

MATTERS OF TIMING

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aharon, took their incense pans and put fire and incense in them and offered an unauthorized fire before God, which He did not command them to offer ... (VaYikrah 10:1)

When an evil person acts and fails, it is usually because his intended action was inherently evil. However, when great people fail, especially miserably, then what?

... A fire went out from before G-d and consumed them and they died before G-d. Moshe said to Aharon, "This is what G-d told me: I will be sanctified through them who approach Me ..." (VaYikrah 10:1)

Moshe told Aharon, "I knew that this house was to be sanctified by those who are beloved to G-d, but I thought it would be through me or you. Now I see that these (Nadav and Avihu) are greater than me and you! (Rashi)

On a simple level, the level called pshat, Nadav and Avihu made a simple, but tragic mistake. Swept up in the euphoria of the Divine Presence descending over the Mishkan, Nadav and Avihu allowed their intense desire to come close to G-d override their obligation to act within halachic boundaries. And, according to Rebi Yishmael, the fact that they had been intoxicated from wine at the time didn't help the matter (Rashi).

Alternatively, there is Rebi Eliezer's pshat: Nadav and Avihu only died because they rendered halachic decisions in the presence of their teacher (Moshe), something for which the Talmud concludes is punishable by death (Eirubin 63a). Alternatively again, Nadav and Avihu became punishable by death back at the time they ascended Har Sinai with Moshe, having viewed the Shechina when they had not been permitted to look (Rashi, Shemos 24:10).

However, there is another level of explanation, a far deeper one, one that can also be drawn out of the following statement:

Anyone who pushes the moment, the moment pushes him off; all who are pushed off by the moment, the moment will be pushed off for them. (Brochos 64a)

Life, very often, is a matter of timing. The right action performed with even the right intention, but at

the wrong time, can have a disastrous effect. Life is not just a matter of knowing what to do and how to do it, but knowing when to do it as well. Sometimes we can have a burning desire to do something, or to say something, but it is just not the moment. If we keep our peace, then we are often around to complete our intention within the correct set of circumstances. If we don't, then, we and others often become victims of the very crisis we tried to alleviate!

Ever since Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and was banished from the Garden of Eden, history has been a process of returning. While the average person may have accepted life outside the garden as "normal" ("If we're here, we might as well enjoy ourselves!"), others more attuned to what is wrong in the spiritual reality and what needs fixing up, have been working furiously to right the wrong, often at the risk of their own lives. According to the more esoteric side of our tradition, Nadav and Avihu had been such people, and it was to this that Moshe referred.

We know from the medical world and similar disciplines that what is visible on the outside is often a sign of what is taking place on the hidden inside. For example, when a person catches a virus, eventually he will get a fever and his eyes will become droopy, along with a host of other symptoms. People will say, "You don't look well ..." because, they can't feel what we feel, but they can tell by the way we look on the outside somewhat how we must feel on the inside.

The same thing is true with respect to the physical-spiritual world. Everything in the physical world is just an "encasement" of a spiritual reality, acting as a threshold, so-to-speak, to allow us to access that spiritual reality, just as our bodies envelope our souls and allow us to use their potential. The Mishkan was a building, but it was also the physical expression of a spiritual concept. The altar was a base with a fire on it, but every detail embodied another holy, spiritual concept. And the incense was made of spices, but it also acted as a "conduit" between two realities, to achieve a desired spiritual impact through a physical act. This is why it could stop plagues of death, as the Angel of Death had revealed to Moshe atop of Har Sinai (Shabbos 89a).

Nadav and Avihu not only knew this, but they also knew what to do and how to do it. They knew what was missing from creation as a result of Adam's eating from the tree, and how the incense played a role in rectifying the situation. They had even been prepared to risk their lives to trigger the rectification themselves.

