

# Parashat Shemini

## Death in the Sanctuary

### Part 1: Introduction

#### The Significance Of "The Eighth Day"

Our Parasha opens on the festive "Yom Hashemini" . What is this eighth day? It is the eighth and final day of the ceremonial dedication of the Mishkan. For seven days now, (Vayikra chapter 8) the Kohanim and Moshe had been engaged in a special inauguration service - the Miluim<sup>1</sup>. This was a week long series of korbanot and ceremonies to sanctify the Mishkan before it began its regular routine of holy service. During the Miluim week, the special ritual objects of the Mishkan were consecrated as were the priests through a daily formula of sacrifices and "anointing oil". After seven days, we are about to witness the climax:

"On the eighth day Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel....TODAY THE LORD WILL APPEAR TO YOU." (9:1-4)

Both Aaron and the people were to bring offerings that would prepare them spiritually for the revelation of God. They brought a sin offering focusing their minds on repentance and self-betterment. They brought a burnt offering expressing their total dedication to God and then a shelamim-peace offering which is representative of human covenant with, and closeness to God.

"Aaron lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after the sin offering, the burnt offering and the peace offering.... and the presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. FIRE CAME FORTH FROM BEFORE THE LORD and consumed the burnt offering .... And all the people saw, and shouted with joy, and fell on their faces." (9:22-24)

God responds to the offerings of man by sending fire from heaven to burn the offering. This revelation is understood by the people. They react with frenzied excitement and unbridled praise, exhilaration. They shout for joy and bow to the ground.

Why is this event so significant? Maybe, it is simply the successful realisation of a major national project. The

explicit aim of the Mishkan was the connection with the divine presence that would result by the establishment of a spiritual centre at the focal point of the Israelite camp. God had promised that this structure would facilitate an ongoing contact between His presence and the people - "Make for me a Tabernacle and I will rest my presence in their midst" (Exodus 25:8). Now, the Mishkan has realised its goals. A connection has been established. God has made revealed His presence in the house dedicated to His name.

But an additional dimension must have been present in the minds of the people of Israel. Ever since the sin of the Golden Calf, God had distanced himself from the nation. He had done this in a most visual way. Whenever Moses wished to communicate with God, he would have to leave the camp to a special "tent of meeting" (Shemot 33:6-10). It was as if God had separated himself, most literally, from the people. Now, with the presence of God revealed to the entire nation in the newly established Tabernacle, God was sending a clear message to the people. He was telling them that they had been forgiven for the betrayal of the Golden Calf. The breach was repaired, direct contact was now restored. (Rashi. Vayikra 9:23)

#### NADAV AND AVIHU

It is on this backdrop of celebration and religious euphoria that we come down to earth with something of a shock. Without so much as a break in the narrative, the Torah turns to the following tragic episode:

"Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took his firepan, put fire on it, and laid incense upon it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, of which they had not been commanded. And FIRE CAME FORTH FROM THE LORD and consumed them; thus they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, 'This is what the Lord meant when he said: Through those close to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people.' And Aaron was silent." (10:1-3)

The contrast in mood and atmosphere could not be sharper, however, there is no doubt that a linkage exists between the stories. The word "ESH" - fire - appears at the critical point of each section of the narrative.

First, God's FIRE consumes the sacrifices on the altar. Then Nadav and Avihu offer incense with a firepan, an act which is considered as "alien FIRE". The result is that FIRE emerges from God and consumes them. It is almost as if Nadav and Avihu themselves become human offerings. They mirror the animal sacrifices which were incinerated by God's fire on the altar only moments earlier. Or possibly the very fire that "came forth from before the Lord", emerging as it were from

<sup>1</sup> Miluim means "induction" into service.

the Kodesh Kodashim, was the self-same fire that "came forth from God" and killed Nadav and Avihu! They were standing at the golden altar, at the only Temple vessel that stood on the central axis of the Mishkan, between the Ark and the Altar; God's fire that emerged to burn the sacrifices on the outer altar burnt them en route. This is a complex moment, jubilation and tragedy are enmeshed, licit and illicit service, divine approval and censure.

