

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Shemini Part II Leviticus 10

1. Nadab and Abihu's Sin

The people sensed supernatural intervention in the fire coming forth “from before Hashem,” perhaps emanating from the Holy of Holies where His presence is represented to be focused. In an instant, the fire consumed all the sacrificial items that had been burning on the altar in their natural fashion, a process that ordinarily required many hours to complete. It was a sign of Divine favor and there was great jubilation.

In the exuberance of the moment, Aharon's two elder sons Nadab and Abihu took their fire-pans, placed fire (glowing coals) on them, placed incense on the fire, and presented an offering before Hashem. The text depicts it as *אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֱתָם*, “strange fire that He had not commanded them” (Lev. 10:1).

Fire burst forth “from before Hashem” and consumed them, in a type of “measure for measure” retribution – they deviated with fire in the holy place and were consumed by fire in the holy place. The identical five-word locution that two verses earlier had referred to the consuming fire that emanated from before Hashem as bringing tremendous joy – *וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלְּפָנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל* – is now employed for the fire that killed Nadab and Abihu. That which a moment before had constituted the appearance of G-d's glory to the people now served as His vehicle for retribution.*

What exactly was Nadab and Abihu's transgression “of strange fire, that He had not commanded them” that deserved such severe punishment on so auspicious an occasion, thus marring the celebration? As it was tersely described in the text, the Sages of the Talmud and Midrash proposed numerous interpretations; taken together their suggestions comprise a veritable code of proper sanctuary behavior.

Rashi cites two opinions. Rabbi Eliezer maintains that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with their service except that it was commanded to Moshe and not as yet specifically taught to them. They acted upon a law without receiving authorization from their mentor, despite his accessibility. This takes “that He had not commanded them” (Lev. 10:1) in its simplest sense, in and of itself rendering the offering *esh zarah* (“strange fire”). Rabbi Ishmael's position is that Nadab and Abihu were intoxicated when they performed their service. This opinion is based on the fact that G-d's instructions to Aharon cautioning the priests not to partake of wine or strong drink before they enter the *Ohel Mo'ed* is located in our context (Lev. 10:8-11). Indeed, interposition of the cautionary law regarding drinking wine before service does give the impression that the tragedy was associated with intoxication. Although the cautionary regulation had not been explicitly taught previously, intoxicated service is ipso facto “strange fire” and repugnant.

In the Sifra, some attribute the punishment to what they detect to be Nadab and Abihu's overweening ambition, acting presumptuously, seeking to ascend to the uppermost leadership positions in the nation, replacing Moshe and Aharon. Sanctuary service performed for personal aggrandizement is a grievous encroachment. (That may also be what Rabbi Eliezer had in mind.) Rabbi Aqiba interprets “strange fire” to mean that the coals they used were not from the sacrificial altar. Another opinion is that they performed service without being properly clothed (thus, not properly prepared) for it.

Others say the sin was that they entered the Holy of Holies. Such entry will subsequently be explicitly prohibited except on Yom Kippur, or in exceptional circumstances such as during a national emergency. It should already have been understood that in ordinary cases the inner sanctum was off limits. Just before His

Revelation on Mount Sinai, G-d warned the people not to ascend the mount until an all-clear signal is given lest they die. Casual entry into the most-holy sanctum, where G-d's presence is represented to abide, trivializes it and violates its lofty status. Although the text does not state Nadab and Abihu entered the Holy of Holies, the manner in which their death is cited in a later passage has been seen as support for this interpretation. Their death is invoked in the background statement for the law prohibiting even the high priest to enter beyond the *parokhet* curtain "at any time," lest he die (Lev. 16:1-2).

Some consider the most straightforward explanation to be that "strange fire" means "strange worship" and refers to the bringing of a non-prescribed offering. The immediately following words אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֲתֶם ("that He had not commanded them") further defined their transgression. Arbitrary service in the sanctuary – even when resulting from spiritual ecstasy, as very possibly may have here been the case – is dangerous. It downgrades the value of the standard instructions and the intended symbolism of the rituals. It opens the door to all sorts of subjective rites, confusion and the "slippery slope," leading to alien concepts and pagan worship. One cannot justify arbitrary ritual decisions except in cases that result from compelling conscience considerations, such as described later in our *parasha* in regard to Aharon and his remaining sons who did not eat from the *hattat* offering that day. (See our discussion on this matter later in this study.)

