

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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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,” consuming in an instant all the sacrificial items that had been burning on the altar, 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, Aaron'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 fire that brought tremendous joy – וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' – וַתֹּאכַל (“and fire came forth from before Hashem and consumed” [v. 2]) – 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 Moses 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 “strange fire” (אֵשׁ זָרָה). 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 Aaron cautioning the priests not to partake of wine or strong drink before they enter the Tent of Meeting is located in our context (Lev. 10:8-11). Indeed, interposition of the cautionary law regarding drinking wine before service would otherwise seem out of place and 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: they acted presumptuously, seeking to ascend to the uppermost leadership positions in the nation, replacing Moses and Aaron. 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, thus treating the holy with irreverence. Another opinion is that they performed service without being clothed in the necessary holy vestments, another example of treating the holy with irreverence.

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. The law prohibiting the high priest from entering the inner sanctum "at any time" lest he die was stated after an introductory verse that mentions the death of Nadab and Abihu (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 nonprescribed offering. The immediately following words אֲשֶׁר □ אֶצְנֶה אֹתָם ("that He had not commanded them") surely seems to have that meaning. 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 Aaron and his remaining sons who did not eat from the *h□attat* 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 the Israelites from going to Jerusalem, were named Abijah 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 Aaron 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 Moses' 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 nonprescribed sanctuary worship, despite the fact that there were differences in the cases.

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

Regarding the two deaths, Moses informed Aaron: "This is what Hashem has spoken, saying, בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדָּשׁ, וְיָעַל פָּנָי כָּל הָעָם אֲפָכְדוּ" ("through those near to Me I will be sanctified and before all the people I will be honored" [Lev. 10:3]). Aaron was silent, submitting to the divine decree. The statement Moses quoted as having been said by Hashem is not attested elsewhere in the Torah!

The sages in the Talmud (*b. Zebah□. 115b*) commented on this. One connects the words Moses quoted in G-d's name to G-d's cautioning words to Moses on Mount Sinai just prior to revelation regarding the priests who approach close to Him. He said that they must sanctify themselves and not come too near, "lest He break out against them" (Exod. 19:22, 24). Another sage regards Moses' source to be a phrase that G-d proclaimed in reference to sanctification of the sanctuary through the presence of His glory. He said, וְנִקְדָּשׁ בְּקִבְדִי ("It shall be sanctified through My glory" [Exod. 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 Moses of taking exegetical liberties for the purpose of consoling mourners.

Ibn Ezra takes Moses' statement as meaning that he had previously received such a message from G-d despite the fact that it is not recorded elsewhere. This is comparable to those cases in which Moses 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 eighth-day dedication ceremony (Lev. 9:6).

Others question this interpretation and make a distinction. It is understandable that there may have been laws G-d taught to Moses 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 Moses 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 position is that the Torah explicitly states that G-d revealed to Moses some of His ways (Exod. 33:17-23), providing insights that the public-at-large was not privy to. We have no idea of the extent of Moses' knowledge of G-d's ways but it surely exceeded what is written in the Torah. Moses 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 "this is what Hashem has spoken, saying" (הוא אָפֶר דְּבַר ה' לְאָמַר) does not necessarily mean that G-d ever literally "spoke" the quoted words. 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, Moses' "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. With the incident that occurred G-d is saying such and such. This may be similar to the statement of Laban and Bethuel in their interpretation of the confluence of events that had occurred involving Abraham's servant and Rebecca, it is "as Hashem has spoken" (כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' [Gen. 24:51]). Although they did not use the additional specifying word *lemor* ("saying"), 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 וַיֹּאמֶר לְדָוִד לְאָמַר ("They said to David, saying" [2 Sam. 5:6]), the latter explanation seems to be evident.

### **3. "Through Those Near to Me I will be Sanctified" (Lev. 10:3)**

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 they had more opportunity to appreciate His ways and more was invested in them, more is expected from them. This is especially the case with those who have been the recipients of His

special favor and attention. Hence, according to Ibn Ezra, "through those near to Me I will be sanctified" means, "through those close to Me I display my sanctity" by enforcing my standards upon them. This leads to the immediately following clause, "and before all the people I will be honored," for in their recognition that this is My policy they will revere Me.

The Rashbam translates בְּקִרְבֵי אֶקְדֹּשׁ as "By those close to Me I should be sanctified." According to him Moses is presenting a positive principle, informing Aaron 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 Moses' opening words, "This is what Hashem has spoken, saying," (הוא אָפֶר דְּבַר ה' לְאָמַר) seem to introduce an interpretation of the immediate event; it does not appear that they introduce a new law. In addition, to view Moses as being completely silent concerning the tragedy and beginning his remarks with transmitting a behavioral law to Aaron – despite the overriding importance of sanctuary service and the validity of the message – appears indelicate.