### Chavruta

At this point, I am inserting a few sources. Look into the pesukim and try to get to the bottom of this sudden death of Aaron's sons.

1. The parsha here: 10:1-10

Pay special attention to the nuances of the pesukim.

What is the meaning of passuk 3?

- Why did Nadav and Avihu lose their lives? What was God thinking (so to speak)?

- If they did something wrong, why did they perform their guilty act?

2. Elsewhere in the Torah: Vayikra 16:1; Bamidbar 3:4, 26:61.

What do these pesukim tell us about their particular sin?

### 3. Parshanim:

i. See Rashi 10:2-3

- How do Rashi and Rashbam differ in their understanding of passuk 3? Which one is closer to the "peshat"?

ii. Sephorno. See D"H "And it consumed them and they died"

iii. See Rashbam and Ramban on 10:1. What fire killed Nadav and Avihu?

## Part 2: The Sin Of Nadav and Avihu

All the commentaries on this enigmatic episode attempt to delve into the precise nature of the sin of Nadav and Avihu. Why did they do it? What was their motivation? And what exactly was their sin?

At first glance, the sin of Nadav and Avihu would seem to be simple. The Torah tells us that,

“...they offered before the Lord alien fire, of which they had not been commanded.”

This is reiterated elsewhere in the Torah (Numbers 3:4, 26:61) and there would, therefore, seem little room for discussion on this point. As we have noted, the repeated use of the word “fire” leads us to believe that their being consumed by fire was a punishment for the alien fire that they brought. But what exactly is "alien fire"? Was it the fire

which was alien in some way (fire taken from the stove - not the altar [Sifra]) or was it the way in which it was brought that made it "alien".

Other questions come to mind. Would two young priests be punished with death simply for making a technical procedural error? Why would these two priests make this mistake on the inaugural day of the Mishkan when the instructions were so explicitly laid out? Maybe, the gravity and immediacy of the punishment begs us to search for further clues. Many of the answers - and you can find a wide spectrum of suggestions as to what was the crime of Nadav and Avihu. - define the sin on the basis of the motivation concerned.

1. DRUNK

One of the more famous approaches to the issue is that of RASHI. He comments:

“They entered intoxicated. Look, immediately after their death, God warned the surviving priests not to enter the Temple after drinking.”

Rashi (basing himself on the Midrash) does not invent this explanation. He has a strong TEXTUAL proof. He notes a clear undertone in a verse which opens the very next paragraph. There God commands:

“Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink when you enter the sanctuary AND YOU WILL NOT DIE.”

Why the qualifying statement here? Why tell us how to avoid death in God's sanctuary so soon after the horrible death of Nadav and Avihu if the issues are entirely without connection? Apparently, Nadav and Avihu had been celebrating; they drank a little too much. In their unrestrained state, they entered the sanctuary, after all, this was a day of celebration for the Tabernacle. It was there that they met their death.

Was it so bad? - They were only drunk! But the lesson must be in the presence of God, in the Temple, we cannot lose control of our bodies and minds. The Temple is a place where we focus our mind - senses heightened, brain and emotion engaged in the encounter with the almighty. Drunkenness and the loss of control are an anathema to the Temple. Drunkenness in the temple is the height of irreverence and the ultimate act of turning ones face from God's presence. As for Nadav and Avihu, they should know better. They are priests, the servants of God in all that relates to the Tabernacle. They must always be 'on call'. We might say that any lapse in that alert awareness is a fundamental flaw in the servant of God.

