

Parashat Shemini 5778, 2018:

*Nadav and Avihu Revisited*

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 Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha and Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The tragic death of Aharon's eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, is the most powerful dramatic moment of this week's *parasha*:

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*)

*Chazal* (our Sages may their memory be blessed) suggest a number of reasons as to why Nadav and Avihu “died before the L-rd.” *Midrash* after *Midrash* offers its differing analysis of the improper behaviors that led to Nadav and Avihu's downfall. I believe that the sheer number of views reflects a fundamental disquietude amongst *Chazal* regarding the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. After all, the following Midrashic passages teaches us that they were greater than both their father and Moshe:

Rav Yitzchak began: “Your words were found and I ‘embraced’ them, and Your word was to me a joy and a rejoicing of my heart, for Your name was called upon me, O L-rd G-d of Hosts.” (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 15:16) Rav Shmuel bar Nachman said: “This statement was said to Moshe at Mount Sinai, and he did not understand it until events [i.e. the death of Nadav and Avihu] unfolded before him. Moshe said to Aharon: ‘My brother, at Sinai it was told to me that I would one day sanctify this house [the *Mishkan*], and that I would do this together with a great man. I initially thought that perhaps this house would be made holy either through my efforts or yours. Now [subsequent to the death of Nadav and Avihu,] I realize that your two sons are greater than both you and myself.’” (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah*, Vilna edition, Parashat Shemini 12:2, translation and brackets my own)

Rav Shmuel Bornsztain *zatzal* (1855-1926), the second Sochatchover *rebbe* and author of the celebrated homiletic work on the Torah, *Shem Mishmuel*, asks the following question based upon our Midrash: “How is it possible that these incredibly holy individuals [i.e. Nadav and Avihu] ...erred so egregiously?” (*Shem Mishmuel, Sefer Vayikra, Parashat Shemini, 1911, s.v. vayikachu*, this and the following translations and brackets my own) His answer focuses upon Nadav and Avihu’s underlying thought process and consequent misguided motivation to offer *aish zarah* (foreign fire) before Hashem:

It is possible to answer our question by suggesting that their rationale was based upon the following statement of *Chazal*: “That very day [upon which the *Mishkan* was erected] was as great a joy before the Holy One Blessed be He as the day upon which the Heavens and earth were created.” (*Talmud Bavli, Megillah 10b*) They, therefore, thought that the time had arrived for the ultimate universal perfection of the world (*tikun klali*) – just as it will be in the Messianic future when everything [good] will be universally accepted and in the state of perfection. At that time, there will be no *zarut* (nothing foreign), and consequently, there will no longer be an exclusive need for *aish kodesh* (holy fire).

In sum, Nadav and Avihu acted based upon the following formula: the joy of the creation of the world = the elation of the inauguration of the *Mishkan* = the ultimate perfection of the world. Unfortunately, however, the overwhelming bliss experienced at the investiture of the *Mishkan* did not signal the “ultimate universal improvement of the world,” i.e., the onset of Messianic times, and the world remained in its imperfect state. Consequently, the Torah’s requirement for *aish kodesh*, and the concomitant prohibition of *aish zarah*, remained in effect.

My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, is in accord with Rav Bornsztain’s analysis, as we find his explication of our passage:

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 in the course of his presentation of the authentic 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, therefore, is the crucial foundation for 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 the following brief exploration 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 the Rav’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.” He underscores this point in his summation of Nadav and Abihu’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 grow in our authentic commitment and spiritual connection to His Torah, and may we be *zocheh* (merit) to fulfill the words recited each and every morning in the *Shacharit* service: "Happy are we! How goodly is our portion, and how pleasant is our lot, and how beautiful our heritage!" *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.