Sha'arei Kedusha as a guide to achieving Ruah HaKodesh and Nevuah. The text even teaches how to use the holy 72 Shemot. Yet, the largest portion of the sefer is dedicated to the preparations for these holy acts. The lion's share of this material is musar, teaching us how to rectify and elevate our midot (personalities). It is these teachings that have made Sha'arei Kedusha a classic in the yeshiva world.

Rabbi Haim's intent with these warnings that proper midot are essential for any type of spiritual achievement is to protect us from repeating the fates of Nadav and Avihu. In order to approach the holy we must be properly prepared. We cannot afford to be inebriated. We must be strongly sober and alert, focused and serious. We must be willing to submit to G-d and not dictate to Him.

Nadav and Avihu were not the first examples of presumptuousness in the Torah. In the beginning, Kayin son of Adam made an offering to HaShem from the fruits of his labors. He expected that the intentions of his heart would make his offer sufficient. This was not the case. When told so, he rose up and killed his brother Hevel (Abel) whose offering was accepted.

To sum up, what we learn is that what HaShem wants of us is what He wants from us. He does not accept substitutes. No matter what our excuses or explanations, what HaShem wants of us are the only things that He will accept from us. When we desire otherwise we violate the sin of presumptuousness. This is the same as the spirit of arrogance, which HaShem hates.