

Parashat Shemini, 5779, 2019:

Nadav and Avihu and the Attempt to Draw Near

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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, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

This week's *parasha* contains one of the Torah's most difficult passages:

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 Vayikra* 10:1-2, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*)

Many Talmudic sages, *Midrashim* and *mefarashim* (biblical exegetes) struggle to explain this tragedy by diligently searching for clues regarding the improper behaviors that led to Nadav and Avihu's untimely deaths. One such suggestion is found in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 52a*:

Moses and Aaron once walked along, with Nadab and Abihu [*k'var* - already] behind them, and all Israel following in the rear. Then Nadab said to Abihu, "When will these elderly men die, so that you and I will be the leaders of our generation." But the Holy One, blessed be He, said unto them: "We shall see who will bury whom." (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations, brackets my own)

It should be noted that Rashi (1040-1135) understood this narrative in a very direct fashion, and therefore states: "Because they wanted [to acquire] power and authority [upon the demise of Moshe and Aharon,] they [Nadav and Avihu] died." (Translation and brackets my own)

At first blush, the Talmud's vignette is exceptionally difficult, since we have an explicit Midrashic passage that teaches us that Nadav and Avihu were greater than both their father, Aharon, and their uncle, 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)

If, as this Midrash states, Moshe declared to Aharon, “I realize that your two sons are greater than both you and myself,” how is it even remotely possible that, according to the Talmud, Nadav could tell Avihu: “Oh that these old men might die, so that you and I should be the leaders of our generation?” In other words, if Nadav and Avihu had reached such spiritual heights, how could they possibly wish and wait for the demise of Moshe and Aharon?

Given the difficulties inherent in a literal interpretation of the Talmud’s statement, the founder of the *Daf Yomi* movement, HaRav Meir Shapiro of Lublin *zatzal* (1887-1933), analyzes this passage in a unique and trenchant manner. He begins by stressing the incredible level of *kedushah* (holiness) that Nadav and Avihu had achieved, as indicated in the verse: “And the L-rd spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they drew near before the L-rd, and they died.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 16:1) In Rav Shapiro’s view, the underlying reason for their deaths was precisely their unmatched “closeness (*hitkarvute*) to Hashem, which led to their yearning and longing to be with Him.” (This and the following quotations, *Itturei Torah, Sefer Vayikra*, Parashat Shemini, s.v. *v'tatze aish*, pg. 52, Rabbi Aharon Ya’akov Greenberg ed., translations and brackets my own) Next, he notes that their level of *kedushah* had not been achieved “overnight.” Rather, “Nadav and Avihu were already walking behind them” over a very significant period of time, in order to “try to ascertain the levels of holiness that they [Moshe and Aharon] had achieved.” As a result, when

they would say to one another, “when will these elderly men die,” Rav Shapiro asserts that they really meant:

At some unknown point in time, the moment will arrive when they [Moshe and Aharon] will depart from this world, and then, it will be incumbent upon us to lead the generation. If that is the case, we must unflaggingly prepare ourselves for that time, so that we can continue to lead this generation in the same manner as Moshe and Aharon...yet, they were unable to do so, since no one ever arose that equaled Moshe’s level [of prophecy], and they died [without achieving their goal].

In a very real sense, Rav Shapiro provides us with a brilliant analysis of our *Gemara* that complements, rather than contradicts, our Midrashic passage. Nadav and Avihu were incredibly holy and dedicated to serving Hashem and His people. This is why they were driven to emulate the *kedushah* of Moshe and Aharon and thereby become the next leaders of the Jewish people. Although they were sincere, and their quest was truly *l’shame shamayim* (in the service of Heaven), they were unable to comprehend the extent to which Moshe differed in kind and degree from any prophet that had ever lived, or would ever live. They could not fathom the gulf that separated them from Moshe and his level of prophecy. This lack of understanding led them to bring *aish zarah* — incense that had not been commanded by the Almighty — and eventuated in their tragic deaths.

Shabbat Shalom

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