However, they had misjudged the moment and had over-estimated their abilities to accomplish what they had set out to do. This was a mistake that was later made by Shlomo HaMelech, and three of the four rabbis who entered "Pardes" (see Chagigah 14b). However, in each case, the noble goal had been the rectification of creation and Adam's mistake; in each case, the timing had been wrong and the ability, over-estimated.

At least three messages emerge. First of all, it is exceedingly important to know one's ability and place, and not to over-exceed one's limitations. This is not so easy to do, since we constantly

struggle to find the balance between under-achieving and over-achieving. People, in general, tend to gravitate to one of the two extremes, and finding the balance is a life-long project.

Secondly, it is crucial to never lose sight of the spiritual and physical context within which we live at any given moment in time. It is from this knowledge that we draw the strength to say, "No, now is not the time," or, "If not now, then when?" A world war, G-d forbid, can begin because of a wrongly-timed question or response!

Thirdly, halacha is halacha. As the Maharal states, had Nadav and Avihu acted as they had prior to the giving of Torah at Har Sinai, they would have been heroes. However, once Torah was given and halacha was established, it became the only way to go. Even should a person, for some strange reason, feel smarter than the Torah and want to serve G-d in his own way, he should not. Service of G-d, from the time the Torah was given was fixed and established, and keeping it, even in the face of confusion, is a high level of serving G-d.

Shabbos Day:

As mentioned above, Rashi points out that Nadav and Avihu could have been killed at Har Sinai as well, long before they offered their "unauthorized fire." Why did G-d wait until the dedication of the Mishkan? Because, says Rashi, He didn't want to mix sorrow with simcha!

Really? If that was a reason to postpone the punishment of Nadav and Avihu, then why not further postpone their death in this week's parsha until after the dedication ceremony was over! If ever there was a moment of mixing of sorrow and simcha, of being elevated to a high level of joy only to drop at breakneck speed to the depths of sorrow, it had to have been at this crucial time that fire came out from the Holy of Holies and burned the souls right out of Nadav and Avihu! What was the difference?

We find a similar situation had occurred before as well, when Moshe had descended with the first set of Tablets which he later broke before the eyes of the people. Why did Moshe bring the miraculous Tablets down, if only to break them? Had Moshe not been informed of the building and worshipping of the golden calf below, we could understand why Moshe had "innocently" brought the Tablets down, and then broke them. However, G-d had told Moshe what to expect while still on top of the mountain, and yet, Moshe insisted on bringing the Tablets down ... as if he had intended to break them before the eyes of the people from the moment he had left G-d's presence!

One answer is that Moshe knew full well that the Tablets were going to be denied to the Jewish people because of what had happened, even broken and lost until the time of Moshiach. However, Moshe wanted them to see the miracle at least once. He wanted the Jewish people to see what they

had received, and lost. He wanted the errant nation to know what can be when we devote ourselves to G-d and do not stray. And finally, Moshe wanted the Jewish people to see what would be returned to them, in the End-of-Days, when all will be corrected and Torah will be returned to its former glory.

With the smashing of the Luchos (Tablets) came the smashing of a dream. However, with the smashing of a dream also came the beginning of the fulfillment of another, more spectacular dream, just as Rebi Akiva understood much later on in history:

Rabban Gamliel, Rebi Elazar ben Azariah, Rebi Yehoshua, and Rebi Akiva ... were going to Jerusalem. When they arrived at Har Tzofim (Mt. Scopus), they tore their clothing (in mourning). When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox coming out from where the Holy of Holies used to be, and they weeped. However, Rebi Akiva laughed. They asked him, "Akiva, why do you laugh?" He asked them, "Why do you cry?" They answered him, "The place of which it is written, 'The commoner that shall enter there shall be put to death.' (BaMidbar 1:51) is the fulfillment of the prophecy, 'For the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes will walk upon it.' (Eichah 5:18)." He told them, "I laugh because of the verse, 'I will take to Me reliable witnesses to record, Uriah the priest, and Zechariah ...' (Yishaya 8:2). Why is Uriah mentioned together with Zechariah when the former was from the time of the first Temple and the latter was from the second Temple era? To make the prophecy of Zechariah dependent on the prophecy of Uriah! Uriah said, 'Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps.' (Michah 3:12); Zechariah said, 'There will sit old men and old women in the expansive places of Jerusalem.' (Zechariah 8:4). While the prophecy of Uriah was not fulfilled, I feared that the prophecy of Zechariah might not be realized. However, now that I see that Uriah's prophecy has come true, I am now certain that Zechariah's prophecy will also come true." Having heard this explanation, they told him, "Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have consoled us!" (Makkos 24b)

