

UN-INFLUENCED SERVICE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The celebratory atmosphere of the inauguration of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) with which Parshas Shemini begins is suddenly and tragically marred by the shocking death of Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu. The Torah explains that, "They took a foreign fire, and incense, regarding which they were not commanded, and brought them before Hashem [into the Sanctuary]. A fire went out from before Hashem and consumed them." Aaron reacted to this tragic event with silent acceptance. "And Aaron was still." Rashi remarks that Aaron was rewarded for his silence; Hashem addressed him and asked him to teach the next section of the Torah to the nation, namely the prohibition against entering the Mishkan after having consumed wine, beer, or other alcoholic beverages. While we understand that Aaron deserved to be rewarded for his silence, why specifically was he rewarded with this parsha (section)? And how does not entering G-d's sanctuary while under the influence of alcohol relate to his quiet acceptance of Hashem's decree?

While the Torah implies that Nadav and Avihu died because of their unbidden incense-offering, Chazal, our Sages, offer many additional reasons and explanations for their death. Indeed, Rav Dessler in his *Michtav Me-Eliyahu* counts no less than thirteen reasons given for their punishment. One of the strangest reasons, found in the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabbah* 12:1) is that Nadav and Avihu entered the Mishkan in a state of drunkenness. (This would explain why the prohibition of entering the Mishkan drunk immediately follows the story of their death). Rashi (12:3) quotes Moshe saying to Aaron, "Now [that they have died], I realize that they were greater than even you and I." Is it imaginable, then, that such great individuals could have erred in seemingly such an ignoble manner as to enter the Mishkan drunk?

First, we must understand that the halacha of not entering the Mishkan "drunk" does not conform to our definition of drunk. We are not talking about someone whose speech is slurred, or who cannot walk a straight line. Halachically drunk means having consumed even a small amount (a *revi'is*) of wine (as much as one should drink when reciting kiddush.) Perhaps, our Rosh Kollel Rav Fuhrer Shlita explained, the error of Nadav and Avihu was not that they entered the Mishkan "tipsy-turvy," G-d forbid, but rather that they felt a small amount of wine would not only detract from their service - it would enhance it!

We all know that a little bit of wine can go a long way to removing inhibitions and opening the mind. There is nothing quite like the elation and euphoria of Purim, when we all "let loose" and allow our emotions and passions free-reign. Well, if it works for Purim - why not all year round?

The Almighty does not desire that we serve Him (notwithstanding Purim) through the medium of mind-altering drugs and mood enhancers. Perhaps, indeed, that blatt (page) of Gemara would go down smoother with a shot or two of scotch - but that's not how Hashem wishes to be served. It is the real us he wants, not the revised, enhanced, or altered version. (Of course this discussion does not pertain to those who require drugs to correct a chemical imbalance).

I am reminded of the story of the chassid who, appearing before his Rebbe, breaks out in bitter complaint: "Rebbe - I am completely unable to serve Hashem the way I want to. My wife gives me tzures, my kids give me tzures, I am strapped for cash - How is one to serve Hashem?!"

"Who's to say that Hashem wants you to serve Him the way you want to serve Him?" replied the rebbe. "Maybe Hashem would rather you serve Him they way He wants you to serve Him!"

Perhaps a time will come that we will, through genetic modification, be able to enhance our memories so that we remember everything we ever learn after having learned it only once (maybe we could inject elephant genes into the brain...). So will we come to Heaven, after one-hundred-and-twenty, and say to Hashem: Do You see how much I know - Shas, Midrash, Mishnayos... ! Do we delude ourselves into thinking this would make us better people? Will we be rewarded for our genetically-enhanced memories?

The error of Nadav and Avihu (to the extent we can attempt to understand the errors of such giants) was in thinking that enhancing our avodah (service) using external influences allows us to serve Hashem even better. That by "doctoring" the deck from which Hashem has dealt us - by dealing ourselves a new hand - we will have, in some way, become superior. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Aaron, who silently accepted the tragedy Hashem dealt him was the antithesis of such ideas. His silence demonstrated the correct technique, of accepting our situations and circumstances, instead of using foreign substances and mood enhancers to make them go away. And perhaps for this he was rewarded with the parsha of the prohibition against "service under the influence."

Have a good Shabbos.