

FIRE - THE GOOD AND THE BAD

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The spectacle of fire descending from heaven and lighting a Mizbeach (alter) occurred only twice in history. The first time was in this week's Parsha on the eighth day of the inauguration of Aharon and his sons into the service of the Mishkan. The second time was on Mt. Carmel when Eliyahu (Elijah the Prophet) challenged the prophets of the idol Baal. In both instances, the appearance of fire descending from heaven was an undeniable sign of G-d's favor.

In the first instance, His favor was directed toward the nation. In the second instance His favor was a personal confirmation of Eliyahu's status as "a true prophet of G-d." The fire in the desert, the national fire, was intended to be everlasting. So long as the nation was deserving, the fire would remain burning on the Mizbeach. On the other hand, the second fire, Eliyahu's personal fire, was only for that moment. Once Eliyahu's primacy as a true prophet had been established and the prophets of the Baal had been exposed as false prophets of a false god, the fire died out.

In this week's Parsha, the spectacle of G-d's fire descending from heaven was marred by the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. The Torah states that they died because "they had offered a strange fire that had not been commanded." Rav Hirsch clearly shows from the presenting verses that personal agenda and intent motivated Nadav and Avihu's actions. They had taken coals from their own hearths, in their own fire pans, and brought the special spice offering, the Ketores, that was the exclusive offering of the High Priest.

In doing so, Nadav and Avihu transgressed a number of laws.

1. They did not first confer with Moshe.
2. They brought an offering that was supposed to be the exclusive right of the Kohain Gadol.
3. According to one opinion in the Talmud, they had drunk wine before attempting to bring their "unauthorized" offering. Drinking wine before performing the Temple service is forbidden.
4. They used privately owned items in their offering - which was forbidden. (All offerings presented in the Bais Hamikdash by the Kohanim had to be prepared with utensils belonging to the nation. In fact, the clothing that the Kohanim wore could not belong to the individual Kohain. They were the property of the nation.)

Regardless of Nadav and Avihu's transgressions, their intentions and motives were noble and devotional. They desired to be close to G-d. They were filled with passion and fervor. They felt holy and pure, and by extension, they felt that their every thought and action was holy and pure. However, the fact that their desire and intention to offer a Ketores had not been "commanded"

rendered the offering unfit.

Nadav and Avihu had been appointed to serve the nation as commanded by G-d and taught to them by Moshe. They were not chosen to serve the nation as they saw fit or were inspired. In doing as they saw fit, Nadav and Avihu served themselves and not the interests of the nation or Hashem.

The Medresh describes the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. As the fire descended from heaven the nation fell down in fear and awe. At the very same time, Nadav and Avihu entered the Holy of Holies (only permitted to the Kohain Gadol) to offer their Ketores. The fire descended from heaven to the space between the Badim - carrying poles of the Aron Hakodesh. It then split into four separate flames two of which entered the nostrils of Nadav and the other two the nostrils of Avihu. The fire killed them instantly without marring their outer appearances. The flame then lifted Nadav and Avihu and threw them outside the confines of the Mishkan. The flame then proceeded to the Mizbeach, setting fire to the stacked wood and consuming the Oleh offerings.

It was as if the fire had to first purify the nation from any personal motives in serving G-d before it could light the Mizbeach in everlasting service to G-d. The very same fire that had revealed G-d's favor toward the nation punished Nadav and Avihu's self-motivated devotion. The message was clear. The individual may die but the nation will survive. Personal motive, feelings, and interpretation are meaningful to the individual but will not, cannot, guarantee the nation's eternity. They serve themselves, not G-d.

At times of personal tragedy it is common for the individual to question G-d's judiciousness. We feel that pain and loss justify the challenges and excuse the occasional lack of civility. Certainly, we cannot judge those who challenge G-d or society when it is due to personal loss or pain. However, even pain requires a perspective. The story of Nadav and Avihu provides the perspective.

In the aftermath of their deaths, the verse states, "Vayidome Aharon - and Aharon was silent." What does Vayidome mean? It means acceptance. Aharon's silence did not indicate a lack of emotion or feeling. It revealed the profundity of his personal devotion and sense of responsibility. As the Kohain Gadol he did not have the luxury of venting his pain. At the time of his inauguration, at the time of the lighting of the Mizbeach, he would not voice feelings that challenged G-d and served his own emotional needs. Instead he was silent.

Aharon was not the only one who was silent. Elazar and Isamar, the brothers of Nadav and Avihu, were also silent. They too had suffered a terrible personal tragedy and they too remained silent. Moshe was their uncle and teacher. He too had suffered a terrible personal loss. He too contained his feelings and remained silent.

In 11:2 Rashi writes, "At that moment, G-d's directive to teach the Bnai Yisroel the laws of the Kosher and the non-Kosher animals, fish, and fowl was directed to all of them (Moshe, Aharon, Elazar, and Isamar) equally. Why? Because they were all equal in their silence and they had all accepted G-d's decree with love." G-d rewarded the family of Aharon with the opportunity of teaching the Bnai

Yisroel the laws of Kashrus. Why was this their just reward for their silence in the face of personal tragedy?

Kashrus is one of classic "Chukim - statutes." Although the Torah tells us that the laws of Kashrus are intended to "Make us holy - to set us apart from the other nations - to be Kadosh just like Hashem is Kadosh," nevertheless, it does not reveal why each individual item was permitted or forbidden. Why beef but not ham? Why Gefilta fish but not lobster quiche? Why carp but not squid (well, that one may not be such a mystery...) Yet, Kashrus, more so than any other category of Mitzvos, dominates the religious life style of the Jew.

As with all the Mitzvos, personal preference does no enter into the equation. If you really like green ham Dr. Seuss will have to suffice. If the desire for a cheeseburger grabs hold of you, my Daddy used to say, "Climb into bed and wait for the urge to pass."

Kashrus is all the time. At home, the office, on airlines, in the Far East, the frozen expanse of Antarctica, and Pico Blvd. Kashrus is the standard of the observant Jew.

Just as the Kohain must serve the nation and not himself, so too, must the Jew be identified by the standards of our nation and not his personal cravings.

Because Aharon, Elazar, and Isamar set aside their personal pain and grief and accepted G-d's devastating decree in silence and love, they merited joining Moshe in teaching the laws of Kashrus.

The original fire that appeared in the second year of the desert burned almost 1000 years, until the destruction of the 1st Bais Hamikdash. What a humbling experience it must have been for the Kohain to approach the Mizbeach on a daily basis knowing that he would feel the heat of G-d's original flame. It reminded him that his service for the people and to G-d was a personal destiny forged in the flames of his forefather's silence.

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