This message of the above scenario can be applied also to what happened at the time of the Chanukas HaMishkan (Dedication of the Mishkan). It is true that the supreme joy of creating a physical dwelling that could "house" the Divine Presence was snatched a way from the Jewish people before they even had a chance to appreciate it. However, had Nadav and Avihu died before that time, there would have been no such moment at all! Had they died after that time, the lessons their deaths were to teach would have been lost, or at least "watered down."

Therefore, the death of these two great people was timed just right, to allow the Jewish nation to witness perfection, at least for one fleeting moment, so that it could be etched on the national psyche; it was an image to be carried with us on some level of consciousness throughout the generations, until Moshiach's arrival, like a seed of hope planted in the backs of our minds. Like the Luchos broken by Moshe, the disaster may have soured the moment for generations to come. However, it also allowed us to know with our own eyes what could be, and what will be when the time is right, and Jewish history has been allowed to run its course along the way to the Final

Redemption.

Seudos Shlishi:

The tragedy of this week's parsha is echoed in the Haftorah, which is taken from Shmuel 2:6:1. The Aron HaKodesh (Holy Ark) had been taken captive by the Philistines back in the days of Eli, and had been returned unwillingly since all those who held onto it suffered. However, it had failed to make its way back to Jerusalem where it belonged, and after G-d granted David tremendous success against his enemies, he sought to finally bring the Ark "home."

Along the way, a mishap occurred. David had the Ark placed on a cart, and began to return it to Jerusalem amidst all kinds of celebration and merriment. However, Uzzah, one of David's favorites, seeing the swaying of the cart feared that the Ark would fall off and placed his hand on it to steady it. And,

"G-d became angry with Uzzah, and struck him down there for his error, and there he died by the Ark of G-d. David was angered because G-d had made a breach against Uzzah ... David was afraid of G-d that day, and he said, 'How can the Ark of G-d come to me?' David did not want to bring to him the Ark of G-d, into the City of David ..." (Shmuel 2:6:7)

Just as in the days of the Mishkan, in a moment, joy had been transformed into shock and mourning. As in the days of the Mishkan, those who had participated in what was to be a great celebration became extremely dismayed and distraught.

The truth is, though it was Uzzah who was punished, it was really David who had made the initial error:

He (David) erred in a matter that even school children know: "Because the service of the holy things belonged to them, they shall bear them upon their shoulders." (BaMidbar 7:9). However, since he remarked, "Your statutes have been like songs to me in the house of my sojournings ..." (Tehillim 119:54), he was punished through this incident, and Uzzah died because of him. Therefore, when they [later] brought it (the Ark) from the house of Oved-Edom, they brought it upon their shoulders, as it is stated, "He said to them, 'You are the chief of the father of the Levites; sanctify yourselves and your brothers, and you shall bring up the Ark ... for since at first you did not [lift it], the L-rd our G-d caused a breach in us, since at first we did not seek Him in a proper manner.'" (Sota 35a)

There are many lessons and deep meanings to draw out of this story, and the commentators do in an effort to appreciate just exactly what crime caused this punishment. However, the Talmud focuses on a specific error that David made, and that was that he called Torah "song" (z'miros). The Ark should have been carried on the shoulders of the Levites,

But isn't that a good thing? Didn't Moshe and the Jewish people "sing" after the splitting of the Sea in praise of G-d, something for which they were greatly praised?

