

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

"The sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, they put fire in them and placed incense upon it; and they brought before G-d an alien fire that He had not commanded them. A fire came forth from before G-d and consumed them and they died before G-d." (Vayikra/Leviticus 10:1-2) At the climax of the celebration of the Inauguration of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), tragedy befell Aaron's priestly family. The Yalkut Shimoni (most comprehensive Midrashic anthology, covering the entirety of the Tanach (Bible); attributed to Rabbi Shimon HaDarshan of Frankfurt of the thirteenth century) (chapter 524) explains "each took his fire pan" is an allusion to the fact that each of the two brothers acted on his own, independent of any input from the other. Simply explained, these two righteous scholars, sons of the great Aaron, following their contemplation of the issue, made a fine error in judgment with catastrophic consequences.

But implicit in the Yalkut is the lesson that had they not acted independently, had they conferred with one another, they would not have made this mistake. This runs contrary to simple logic: if individually they each came to the conclusion that it was acceptable to bring incense for which there was no Divine command or license, would consultation not yield the same flawed conclusion?

Rabbi Alter Henach Leibowitz (Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim of Kew Gardens Hills, New York) elucidates that realization of the truth is the fruit borne from discussion. Two people of like thinking who are genuinely interested in arriving at the truth of the matter, in the course of their dialogue, will unearth the truth, even if that reality is contrary to the initial premise of both parties. The nature of the back and forth of the discussion forces them to reflect and reanalyze their arguments and rationales, compelling greater depth of thought and an arrival at the truth. Yes, Nadav and Avihu would have realized the grave error in offering unsolicited incense.

Furthermore, when Pirkei Avos/The Ethics of Our Fathers lists amongst the forty-eight components of Torah acquisition "closeness of friends" (6:6), most understand that to mean that if one makes a mistake in a Torah concept that he can rely on his friend to set him straight. This is consistent with the teaching in Koheles/Ecclesiastes (4:9-10) "Two are better than one, for they get a better return on their labor. For should they fall, one can lift the other; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and there is no one to lift him!" Rashi explains that the "lift" can be understood literally; but in the realm of Torah learning, if one erred and was not precise in understanding the mentor's lesson, his friend comes and redirects him to the truth. Concludes Rabbi Leibowitz, that the closeness of friends has another imperative. Simply reexamining the issue with a peer forces the diligent scholar to delve

ever deeper and realize the truth.

Indeed, the expert is not the one who can espouse his position on an issue and find it universally accepted because it was he who uttered it. The expert is the scholar who constantly finds himself challenged and, through the process, hones an understanding of reality that would have been impossible to achieve had he been left unchallenged.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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