

Parashat Shemini 5771, 2011:

Nadav and Avihu: A Case of Misdirected Love

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The untimely and completely supernatural death of Nadav and Avihu serves as one of the focal points of this week's *parasha*. Nadav and Avihu were the sons of Aharon and Elisheva: "Aaron took to himself for a wife, Elisheba, the daughter of Amminadab, the sister of Nahshon, and she bore him Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar." (*Sefer Shemot* 6:23, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) As the Biblical narrative reveals, they were like their father Aharon and their uncle Moshe, in that they were totally dedicated to Hashem (*kulo l'Hashem*). Moreover, they were rewarded for their unswerving loyalty and devotion to the Holy One Blessed be He by being allowed to "perceive G-d," and by being chosen as Kohanim:

And to Moses He [G-d] said, "Come up to the L-rd, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and prostrate yourselves from afar." ... And Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel ascended, and they perceived the God of Israel, and beneath His feet was like the forming of a sapphire brick and like the appearance of the heavens for clarity. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand, and they perceived G-d, and they ate and drank. (Ibid. , 24:1, 9-11)

And you [Moshe] bring near to yourself your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel to serve Me [as Kohanim]: Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar, Aaron's sons. (Ibid. , 28:1)

In light of the incredible spiritual and intellectual heights that Nadav and Avihu had achieved, the following two verses in our *parasha* are particularly difficult to comprehend:

And Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it, and they brought before the L-rd foreign fire (*aish zarah*) 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.

Let us review the essential elements of this brief but overwhelmingly powerful narrative:

1. Nadav and Avihu each took their own incense pans, placed fire (i.e. coals) thereupon, and then placed incense on top of the fire.
2. This incense offering was absent G-d's command and therefore received the title of "foreign fire" ("*aish zarah*").
3. The punishment for bringing *aish zarah* was swift and irrevocable: "And fire went forth from before the L-rd and consumed them, and they died before the L-rd."

Significantly, the expression "*aish zarah*" is found two other times in *Tanach* (the Hebrew Canon of Scripture), and appears solely in the context of summarizing our story (See *Sefer Bamidbar* 3:4, and 26:61).

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (known as the Netziv, 1817-1893) notes in his Torah commentary, *Haamek Davar*, that Nadav and Avihu acted with a deep and abiding sense of *ahavat Hashem* (love of G-d) when they entered the *Ohel Moed* (Tent of Meeting) to offer their incense: "They entered [the *Ohel Moed*] with the fire of the love of Hashem burning deeply and profoundly within them." (*Sefer Vayikra* 10:1, all translations and brackets my own) This seems to be reminiscent of the well-known commandment to love Hashem that is found in the first paragraph of the *Shema*: "And you shall love the L-rd, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means." (*Sefer Devarim* 6:4) If this is the case, asks the Netziv, why did they have to pay for this manifestation of their love of G-d with their very deaths? In other words, why did

Hashem punish them with death when it seems, on the surface, that He should have “rejoiced” in their love and devotion to Him?

Rav Berlin answers these questions in a clear and direct manner that enables us to understand some of the fundamental aspects of *ahavat Hashem*:

The Torah teaches us [through the deaths of Nadav and Avihu] that although *ahavat Hashem* is precious in the eyes of G-d – it was not viewed as such when pursued in this manner i.e. , without G-d having commanded [the offering of this incense.]

To further underscore this mode of approach, the Netziv contrasts the forbidden *aish zarah* of Nadav and Avihu with Moshe’s words, and Aharon’s subsequent actions, in *Sefer Vayikra* 9:6-8:

And Moses said, “This is the thing the L-rd has commanded; do [it], and the glory of the L-rd will appear to you.” And Moses said to Aaron, “Approach the altar and perform your sin offering and your burnt offering, atoning for yourself and for the people, and perform the people's sacrifice, atoning for them, as the L-rd has commanded.” So Aaron approached the altar and slaughtered his sin offering calf.

Rav Berlin explains this passage according to the interpretation of the *Sifra*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Vayikra*. He notes that Moshe was already well-aware of the tendency and desire among certain G-d-intoxicated groups and individuals to demonstrate their love of Hashem in a prohibited manner. This breach of the law, ostensibly with the intent to serve Hashem, was in reality, not serving G-d at all. Instead, it was self-serving and driven by the *yatzer hara* (evil inclination) – precisely because it entailed unauthorized actions. Thus, the Torah teaches us in no uncertain terms: “This is the thing the L-rd has commanded; do [it], and the glory of the L-rd will appear to you.” Clearly when G-d directs our actions through His commandments, then and only then do we have the potential for “the glory of the L-rd to appear to us.” If, G-d forbid, however, we were to

demonstrate our love of Him in a manner lacking the Divine Word, then our love, like that of Nadav and Avihu, would be misdirected and self-destructive.

May it be G-d's will that we will serve and love Him "with all our heart and with all our soul, and with all our means" in accordance and compliance with the laws of His holy Torah. Then, may we, too, be *zocheh* (merit) to witness "the glory of the L-rd" appear to us in the rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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 at rdbe718@gmail.com.