FIRE FROM HEAVEN

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The story of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the two oldest sons of Aharon and Elisheva, is the subject of considerable discussion in this week's Parsha. The Parsha begins on the first day of Nissan, 2449, the first day that the Mishkan was fully assembled and functioning. The previous week had been devoted to the inauguration of Aharon as Kohain Gadol and his four sons, Nadav, Avihu, Elazar, and Isamar as regular Kohanim. For an entire week Aharon and his sons had been secluded within the Mishkan. Under Moshe's direction they prepared their bodies and souls in anticipation of the momentous occasion of assuming their duties in the Mishkan.

It was to be a day of miracles. Hashem would express His pleasure in the intentions of the Mishkan's construction by sending a bolt of fire from heaven to light the Mizbeach and inaugurate the daily service. This heavenly fire would remain burning on the Mizbeach as an Aish Tamid (continuous and constant flame) for 889 years, until the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash. However, it would also prove to be a day of tragedy and sacrifice.

Something went terribly wrong. Nadav and Avihu, the two eldest sons, overcome with religious fervor and inspiration, offered an Aish Zarah (a foreign fire) that had not been commanded by Hashem. Consequently, the very same fire which remained burning on the Mizbeach for 889 years would also take the lives of Nadav and Avihu, marring what otherwise should have been the happiest of all days.

What went wrong? How could Nadav and Avihu make such a terrible mistake? Who were Nadav and Avihu that the Gemara evaluated them as being potentially greater than Moshe and Aharon? What was so wrong with their personal fervor and inspiration that they had to die? Why did this have to occur on the first day of the Mizbeach's inauguration?

In many ways, the story of Nadav and Avihu teaches us the essence of what a relationship with Hashem is supposed to be. Aharon, the brother of Moshe, was chosen by Hashem to be the father of the Kohanim. He was selected to be the preeminent role model of the true Eved Hashem - servant of G-d. More so than his brother Moshe, Aharon represents the individual who totally accepts his station and circumstance in life. When Moshe argued with G-d over his selection as the "Redeemer" and suggested Aharon as a better choice. G-d told Moshe that he is to go to Egypt where he will meet Aharon who will "see him and rejoice in his heart". Rather than jealousy or even rational questioning, Aharon rejoicingly accepted Moshe's appointment and destiny.

In the aftermath of the Golden Calf, Moshe accused Aharon of leading the people astray and bringing G-d's wrath down upon them. Aharon accepted full responsibility without any attempt at defense or argument.

In this week's Parsha, when his two oldest sons died at the crowning moment of their appointment to the priesthood, the Torah describes Aharon's response as, "And Aharon was silent!" Aharon's silence expressed the emotional devastation of a father but the dignified acquiescence of the Kohain Gadol.

Aharon is the quintessential servant who accepts the decrees and demands of his master without complaint or even reason. This is why he and his children were chosen from among the rest of the Jewish people to serve as the first Kohanim. Later, the selection of his grandson, Pinchas, to also be a Kohain was for the very same reason. At the end of the 40 years in the desert, Pinchas exhibited the "The Covenant of Wholeness" - an ability to suspend both emotional and rational thought in the face of serving his Master and nation. Such a wholeness of devotion could only be rewarded through the intensity and intimacy of the Priesthood. The Priesthood was therefore intended to reflect the singular devotion of the servant of G-d who enters into the sanctuary of Hashem's own home and postures himself as accepting of His every decree and commandment. Within G-d's home there is no room for personal initiative and desire, only service and devotion.

Aharon and Pinchas's abilities to accept G-d's demands without question or compromise is consistent with the prohibition on Shabbos against doing Milacha - creative work. Just as Shabbos is the day when Hashem completed all the work He had intended for creation and therefore we also suspend all creative work on Shabbos; so too, the Mishkan which represented the integration of time, place, and divine intent is also removed from man's imposing innovation and creativity. The Mishkan represented utopian perfection reminiscent of Gan Eden before Adam and Chava were expelled. In the garden our job was Leavdah U'Lishomruh - to serve Hashem and safe-keep his commandments. It was a place of perfection and there was no need to innovate or make changes! So too, the Mishkan was a place where we were to "serve and safe-keep" Hashem's commandments, not innovate or change! The Kohain was intended to be the living embodiment of that total acceptance.

It makes sense that the day of the Mishkan's inauguration would represent absolute unquestioning devotion and acceptance of G-d's commandments, without innovation or change. In fact, Moshe's own critique of the Mishkan was "Kichol Asher Tzivah Hashem Es Moshe" - in accordance with all that Hashem had commanded Moshe. Not only were His exact instructions followed, but every artist directed and limited his and her own creativity to follow the demands of Hashem, rather than the dictates of their artistic selves.

According to most of the commentaries, the sin of Nadav and Avihu involved personal innovations and changes born of their fervent devotion that transcended the dictates of G-d's wishes. Some

suggest that it was their innovation of a personal Psak Halacha - halachik ruling that circumvented the authority of their two teachers, Moshe and Aharon. Others say that in brnging the fire offering they neglected a number of general laws regarding the preparations of any offering. These included the use of personal utensils, ingredients and coals in the making of the offering that ignored the laws governing the service in the Mishkan. It was not within Nadav and Avihu's purview "to do as they wished" - regardless of their intentions. The fact that the Talmud relates that they were "greater than Moshe and Aharon" highlights this very point. Only the brightest and most creative feel that they sometimes "know better" than the older generation. It was Nadav and Avihu's brilliance and insight which led them astray! Rather than embrace the total acceptance that the Priesthood represented, they thought to show initiative and personal expression through the Aish Zara - foreign fire that in the end negated the purity of their mission bringing disaster and tragedy.

"The purpose of his offering is to make him subservient to the fulfillment of G-d's will. Hence all offerings in Judaism represent statements of G-d's demands; he who makes the offering symbolically demonstrates that he has adopted these demands as the standards for his own future conduct. Hence, offerings of one's own devising would be a subversion of that very truth that is to attain dominion over man precisely by means of the offering he makes; it would be tantamount to erecting a pedestal of glory to personal caprice where obedience should be enthroned to the exclusion of all else. Now we understand the reason for the death of the two priestly youths. Their deaths at the moment when G-d's own sanctuary was consecrated is a most solemn warning for all future priests who will serve in that sanctuary. It bars every trace of personal choice and caprice from the precincts of G-d's sanctuary, which is to be nothing else but the sanctuary of His law. In Judaism the priest must demonstrate his efficacy not by inventing novelties for the Divine service but by carrying out what G-d Himself has commanded. (R.S.R. Hirsch - Vayikra, 10:1)

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