Interestingly, the two sons of Jeroboam, another individual who engaged in what surely may be termed "strange worship" when he established the two golden calves to divert Israel from going to Jerusalem, were named Abiya and Nadab (1 Kings 14). These names are so similar to Nadab and Abihu that it does not appear to be coincidental. M. D. Cassuto assumes that Jeroboam named them thus to provide an underpinning of priestly antiquity to his deviant endeavor, associating his golden calves with the one Aharon fashioned and hence linking his family with ancient priestly personages. But is it likely that he would identify his children with individuals who trespassed and met such a tragic end? In defense, it may be said that Moshe's comments on Nadab and Abihu may be taken as containing great praise for them, as we will soon explain. Others are of the opinion that the similarity of names is a prophetic

commentary on the danger of non-prescribed sanctuary worship, despite the fact that there were differences in the cases.

2. "This Is What Hashem Has Spoken, Saying"

Regarding the two deaths, Moshe informed Aharon: "This is what Hashem spoke, saying, בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדֵשׁ וְעַל בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדֵשׁ וְעַל כָּל הָעָם אֶכְבֹּד" ("through those near to Me I will be sanctified and before all the people I will be honored," Lev. 10:3). Aharon was silent, submitting to the Divine decree. The statement Moshe quoted as having been said by Hashem is not attested elsewhere in the Torah!

The Sages in the Talmud (BT *Zeb.* 115b) commented on this. One connects the words quoted in Hashem's name to His cautioning words to Moshe on Mount Sinai just prior to Revelation regarding the *kohanim* who approach close to Him. He said that they must sanctify themselves and not come too near, "lest He break out against them" (Ex. 19:22, 24). Another Sage regards Moshe's source to be a phrase that Hashem proclaimed in reference to sanctification of the sanctuary through the presence of His glory. He said, וְנִקְדַּשׁ בְּכְבוֹדִי ("It shall be sanctified through My glory," Ex. 29:43), which through slight emendation and out-of-context reading can be made to yield the necessary message, and imply that Nadab and Abihu were exceedingly great individuals. Surely these statements are homiletic. One wonders if the Sages were not establishing a precedent from Moshe of taking exegetical liberties for the purpose of consoling mourners.

Ibn Ezra takes Moshe's statement as meaning that he had previously received such a message from Hashem despite the fact that it is not recorded elsewhere. This is comparable to those cases in which Moshe revealed a Divine law that was not preceded with mention of it having been transmitted to him, such as earlier in our *parasha* regarding the rituals for the eighth-day ceremony (Lev. 9:6).

Others question this interpretation and make a distinction. It is understandable that there may have been laws that were going to be revealed to the public in their proper time but whose original transmittal was unrecorded for some reason or other. This is unlike Moshe having a reservoir of received communications

from G-d which were unrecorded and which he only revealed when and if the need arose. Is it legitimate to assume that had the tragedy not occurred there was a valuable Divine message that would not have been transmitted to the nation and would not have been incorporated in the Torah?

Ibn Ezra's response is that the Torah explicitly states that G-d revealed to Moshe some of His ways (Ex. 33:17-23), providing insights that the public-at-large was not privy to. We have no idea of the extent of Moshe's knowledge of G-d's ways but it surely exceeded what is written in the Torah. Moshe was at liberty to reveal these insights when and if he deemed it appropriate. The present case involves such an insight.

The Ramban assumes that *הוא אָשַׁר דְּבַר ה'* ("this is what Hashem spoke, namely") does not refer to anything specific G-d actually "spoke." The word *dibber* ("spoke") may connote what He decreed, or thought, or refer to a message made clear by the manner in which He acted. In our case, Moshe's "quote" of what G-d said is his interpretation of the event which had just occurred, based on his knowledge of G-d's ways, not that G-d ever literally "spoke" the quoted words. With the incident that occurred G-d is saying such and such. This may be similar to the statement of Laban and Betuel in their interpretation of the confluence of events that had occurred, it is "as Hashem has spoken" (*כַּאֲשֶׁר דְּבַר ה'*, Gen. 24:51). Although they did not use the additional specifying word "*lemor*," as in our case, that word may take the translation of, "which means to say." In the ambiguous Jebusite statement to David that is introduced with *וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְדָוִד לֵאמֹר* ("They said to David, saying," 2 Sam. 5:6) the latter explanation seems to be evident.

3. "Through Those Near To Me I Show Myself Holy" (NJPS)

What is the straightforward meaning of *בְּקִרְבֵי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם אֶכְבֹּד* ("through those near to Me I will be sanctified and before all the people I will be honored")? Ibn Ezra states that the underlying concept is similar to what is expressed in Hashem's declaration concerning Israel, "You alone have I singled out from all the families of the earth – that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities"

(Amos 3:2, NJPS). G-d is more exacting with those close to Him; since more was invested in them more is expected from them. This is especially the case with those recognized as occupying a position of closeness to Him and who have been the recipients of His special favor and attention. Hence, according to Ibn Ezra, *בְּקִרְבֵי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְגו'* means, "Through those close to Me I display my sanctity" by enforcing my standards upon them. This leads to the immediately following clause, "and I will be honored by the people," for in their recognition of this policy they will revere Me.

