

THE DEATHS OF NADAV AND AVIHU

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

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 do. A fire went out from before God and burned them up, and they died before God. (Vayikra 10:1-2)

The deaths Of Nadav and Avihu in this week's parshah is always very troubling. No question that they made a BIG mistake in bringing their unauthorized fire before God, but still, on such an important occasion, kill them so dramatically? After all, it was their religious fervor that drove them, their intense desire to become even closer to God that inspired them, so why punish them so severely?

One thing is for certain: God did not overdo it. Unlike a parent, who can overreact to a child's transgression and make the punishment a little more than called for, God punishes only measure-for-measure. Humans can make the mistake of overkill, but God's responses are right on the mark, and if they do not appear that way to us, it is because we don't understand the severity of what went wrong.

Take the incident at Mei Merivah, for example, when Moshe Rabbeinu brought forth water by hitting the rock, as opposed to speaking to it, as commanded by God. Yes, he erred. But, die in the desert instead of leading the Jewish people into the Promised Land, after all he did to bring them there over 40 years? A little extreme, wouldn't you say?

Yes, until you understand what was at stake.

What seemed like just the fulfillment of a request for water was far more than that. After all, there were a few ways that God could have quenched their thirst, and most of them far less dramatic than by speaking to a rock, which begs the question: Was speaking to the rock for the sake of bringing forth water, or was the bringing forth of water an excuse to have Moshe Rabbeinu speak to a rock?

We would have thought the former. Turns out, it was the latter.

That being the case, the question becomes, what's so special about speaking to a rock to bring forth water? Well, if you are a nation about to enter a land that works on a high spiritual plane, and physical success depends upon spiritual dexterity, then getting water from a rock that you spoke to is the ideal preparation for successfully living there.

In fact, the message was so essential that if it could not be taught through Moshe Rabbeinu properly

performing the miracle, then it was going to be taught through his punishment, and indeed, it was. By being forced to die in the desert, the Jewish people came to understand what they were supposed to have learned for living in Eretz Yisroel.

The same type of question can be asked here as well: Did Nadav and Avinu create the need for a swift and Divine punishment for bringing an authorized fire, or did the need for a swift and Divine punishment for bringing an unauthorized fire cause Nadav and Avinu to act as they did? And, if the latter, what was the point, and how can they be held accountable if they were set up?

The message being taught is the same as the one that Noach learned the hard way. Noach was no miscreant. He was a tzaddik. And, as a tzaddik, he set out, from the beginning, to rectify Creation, since mankind was given a fresh start. The wine, the nakedness, all of it was for the sake of returning to the state of existence prior to the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

It had not been an unreasonable assumption, and his intention had been good. But, as they say, the road to Gihenom is paved with good intention, and Noach paid dearly for his faulty attempt to rectify a world that was not yet ready to be rectified. Like Adam HaRishon before him, he had taken on the forces of impurity, only to be overcome by them, and not the other way around.

The message: service of God has rules. Religious fervor has its place, and that is where it must remain. Once it goes beyond its borders, it ceases to be service of God, even if the intention is still pure. It becomes corrupted, and even destructive, and must be stopped before it destroys-in the Name of God. Oh, how it can destroy in the Name of God!

What is religious fervor? It is an extreme and intense emotional belief, one that often leads to a sense of abandonment to a specific cause, and therefore, which can also result in extreme behavior. When the cause itself is beneficial to mankind, the extreme behavior can be positive, even heroic. But, when the cause itself is detrimental to mankind, then the extreme behavior can only be destructive to the world, and eventually, to the zealot himself.

And, don't be fooled by the word "religious." The word itself only means a set of beliefs, which can involve God and the spiritual world, or they can be totally secular. Indeed, often the only difference between a religious zealot and a business zealot is what they sacrifice their lives for, not how they go about doing it. Both get up early, both work hard, and both have plenty of rituals.

The truth is, we have a real time example of the idea from this week's parshah, though it is quite extreme, and not even Jewish. We call them Islamic extremists, but they call themselves Jihadists. The destruction they have wreaked upon others as well as themselves in the name of God is legendary, and the legend is only beginning. They are just starting to spread out across their world with their unique form of sacrifice for God.