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

Since the status of Nadab and Abihu is ambiguous in the text it may be helpful to examine the case of Moses and Aaron in a passage in which the ק-ד-ש stem (sanctify) is used twice in two different (but related) manners. When Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to it – in a display of anger that Aaron was associated with – G-d decreed that these two leaders could not enter the promised land since they did not fulfill their responsibility לְקַדְּשֵׁנִי ("to sanctify Me"

[Num. 20:13]). Had they comported properly they would have sanctified G-d.

The passage concludes in the following verse with, “Those are the Waters of Meribah where the Israelites quarreled with Hashem וַיִּקְדָּשׁ בָּם” (“and He was sanctified among them”). His demand from Moses and Aaron, those closest to Him, for precise compliance with His standards and punishment for violation, 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 closest to Him for their breaches 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.

#### 4. Not to Mourn

Moses instructed Aaron and his two remaining sons that they were prohibited from acts of mourning as well as from leaving 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 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 Aaron and his sons that signaled their becoming priests. Subsequently, only high priests were anointed; ordinary priests were born into the priesthood. Thus, Aaron’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. Moses 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.)

Moses further instructed Aaron and his two sons that they should eat their portions from the *minh* and *shelamim* sacrifices. At this point he did not mention the more serious matter of eating from the *h* sacrifice. Concerning the priestly portions of the *minh* and *shelamim*, the law does not oblige eating from them – the priests eat what they choose, and the

remainder, after the allowable time limit, is burned. With the instructions concerning *minh* and *shelamim*, although he spoke as if enjoining them to eat, Moses 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 *h* is very different. When it is of the type whose blood is sprinkled inside the Tent of Meeting, it is never eaten from; it is totally incinerated outside the camp (except for the few parts that are placed on the altar). The governing concept seems to be that when its blood was sprinkled inside the Tent the direct contact with the Holy achieves the maximum purifying effect. A requirement for priestly eating would detract from the perception of the Holy’s status. In a standard *h*, however, portions are allocated to the priests and they are required to eat from them. As the sages put it, כֹּהֲנִים אוֹכְלִים וְיִשְׂרָאֵלִים מְתַכַּפְּרִים (“The priests eat and the ‘owners’ receive atonement” [b. *Yebam.* 90a, Sifra ad loc.]). Such eating, obviously with proper thoughts, plays a vital role in the purification process (b. *Yebam.* 17). This seems to have constituted an important protest in Torah legislation against contemporary idolatrous concepts. In the *h* 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 *h* that was sacrificed that day on behalf of the nation, which was of the standard type whose blood was not sprinkled in the Tent of Meeting, it was a requirement that the priests eat from it. As a mandated law, Moses did not address this detail when he advised about the optional eating of the *minh* and *shelamim* portions.

#### 5. Aaron’s Judgment

Subsequently, Moses investigated the whereabouts of the goat that had been offered as a *h*, 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 *h*, he became angry. Undoubtedly, the “violation” was done with Aaron’s knowledge, since he was now in charge of sanctuary

service. Out of respect for the high priest, Moses directed his censure to Aaron's sons.

Aaron 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 הַטָּאֵת הַיּוֹם הַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינָי ה' "Had I eaten from the *h□attat* today, would it have found favor in Hashem's eyes?" (10:19). Moses had explicitly clarified the law to Aaron and his sons regarding the inapplicability of mourning practices to them. Nevertheless, Aaron 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 Moses' position but decided to rely on his own conscience, choosing not to consult with him. Had Moses not asked, Aaron 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, Aaron'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.

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

The phrase וַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינָיו, stated regarding Moses, corresponds to the הַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינָי ה' in Aaron'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 Moses' approval. The point is made that G-d undoubtedly takes into account such suffering as Aaron 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 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 spell of ecstasy.

\*\* Ronald Benun pointed out the following: The complete passage that deals with the issue of eating from the sacrifices that day, from *petuh□□ah* to *petuh□□ah* (10:12-20) contains 160 words. The two center words are ה' צִוָּה ("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 initiation of the priests and their and Tabernacle dedication, as well as the attached events – that is, from the beginning of chapter 8 to the end of chapter 10 – comprises eighty verses. From the first word of chapter 8 until the last word of chapter 9 (that is, up until but not including the Nadab and Abihu narrative and its aftermath) there are 888 words.

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