Others interpret *אֶקְדֹּשׁ* as meaning, "I will be sanctified," but in a slightly different vein. When G-d decreed punishment for Moshe and Aharon for their sin (associated with Moshe's hitting the rock) of not fulfilling *לְקַדְּשֵׁנִי* ("to sanctify Me," Num. 20:13), the passage concludes, "Those are the Waters of Meribah where the Children of Israel quarreled with Hashem *וַיִּקְדַּשׁ בָּם*" ("and He was sanctified among them"). His demand from those close to Him for precise compliance with His standards fosters awe for His authority and inspires observance of His will by those who might otherwise deviate. It may be added that were He not to punish those close to Him for their violations of His sanctity, He would set an example of governing the world with an unjust standard. Such punishments point to His commitment to justice, an essential component of His sanctity.

The Rashbam interprets *בְּקִרְבֵי אֶקְדֹּשׁ* as presenting the positive principle that "By those close to Me I should be sanctified." According to him, Moshe is informing Aharon of his responsibility that he, as high priest, is now to sanctify G-d and bring Him glory among the people by not abandoning the sanctuary service to engage in mourning practices. Although the regulations regarding the high priest's responsibility in this regard are recorded in Leviticus 21, according to the Rashbam their essence was transmitted at this point and later spelled out more fully. A difficulty with this explanation is that Moshe's opening words, "This is what Hashem has spoken, saying," (*הוא אָשַׁר דְּבַר ה' לֵאמֹר*) seem to introduce an interpretation of the immediate event; it does not appear that they introduce a new law. In addition, to view Moshe as being completely silent concerning the tragedy and beginning his remarks with transmitting a behavioral law to Aharon – despite the overriding importance of

sanctuary service and the validity of the message – appears indelicate.

Menahem Bula (*Daat Mikrah*, Mosad Harav Kook), takes בְּקִרְבֵי אֶקְדֵשׁ in its most basic sense of referring to an elevated standard of behavior that is expected from individuals of great stature, and suggests the following. Moshe implies that Nadab and Abihu, who were anointed priests and therefore close to Hashem, were required to conduct themselves in a manner that would increase His sanctification, which they did not do. However, it does not appear likely that Moshe criticized the deceased to their father before the corpses were removed from the sanctuary.

4. Not To Mourn

Moshe instructed Aharon and his two remaining sons that acts of mourning were prohibited to them and that they were not to leave the sanctuary precincts, presumably to follow the bier or attend the burial. (The seven-day initiation requirement to remain within sanctuary precincts [Lev. 8:33] had already concluded.) He explained, “because Hashem’s anointing oil is upon you” (Lev. 10:6-7), referring to the rite performed during the installation service to Aharon and his sons that signaled their becoming priests. Subsequently, only high priests were anointed; ordinary priests were born into the priesthood. Thus, Aharon’s sons were to assume the responsibility that normally applies only to the high priest, to refrain from mourning practices for even their closest relatives (Lev. 21:11). Constant commitment to their spiritual responsibility had to be paramount. Moshe buttressed his instructions with the motivational clause: “lest you die and His anger strike the whole community” (Lev. 10:6). Even leaving their posts temporarily would leave the nation vulnerable. (For a discussion on other aspects of this law see our *Parashat Emor Part I* study.)

Moshe further instructed Aharon and his two sons that they should eat their portions from the *minḥa* and *shelamim* sacrifices. At this point he did not mention the more serious matter of eating from the *ḥattat*. Concerning their portions from the *minḥa* and *shelamim*, the law does not oblige the priests to eat them – they eat what they choose, and the remainder, after the allowable time limit, is burned. With the instructions concerning *minḥa* and *shelamim* Moshe

was basically informing them that since they were not to engage in acts of mourning, they may fulfill the *misvah* of eating their portions of *qodesh*.