Hitler, y"s, translated his religious zealousness into extreme nationalism. That is why he was able to get along so well with the Arab world, which is just continuing on where he left off. His god was the

concept of human supremacy, or Social Darwinism, and he went to extremes to wipe off the face of humanity its weaker elements.

The point is that mankind has this tendency to become extreme about something. It is what makes life exciting because it helps to define us in exciting terms. It even makes us feel heroic, which is really the bottom line, because it seems that we all suffer from something that psychologists call a "Messiah Complex," a latent but intense desire to fix the world.

Where does THAT come from? It's a soul drive. It stems from the fact that we were made in the image of God, and like God, we love perfection. We want it for ourselves and we want it for our world. Some people know this already and commit themselves to it, although they may not yet be clear about what perfection, from God's perspective, actually looks like.

For other people, their drive to perfect the world is buried deep within them, under layers of intellectual confusion and misguided emotions. It's there, but it is quite hidden, and quite quiet, aroused only on unique occasions when something affects them in such a way as to remind them how imperfect they and their world really is. When that happens, sometimes people change their lives forever, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worst.

That is why God gave man a Torah. Through the Torah, God says: This is what perfection looks like, and this is how to go about achieving it, for yourselves and for the world. Follow its instructions closely, and you will, over time, be very pleased with the results. You will feel better about yourselves, your world will improve, and best of all, you and I will relate to one another on a higher level.

However, use a different path towards perfection, apply your zealotry in a non-Torah way, and the result will be just the opposite of what you set out to achieve. You will not become perfect, and the world will not become a better place. "And I," says God, "will have to step in, as I have had to do many times already, to stop what you are doing before it undoes all the good I put into Creation." Just like in this week's parashah.

As of Pesach, the Omer-Count has begun. There are 49 days to prepare for Shavuot by working on a trait a day. Most siddurim tell you what they are each day, but how many tell you what they mean? For that, you have to have a thorough understanding of the sefirot, something that is too Kabbalistic for the average person.

But, whatever they mean and whatever they do, it is all one thing. They are designed to finish the job that Pesach began, and that was to locate our inherent Godliness. As we move further away from Mitzrayim and closer to Shavuot, we are supposed to be learning to identify less with our bodies and more with our souls. And, as we do, we begin to tap more into that part of us that is in God's image, which begins to unleash our religious fervor, tapping into our personal drive to save the world.

As the Leshem explains, the redemption begins on Pesach and ends on Shavuot. He means

nationally, but it also is true personally as well. A Godly person is a free person, because he can rise above the demands of his yetzer hara, not be a slave to it. Indeed, he can even go the next step by channeling its energy in a positive direction, as Moshe Rabbeinu did and Aharon as well.

They also were religious zealots. They were also committed 100 percent to God and Torah, and would have sacrificed everything for both. They lived to serve God and never knew a lazy moment when it came to executing God's will. So why don't hear about them like we do Nadav and Avihu in this week's parashah?

Because, they understood that executing God's will 100 percent meant 100 percent, which included doing it the way God wants it to be done. Nadav and Avihu also wanted to fulfill the will of God 100 percent, but their actual execution of His will fell far short. That is the difference between a real zealot and a pseudo-zealot, and history has witnessed, and is witnessing now, the incredible damage the latter causes to the world.

A sheik once told the Israeli people that the reason why he believed Islamic fundamentalism would overcome the Jewish people, God forbid, was because as much as Israelis love life, they love death. Obviously, this shiek, like so many other fanatical religious leaders, was missing a few screws, feeling like a hero while he should have felt more like a failed human experiment.

God tells the Jewish people in Parashas Nitzavim to choose life, that they may live. At first, it appears like a peculiar statement to make, until you listen to such statements above, and see how many good people have also gone down trying to make the world a better place on their own terms. Choose life, says God, means:

Unleash your messianic drive and religious fervor to connect to Me and make the world a better place, but on My terms, so that, rather than interfere with you, we can celebrate your success together.

Makes sense to me.

Text

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