The answer is, there is song, and then there is song. In English, the difference may not readily emerge, but in Hebrew the difference between the two is very distinct: z'miros and shira. The former was what David had referred to, and the latter was what Moshe had sung after the miracle of the sea. What is the difference between the two Hebrew terms?

Shira is what the soul sings, all the time, except that the "white noise" of the body and the physical world around us does not allow our ears to hear the soul's praise of G-d. However, occasionally, when something happens to "neutralize" our bodies, say a tremendous miracle or something similar like becoming inebriated on Purim, the body is silenced and the soul is allowed to sing freely and to be heard.

Z'miros, on the other hand, is something more limited. It is the body's response to some sort of stimulation, and the spiritual quality of the z'mirah will be dependent upon what type of stimulation was felt, and how much. When used properly, z'mirah can be used to elevate the body to the point that it can begin to hear the song of the soul, but it is not shira unto itself.

Torah may be physical, inasmuch as it is written down on physical parchment. But make no mistake about it; Torah is not physical, and is on the level of the highest portion of the Jewish soul. According to the Ramban, from the first "beis" of "Bereishis" at the beginning of the Torah, until the "lamed" of "Yisroel" at the end of the entire Torah, all the words comprise names of G-d (aside from the one's we know about).

Torah is not z'mirah, it is shira. To treat it on a lower level, by not treating it with the proper respect or respecting its guidelines, no matter how intense and sincere the drive may be to come close to G-d, is a violation of Torah and cannot bring one close to G-d. This David learned the hard way, but it is a message for us to take to heart without having to go through the same result as Uzzah, Nadav, and Avihu.

Melave Malkah:

This week's parsha begins the laws of kashrus, providing us with a list of animals we are allowed to eat, and those which are not permitted to us. Perhaps one of the most famous of all the animals not permitted to the Jew, and, de facto a symbol of "treif" food, is the pig, which in Hebrew is called "chazir."

According to the midrash, pig is called "chazir" because G-d is destined "lehachaziro" (to return it) to the Jewish people in Moshiach's time. However, for many this hard to understand. "Make up your

mind!" they say, "Is pig kosher or treif?!" If it is treif, they reason, then it should always be treif; if it is going to be kosher, then why is it not kosher now?

This just re-emphasizes how much mitzvos, no matter how they are physically expressed in this world (since Har Sinai and the giving of Torah), really express eternal concepts that can be fulfilled in any way G-d sees fit. (Another midrash states that Ya'akov, when he inserted the sticks in the ground to cause the sheep to multiply (Bereishis 30:38), he performed a spiritual act similar to that of Tefillin!) If G-d says that pig is treif now, then it is treif. When He will permit it again, then it will become permitted.

In fact, Adam's sin was not that he ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but that he ate from it at the wrong time. According to the Arizal, had Adam waited three hours until the very first Shabbos, then he would have been permitted to eat with G-d's blessing what previously had been forbidden. Then, according to the Shem M'Shmu'el, Adam would have risen to an even higher level of holiness which would have made the eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil a "holy eating."

If so, in a very real sense, observing the Jewish dietary laws also rectifies the sin of Adam himself, helping us to also eat in "holiness." In other words, when we live on a low spiritual level, then we must act one way to elevate ourselves to a more ideal level of kedusha (holiness). Once we arrive at this level (as in the days of Moshiach), then our inherent holiness will allow us to respond to the physical world around us (which, in itself, will also increase in holiness based upon man's spiritual growth), in a different manner.

In the meantime, we have to follow the Jewish dietary laws to help elevate ourselves to a more desired level of spirituality and holiness. Even should we solve all the physical problems that arise from eating chazir, it will only Moshiach who can usher in a period of existence during which the reality of mitzvos in this world can be altered.

Shabbat Shalom.

Pinchas Winston

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