The case of *ḥattat* is very different. When it is of the type whose blood is sprinkled inside the *Ohel Mo`ed*, it is never eaten from; except for certain fats and other items placed on the altar, it is totally incinerated outside the camp. Perhaps the governing concept was that when its blood was sprinkled inside the Tent, had there been a requirement for priestly eating it might diminish the perception of the purifying power of having had direct contact with the Holy. In a standard *ḥattat*, however, priests receive portions and are required to eat from them. As the Sages put it, כְּהֹנִיִּם מִתְּכַפְּרִים וְאֹהֲבִים וּבְעָלִים מִתְּכַפְּרִים (“The priests eat and the ‘owners’ receive atonement,” BT *Yeb.* 90a, Sifra ad loc.). Such eating, obviously with proper thoughts, plays a vital role in the purification process (BT *Yeb.* 17), very possibly constituting an important protest in Torah legislation against contemporary idolatrous concepts. In the *ḥattat* of neighboring societies, it was thought that the impurity being purged from the individual or nation was transferred into the animal, rendering it impure and unfit for ritual consumption. Eating from it demonstrates that there is nothing intrinsic in the animal; rituals do not create a new reality.

Accordingly, regarding the goat of *ḥattat* that was sacrificed that day on behalf of the nation, which was of the standard type whose blood was not sprinkled in the *Ohel Mo`ed*, it was a requirement that the meat be eaten from. As a mandated law, Moshe did not address it when he advised about the optional eating of the *minḥa* and *shelamim* portions.

5. Aharon’s Judgment

Subsequently, Moshe investigated the whereabouts of the goat that had been offered as a *ḥattat*, concerned with assuring that the priestly portions be eaten to complete the ritual properly. Upon discovering that it had been totally incinerated, in violation of the law concerning a standard *ḥattat*, he became angry. Undoubtedly, the “violation” was done with Aharon’s knowledge, since he was now in charge of sanctuary service. Out of respect for the high priest, Moshe directed his censure to Aharon’s sons.

Aharon responded with a rhetorical question. On the day when his sons presented their dedicatory offerings before Hashem, ascending to the heights of the cherished priestly status, such a tragedy befell him, וְאָכַלְתִּי חֶטְאֵת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה בְּעֵינַי ה' "Had I eaten from the *hattat* today would it have found favor in Hashem's eyes?" (10:19). Moshe had explicitly clarified the law to Aharon and his sons regarding the inapplicability of mourning practices to them. Nevertheless, Aharon had rejected the instructions of the highest human authority on Torah law based on his own personal sense of religious conscience as to what G-d would deem appropriate. Clearly, he had not intended to make an issue of it; he knew Moshe's position but decided to rely on his own conscience, choosing not to consult with him. Had Moshe not asked, Aharon would not have expressed his view.

It should be borne in mind that the cause of the tragedy that had occurred that day was a deviation in sanctuary service. In addition, Aharon's judgment in the golden calf episode was found deficient and had enormous negative consequences. Thus, his conscience-driven decision regarding a sanctuary ritual in a sphere that if he is mistaken may bring the most dire consequences was that much more significant.

Moshe heard Aharon's logic and וַיִּטֵּב בְּעֵינָיו ("it found favor in his eyes"). At that point the discussion ends and the subject of the priestly installation is concluded.

The וַיִּטֵּב בְּעֵינָיו stated regarding Moshe corresponds to the וַיִּטֵּב בְּעֵינָיו ה' in Aharon's rhetorical question of the previous verse. It seems that the Torah highlights this monumental dialogue with this correspondence and by having the section abruptly conclude with it, specifically with the words denoting Moshe's approval. The point is made that G-d undoubtedly takes into account such suffering as Aharon was then experiencing as well as his sincere intentions. Conscience, together with full commitment to the will

of G-d, must check mechanical application of ritual law.**

Endnotes

* The Rashbam sees both events as referring to the identical fire. After killing Nadab and Abihu in the Tent, the fire continued on its path and consumed the sacrificial portions on the altar. The latter is described first in accordance with the narrative style of completing the account under discussion before shifting to another subject, even when the second subject described occurred before the first was concluded. This order is especially relevant here, where the people were unaware of what transpired in the Tent. However, it is considered unlikely that Nadab and Abihu would have acted as they did while everyone was awaiting the imminent display of Divine glory. But to have so acted after observing the amazing manifestation of Divine glory in consuming the portions on the altar is consonant with many recorded cases of strange or aberrant behavior during a period of ecstasy.

** From Ronald Benun's workshop: The complete passage that deals with the issue of eating from the sacrifices that day, from *petuḥah* and *petuḥah* (10:12-10:20) contains 160 words. The two center words are צִוָּה ה' ("Hashem commanded"), the first being the eightieth word going forward and the second the eightieth word counting back from the end. This highlights the fact that the topic being dealt with here is focused on Hashem's command within the Covenant. In addition, the three-chapter unit that deals with the priestly initiation and installation as well as the attached events, that is, from the beginning of Chapter 8 to the end of Chapter 10, is comprised of eighty verses. From the first word of Chapter 8 until the last word of Chapter 9 (the text that covers the priestly initiation, installation and Mishkan dedication) is 888 words.

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