

Parashat Shemini 5775, 2015

How To Serve Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yeziel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it, and they brought before the L-rd foreign fire, which He had not commanded them. And fire went forth from before the L-rd and consumed them, and they died before the L-rd. (*Sefer Shemot* 10:1-2, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*)

The swift and untimely death of Aharon's eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, is one of the focal points of this week's *parasha*. *Chazal* (our Sages may their memory be blessed) suggest a number of reasons as to why Hashem summarily put them to death:

1. Rashi (1040-1105), based upon *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 12:1, quotes Rabbi Eliezer's opinion that Aharon's sons rendered halachic decisions before Moshe – an act that is subject to capital punishment. He also states Rabbi Yishmael's opinion that they had entered the *Mishkan* (Portable Sanctuary) after having drunk wine to the point of probable intoxication.
2. *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shemini* 524 and *Talmud Bavli*, *Sanhedrin* 52a suggest that they were put to death because of the untoward question they asked regarding Moshe and Aharon that was "overheard" by Hashem, "When will these two old people die so that we can lead the community?"
3. *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 20:10 maintains that Nadav and Avihu died because of their having "turned their eyes away from the *Schechinah* (Hashem's presence) and thereby failed to gain spiritual inspiration therefrom." Therefore, G-d waited for the appropriate moment to mete out their punishment.

4. *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 20:9-10 suggests their death came about as a result of their refusal to marry at the proper time – thereby preventing themselves from fathering children.

As classic as these reasons surely are, none of them specifically focus upon the first of our *pasukim*: “And Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it, and they brought before the L-rd foreign fire, which He had not commanded them.” As the *Alshich Hakadosh* (Rav Moshe Alshich, 1508-1593) already noted in his commentary, the most problematic words of our two verses are “they brought before the L-rd foreign fire, which He had not commanded them.” Somehow, he suggests, this phrase uniquely encapsulates the underlying and authentic reason for the deaths of Aharon’s beloved sons.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, implicitly agreed with the *Alshich Hakadosh* and stated that the key phrase in understanding our verses is, indeed, “they brought before the L-rd foreign fire, which He had not commanded them.” He interpreted these words in the following manner:

On the day of their installation, wearing their priestly vestments, they were overcome by ecstasy and by the need to express their emotions. The incense that they burned was identical to that which their father, Aharon, had offered. But there is one significant difference. Aharon was obeying G-d’s will, while Nadav and Avihu performed an action that G-d had not commanded. (This, and the following quotations are from *Darosh Darash Yosef*: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David editor, pages 223-226)

The Rav *zatzal* utilized this explanation as the foundation for his analysis of the Torah approach to serving Hashem. The Jewish way “requires us to fashion our lives according to G-d’s discipline, as illustrated by the word *ve-tzivanu* (and He has commanded us).”

Moreover, “the reason we perform the *mitzvah* is our absolute surrender to G-d’s will.” Surrender, as crucial as it is, however, must be followed by our ultimately transforming the *mitzvah* into “a profound spiritual experience that encompasses our entire being.” The Rav illustrated this idea by examining the nature of *tefilah* (prayer):

Prayer begins as an obligatory, even compelled act, with rigid requirements of time, location, and behavior. We are particularly aware of this during the winter or in inclement weather when we must venture out into the cold for *minyan* early in the morning and at night. However, as we progress in our relationship to prayer, we feel the rewards of intimate communion with G-d.

Rav Soloveitchik further developed the idea of the commandment - spiritual experience nexus in his brief exploration of the *mitzvot* of *matzah* on the Seder night and fasting on Yom Kippur:

The eating of *matzah* on Seder night is initially a response to G-d’s command, “On this night you shall eat *matzah*.” [*Sefer Shemot* 12:18] As the evening evolves, however, eating the *matzah* becomes an act of love for G-d. Likewise, Yom Kippur begins with total surrender to the will of G-d, but as it progresses, we move toward a joyful catharsis. (Brackets my own)

In sum, in Rav Soloveitchik’s view, the Jewish approach toward serving Hashem “consists of two steps: obedience to G-d’s command and discovering the spiritual treasures inherent in it.” As such, we are now in a better position to understand Nadav and Avihu’s sin, and subsequent punishment:

Therefore, the transgression of Nadav and Avihu, whom the Torah describes as sanctified, was that “they offered a strange fire concerning which they had not been commanded.” The divine command and our discipline in obeying that command are the only healthy routes to religious inspiration. Any deviation, especially by *tzaddikim* (righteous individuals), is unacceptable and ultimately doomed to failure. (Underlining and parentheses my own)

With Hashem’s help, may we learn to serve Him in an authentic manner that demonstrates heartfelt observance of His commandments, and enables us to grow closer to Him. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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