

TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

These are the names of the sons of Aaron: The firstborn was Nadav, and Avihu, Elazar and Isamar... And Nadav and Avihu died before Hashem when they offered a foreign fire before Hashem; they had no children. [3:3-5]

When enumerating the names and numbers of offspring in each family, it is presumed that where children are not mentioned, there were none. Why does the Torah go out of its way to stress that Nadav and Avihu had no children when by its omission it would have been self-understood? It seems, mefarshim comment, that their not having children must in some way be connected with their deaths.

Sometimes we notice people who are a tad over-enthusiastic in their avodas Hashem (service of Hashem). Not that it is ever possible to be over-enthusiastic, but still, based on the whole picture, it seems as if they are stretching for levels beyond their grasp. Perhaps at times we ourselves feel hypocritical: "Who am I fooling?" we ask ourselves. "Does a holy fire indeed burn inside me that I should daven so loudly/learn with such enthusiasm/dress so modestly/etc.?"

Nobody wants to feel like a phoney. So what should a Jew do if, say, he comes to shul but just isn't in the mood for davening? Should he stick his hands in his pockets and mumble a few words, presenting a true and accurate picture of himself as he feels at the moment?

Sometimes it's okay to burn a "foreign fire" - to paint a self-portrait that may not do full justice to our present selves. We're not trying to fool Hashem, nor ourselves. But it's important to keep in mind that our actions, our attitudes, and our whole approach to serving Hashem has tremendous influence on those around us, most of all our children. Even when we feel apathetic, there's no mitzvah to inject that apathy into others. To the contrary, by igniting a "foreign fire," what we actually present is not a false picture of ourselves, but a representation of how we'd like to feel, even if we don't feel that way right now. Not "this is who I am," but "this is who I'd like to be, this is what I represent, this is my view and my outlook."

Now, were one to be in the position that his actions had no influence on others, then perhaps it would be more correct and honest to contain that "foreign fire," for what do we stand to gain by

making ourselves out to be something we really aren't?

Nadav and Avihu, says the sefer Ma'adanei Melech, ignited a foreign fire. They aspired to perform a service they had not been instructed to do. Had they fathered children, this would be excusable. A father sometimes has to ignite a "foreign fire" in his own heart in order that his children see where he stands and what's dear to him. But they had no children, and thus no excuse for taking on something they had not been told to do. And Nadav and Avihu died before Hashem when they offered a foreign fire before Hashem; they had no children. Perhaps this also explains why the Torah stresses and reiterates that the fire they offered was "before Hashem," i.e. since by having no children they had placed themselves in the position of being before Hashem Alone, they had no right to ignite any foreign fires, and should have stuck to what they had been told to do.

One who digs a pit, or places a stumbling block in the public domain, is liable for any damages incurred as a result. Our faces our actions and our attitudes, say the ba'alei mussar, belong to the public domain. We live with others who pick up and are influenced by messages as subtle as the nuances of our body language. If in a misguided fit of "honesty" we insist on presenting to the world our "true selves," i.e. the bad mood or lack of inspiration we may be feeling at this moment, we will be held liable for damages incurred to others as a result. Just as a mother must sometimes paint a smile on her face and tell her child how nice her drawing is - even when she doesn't feel it - because of her deep love for her child and her desire to make her happy, so too we must always wear our "show faces" when serving Hashem.

The Gemara says Nadav and Avihu died as a result of their halachic ruling (to offer the incense) before Moshe, their teacher, without consultation. At first glance, this seems to be at odds with the cause-of-death mentioned by the Torah - that they offered a foreign fire?! And here the Torah throws an additional nut into the machinery by insinuating that their deaths were related to their not having borne children.

It is only when one becomes a parent and bears children of his own that he can truly comprehend how hurtful his youthful disrespectfulness must have been to his parents. It is critical to a father and mother that their children show them respect when interacting with them. This need for respect gives an adult a heightened sensitivity to the feelings of others. When we are hurt for not receiving the respect we deserve, hopefully it helps us to reflect on situations in our lives in which we are perhaps acting in a similar manner.

In truth Nadav and Avihu died, as the Torah writes, because they offered incense before Hashem without being told to do so. If they would have given Moshe the respect he deserved and deferred to him, he would surely have instructed them not to. But somehow they didn't feel it was necessary to consult with their teacher in this matter, even though not doing so implies some degree of

disrespect. Maybe if they would have had children of their own, they would have seen things a little differently.

One thing's for sure: Children keep us honest. Whether it's by forcing us to put on our rosier faces even when we feel glum, or by piquing our awareness of the feelings and emotions of others, they're there for us almost as much as we're there for them. It's just that they don't have to work too hard at fulfilling their role. We do.

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