



YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL

WEEKLY PARSHA

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Nadav and Avihu and the Danger of Unbridled Religious Passion

The Mishkan, after many many months devoted to its construction, and after many many *parshiyot* devoted to its narrative, is - in *parshat* Shmini - finally dedicated and becomes operational. On the eighth and final day of inauguration, Moshe introduces the final series of sacrifices to the Children of Israel, with the declaration that, if they do these final inauguration sacrifices then "the Glory of the Lord will appear to you." (Vayikra 9:6). And, when the ritual is completed, we are told that, in fact, "the Glory of God appeared to the People. And a fire went forth from before God and it consumed on the altar the *olah*, the burnt offering, and the fats, and the entire nation saw and they rejoiced and they fell on their faces." (Vayikra 9:23-24).

Amidst this direct manifestation of God's presence, and the rejoicing of the People, Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, bring their own sacrifice, an offering of incense which was "a foreign fire, one that God had not commanded them." (Vayikra 10:1). This time, again, a "fire went forth from before God," however it does not consume the sacrifices, but those who brought it: "and it consumed them, and they died before the Lord." (Vayikra 10:2).

While the midrash suggests a number of reasons why they were punished, it seems that the simple explanation is what the text itself states - that they drew near with a sacrifice that they had not been commanded to bring. The issue is not violation of God's command *per se* or its converse, doing a non-commanded religious act, it is rather the much more specific concern of how one draws close to God. This can be understood as a natural result of the metaphysical reality of God's presence. The Torah describes God as a "consuming fire." God is the life-force of the universe; God is infinite power. When approached correctly, this brings forth fire that will consume the sacrifices and bring good to the world. When approach incorrectly, or in unregulated ways, this brings forth fire that will destroy people, and bring tragedy to the world. Hence, we find that wherever and whenever the *aron*, the ark that housed the tablets, is handled

incorrectly, that tragedy immediately ensues. Thus, we read in this week's haftorah, that when Uzah makes an innocent mistake and grabs unto the *aron* to prevent it from falling, is immediately stricken dead by God (Shmuel II, 6:7). Such is the power of God's presence, and of the *aaron* which is the location of the presence, that if handled incorrectly, can cause death.

This approach, while true to the text, still does not provide a satisfying religious explanation. We might react as King David did and be "angered that God had broken forth against Uzah," (Shmuel II, 6:8), and we might try to understand how the punishment makes sense on a religious or moral level.

I believe that the deeper meaning of what happened Nadav and Avihu is the need to strike the proper and delicate balance between religious fervor and passion and between regulation and limits. Clearly, Nadav and Avihu were so moved by the manifestation of God's presence, that they felt a powerful religious need to draw close to it, to bring their own sacrifice of incense. They acted on their fervor without reflecting or pausing to assess if what they were doing was proper. Religious passion can be a powerful good, but it can also be extremely dangerous. When people act on their unregulated religious passions, they will tend to feel that their religious actions are self-justifying. If this is how my religious passion propels me to act, then it is a religious act, it is good. If this gets me closer to God - in my mind - then it is good. This "ends justify the means," and "if it feels right it is right," is very antithetical to a classical Jewish approach. And, we only have to look at the world around us and the atrocities that are perpetrated in the name of religion to recognize that unbridled religious passion can be very bad indeed, it can even be evil. The horrific, immoral and cowardly bombing that occurred this week near the Eged bus station in Israel is just the most recent example of the despicable acts can be justified by unregulated religious passion.

What, then, is the proper balance between passion and

rules and regulations? According to the Torah, it is to first follow the rules, to first ensure that one's actions are according to what "God has commanded." When the people did what "God had commanded" the fire consumed the sacrifices. When Nadav and Avihu brought an offering that "God had not commanded," the fire consumed them. Once the rules are being followed, then one can bring all of his or her passions to the experience: "And the people saw and rejoiced and fell on their faces." The mistake is to first focus on the passion. When one does this, the rules are violated, and the act is no longer a religious act, but a dangerous one, one that can bring destruction.

It is for this reason - this need to focus on the rules first - that immediately after the death of Nadav and Avihu the Torah commands against serving God while intoxicated. For many, becoming intoxicated is an important means to a state of religious ecstasy. However, for the Torah it puts passion and experience above rules and responsibility. Approaching God while intoxicated will bring death. Rather, the Kohanim's prime responsibility is to not blur the boundaries, but to set them. They must be sober so they can "distinguish between the holy and the profane, and between the ritually pure and the impure." (Vayikra 10:10). The Kohanim - from the actions of Levi to defend God's honor at Har Sinai, to Pinchas' acting zealously for God, to Eliyahu jealously defending God's honor, to Matityahu's revolt against the Seleucids and the Hellenizers - were very good at religious passion. God, however, had to bridle this in and redirect them, and made their first and primary responsibility to guard the Mishkan, to keep the impure out, and to set the boundaries between what is and is not acceptable.

And thus, the end of the parasha devotes itself to the detailed differentiation between the pure (i.e., kosher) and impure (i.e., non-kosher) animals, and ends by underscoring that setting of boundaries and making proper distinctions is the responsibility of not just the Kohanim, but of everyone. "And to distinguish between the impure and the pure, and between the animal that may be eaten and the one which may not be eaten." (Vayikra 11:47).

Our challenge today is that we have learned this lesson perhaps too well. We have so focused our religious experience on the rules and regulations, on halakha and all of its details, that we have completely lost touch with any sense of religious passion. If there is no religious passion, then our religious life becomes just a life of observance, it becomes lifeless, antiseptic and anemic. Part of the reason that this is so is because we have not - as a rule - prioritized this as a

religious value in the home, in the synagogue, or in the schools. But there is another challenge, and that is that we do not experience God as directly as people had in the past. When one could experience God's presence, when a fire could come down from the heavens, it was easier not just to believe, but to *experience* God, to have a sense of connecting with God. This was a central part of the function of the Mishkan - to create a tangible sense of God's presence. Because we are less connected to nature and our natural, physical state, and because we rationally and philosophically shy away from thinking of or experiencing God's presence as something felt in this world, we are much less equipped to have such a felt religious experience. And so we live a life of halakha, but often not a life of passion. How often have we had a religious experience of "and they rejoiced and they fell on their faces"? Not often, I would guess.

If I had to pick between the two, I would pick the passionless religious experience that is guided by law, halakha, and regulation. This ultimately produces right actions and good in the world. In contrast, as we know too well, a religious experience that is driven by passion can, with all its attractiveness, lead to terrible atrocities. But we shouldn't have to pick. We have been so good at establishing the rule of law, the rule of halakha, that we can stand to reintroduce a little religious passion into our lives. In our relationship with God, we have truly been married a long time, but I am not ready to continue living like the old married couple who are so familiar with each other's ways, that they live their lives quietly and peacefully, with the reassuring regularity that comes after so many years. I want there to still be some spark in the relationship. I want to get excited, and I want us as a people to get excited, to get passionate, to have a drive to serve God and to bring God into the world. Let us know that we must always continue to ensure that the rules are primary, but let us work together to be able to truly connect to God and to "rejoice and fall on our faces."

Shabbat Shalom!

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