Even today, in a reflection of this law, we are restricted from praying if we are in a state of drunkenness. This law applies to Kohanim (Priests) in an interesting way. They are restricted from engaging in the priestly blessing in the Synagogue if they have consumed alcohol as long as they are still affected by it. (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 99:1, 128:38)

## 2. HUMAN INITIATIVE

But Rashi's explanation has a flaw. It relates more to what is said between the lines to that which is stated explicitly. It does not give insight to the "alien fire" and explains little that can satisfy our curiosity as to the causes of this problematic act. The Sifra (a 2nd Century Midrash) offers two alternative approaches:

"... another view: When they saw that Aaron had offered the sacrifices and performed the prescribed service and God had not yet descended in revelation to Israel, Nadav said to Avihu, 'Does anyone cook without fire?' They went to get fire immediately - alien fire - and brought it into the Holy of Holies, as it states: (10:1) "Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took HIS firepan, put fire on it ..."

Let us examine this view. It sees Nadav and Avihu waiting for the fire to descend from heaven. They think that maybe God cannot burn the offering without their assistance. According to this view, their sin is a fundamental and disturbing lack of faith in God. They are unsure whether God has the ability to create fire for himself. Note the textual support. Their own personal fire, became the "alien fire". It was alien because it was undesirable. God responded by demonstrating that he had the power to create fire, and fire of such intensity that it would end their lives.

It is interesting that this midrash has some basis in the text itself of Sefer Vayikra. See how the Midrash inserts the episode of Nadav and Avihu into the time lapse between the sacrifices being offered and fire descending from God. Study the verses inside - 9:22-24 - and you will see the gap which the Midrash uses to read this story.

## 3. RELIGIOUS MOTIVATIONS.

But maybe the most powerful of all is this third alternative explanation, found once again in the Sifra:

"And the sons of Aaron took: They too were bound up in the joy of the occasion. When they saw the "new" fire (from God) they acted to add love to love."

What is the meaning of this esoteric explanation? Apparently, according to this reading, Aaron's sons were moved by only the noblest of motives, thus their given title - "sons of Aaron". They saw God's love for his people by means of the fire he sent to bless the endeavours of man, and they wished to reflect that act back to God. They wanted to imitate God, to dedicate their own religious act to God in a reflection of God's actions towards man.

Rabbi Hirsch explains that their motivations were ideal, but the methods inappropriate. The verses stress their independent act, without consulting the religious authorities - Moses and Aaron. They were well intended, in fact God Himself calls them (v.3) "krovei" - those who are close to Me. So why did they die? Because this was "alien fire". Why was it alien? Because the Torah stresses, "they had not been commanded" to bring it. Only that which God has prescribed is legitimate in the Temple. Individual religious expression, even the most heartfelt feelings of the soul, has to be channelled and expressed in a particular way. Nadav and Avihu broke this sacred code.

"... all offerings are formulae of the demands of God ... Self devised offerings would be a killing of just those very truths which our offerings are meant to impress and dominate the bringers and would be placing a pedestal on which to glorify one's own ideas... Not by fresh inventions even of God-serving novices, but by carrying out that which is ordained by God has the Jewish priest to establish the authenticity of his activities." (Hirsch on 10:1)

Are we all treated so harshly? Apparently not. The Torah records God's guiding rule: "Through those close to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people." It is the closeness to God - whether physically, in the Temple, or religiously, in the case of the righteous - that causes God to exhibit a more stringent treatment. The Talmud has a different way of putting this. It states:

"God takes issue with the righteous, up to a hairbreadth."

But the message is not so distant from our contemporary reality. This Midrash comes to warn us of a common trap within religion. The religious soul conflicts at times with the legal word of religion. There are inspired moments in our Judaism where we feel that if only we could carve out original avenues for our religious expression, channels which give deep and passionate expression to our religious energy, then we would be serving God in the truest way, in the deepest and holiest way. The episode of Nadav and Avihu teaches us that there are limits. The boundaries of Halakha define for us that which is a legitimate religious act and that which crosses over into the realm of the illegal. Religious

passion knows no bounds. But in Judaism, an act is not measured by the heart alone. The act must conform to God's word.

