

PLAYING WITH FIRE

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. The Mishkan (tabernacle) was finally completed, and the celebration had begun. Ahron the High Priest and his children brought special offerings, and the joy of accomplishment permeated the camp of the Jewish Nation. Then tragedy struck. Ahron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, brought an offering that the Torah characterizes as "an alien fire that Hashem had not commanded. A fire went out from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem." (Leviticus 10:1-3)

Varying Talmudic and Medrashic opinions argue as to what exact sin they committed. Some commentaries interpret the literal verse by explaining that Ahron's children rendered a Halachic (Biblical law) decision in front of their master, Moshe. Others say that they performed their service after drinking wine. Still others argue that their true punishment was deserved at Sinai. They refused to marry claiming that their lineage was so dignified that no maiden could ever meet their standard. Another interpretation is that they began to discuss their future leadership roles that they would secure after the two old men (Moshe and Ahron) passed on.

In all these varying opinions a major question must be addressed. If those were their actual sins, why then did the Torah use the terminology "a strange fire **that Hashem had not commanded**" to describe their transgression? Obviously those words are fit to describe each interpretation that is offered. How?

The Dubno Magid would often relate the following parable: After receiving his promotion to captain, a young sergeant was given his new uniform. He was strictly warned by his appointing general. "Officer, this uniform is your badge of honor. Wear it with pride, and never remove it in public! Remember, you represent the king's elite forces, and your life is now devoted to enhance the honor of his kingdom."

Not long after his commission some seamen in a public park chided the young officer. "We hear you have a large tattoo across your chest reading "I miss my Mom." The young officer was enraged at this humiliating claim, and disputed it vehemently. He was tempted to strip to the waist, but remembered the stern warning not to remove his coat. Suddenly one of the sailors declared, "we will contribute 500 golden pieces to the King's treasury if you don't have the tattoo -- but only if you prove it now!"

In a patriotic move that the sergeant felt would surely bring pleasure to the commander-in-chief, he

bared his chest, proved his point and collected the 500 gold coins. He ran to the general with the money and expected a commendation. Unfortunately, a shower of abuse greeted the neophyte officer. "You fool! I just lost a fortune because of your stupidity. I bet the Navy admiral 2,500 gold pieces that not one of my soldiers would ever remove their uniforms publicly! "

Perhaps there is a common thread among all the explanations of the sins of Nadav and Avihu. In all of the opinions, they had the best of intentions but their actions lacked protocol and guidance. Actions without protocol can have disastrous results. Nadav and Avihu were considered very holy and pious. But the small degree of over-confidence led to their acting without consort. It led to their demise. Perhaps they felt that they were in a position to render judgment without Moshe, or that a little wine may have enhanced their service. Maybe they felt that marriage was beneath them. In theory they may have been correct. But they made decisions without consultation, advice, or consent. They were looked forward to their own leadership -- a leadership that never materialized. They had the desire to contribute their own fire, according to their own visions, but the Torah considered it alien.

The Mishkan was given to the Jews to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. It was at the Golden Calf where the young nation rushed to judgment without true guidance. As soon as Hashem felt that the self-directed scenario was about to recur in the Mishkan, He made a powerful statement. It was as if the Mishkan had a nuclear charge. When dealing with high levels of radioactivity, one cannot forego the slightest established protocol. If you experiment with fire, especially an alien fire, unfortunately you get burnt.

***Dedicated by Ira & Gisele Beer in memory of Harry & Tillie Beer
Good Shabbos!***

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