#### THE BACKGROUND TO THIS EPISODE: HAR SINAI

The accusation of drunkenness is remarkably strange. Is it probable that the priests, on their most prominent and auspicious occasion, would enter the Mishkan in a state of intoxication? What were Nadav and Avihu thinking? Even the other suggestions which highlight a certain sin in the mindset of Nadav and Avihu beg the question of "Why?". Why did they not follow instructions. Did the episode of the Golden Calf not teach them that unchecked unrestrained human initiative in the service of God can be a very dangerous commodity?

The Sephorno draws our attention to an event that might provide the background to this event. It happened at Har Sinai:

"Then He (God) said to Moses , 'Come up to the Lord, with Aaron, Nadav and Avihu and seventy elders of Israel, and bow low from a distance. Moses alone shall come near to the Lord; but the others shall not come near, nor shall the people come up with him.

...Then Moses, Nadav and Avihu and the seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel: under his feet there was the likeness of a sapphire stone, like the very sky for purity. Yet he did not raise his hand against the leaders of Israel; they beheld the Lord, and they ate and drank" (Shemot 24:1-2, 9-11)

These verses are very difficult to de-code, however, they tell us the following story. That in the celebrations of the covenant at Har Sinai, a select group of the nations elite, were invited to ascend the mountain. They caught a glimpse of God. They ate and drank.

Were they supposed to look? The text does state that God "did not raise his hand against" these people. Were they guilty of looking too far, of gazing where they should not have gazed?

Sephorno sees this death of Nadav and Avihu as a punishment for their looking at God's image on the mountain which is described as "a consuming fire" (Shemot 24:17) They are killed with that very same fire of God that they experienced on Har Sinai!<sup>2</sup>

#### THE PASSION OF THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

But, to my mind, this is not simply a punishment for their looking at God on Mt. Sinai. After all, God did invite them up the mountain; what were they invited for if not to behold God? I would prefer to see that parsha as a prologue to this parsha in another way.

Nadav and Avihu had seen God. They had experienced God - Panim el Panim - they had lived through a direct encounter of the Divine. Was their "Esh Zara" not an attempt to once again draw closer to God? Maybe the joy of the occasion of the Yom Hasheminni and the appearance of God's fire - direct revelation - was enough to make them yearn once again for that raw experience of God. Hence they "drew near" again. Maybe they felt that in the light of the past they had the license to approach where the ordinary man was forbidden.

And maybe their eating and drinking at Mt. Sinai is also connected in some way to their drunken state here? Why had they drunk? Were they out of control, or were they just attempting to recreate the conditions of the Mt Sinai revelation?<sup>3</sup>

Here is a more sophisticated warning. That even divine revelation itself can, on occasion, prove misleading. The Halakha is the only true guide to correct conduct. The attempt to "get closer" without taking care of the safeguards and the propriety of the occasion, without adhering to Halakhic norms and directives, surging forward passionately with absolute disregard for the system of rules and regulations, however well intended, is a potential for disaster.

Shabbat Shalom

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in Tanach. (The next parsha there in Bamidbar talks about appointment of 70 elders and everyone wonders what happened to the original 70. Chazal explain (see Rashi 11:1) that in the fire of Tavaera, the original 70 elders were killed. Again, there the text is rather cryptic and hides more than it reveals.) See next footnote too.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, the Midrash [Midrash Rabba Beha'alotcha] suggests that it is possible that the instigators of the Golden Calf were the seventy elders. Maybe the same issue is at play. The visualisation of God mislead them to attempt to recreate that self-same visual representation. The elders were affected by their revelation in one way, Nadav and Avihu in a different way, but for both of them, the direct vision of God was something that lead them to irresponsible behaviour.)

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<sup>2</sup> Likewise the Sephorno talks about the seventy elders being consumed by fire in Bamidbar 11:1-3 - another mysterious episode