

# IN BOUNDS

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Parshas Acharei Mos begins with a reference to the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. It then presents the Yom Kippur service, the prohibitions against bringing sacrifices outside of the Temple and against eating blood, and concludes with a list of 15 prohibited intimate relationships. What is the scope and sequence of these seemingly diverse topics?

When Aharon's two sons died Moshe comforted Aharon with the words, (10:3) "Of this G-d spoke saying, I will be sanctified with those who are nearest Me." Nadav and Avihu died because they attempted an intimacy with G-d that was forbidden to them. They died because they did not respect the boundaries that G-d had established for His relationship with them. Instead, their fervor and desire for closeness with G-d allowed them to ignore the basic discipline demanded of all relationships, and certainly of a relationship with G-d. G-d's message was exceedingly clear, "Especially those who are closest to Me must be careful not to become too familiar."

When Adam and Chava ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil they did not just simply go against G-d's express prohibition. The "Nachash - serpent" presented them with a rationalization that allowed them to justify their action. (Ber. 3:5) "And you will be like G-d, knowing good and evil." The Nachash dangled before them the greatest incentive for not listening to G-d. "What does G-d want from you? He wishes you to be like Him. He wishes you to emulate His actions. He wishes you to spend your lives delving into the profundity of His reality and teach all future generations your ever emerging and expanding comprehension of His divinity. He desires that you should do everything in your power to be "Like Him." Therefore, even though G-d commanded you not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, He really wants you to do so. G-d is testing your love. Will you desire to be so much like Him that you are prepared to even go against His wishes to do so? Go ahead, eat from the forbidden fruit so that you will be "Just like G-d."

Nadav and Avihu suffered from the same self-delusion as Adam and Chava. Their desire to be close with G-d was greater than anything else in their lives. Their desire to "know G-d," rivaled even the passions of their father Aharon and their uncle Moshe. Yet, they had not attained the total subjugation of self and ego that their elders had attained. They were not as humble as Aharon and Moshe. Therefore, they were unwilling to deny themselves their greatest passion. They justified their transgression as the greatest expression of their love for G-d.

According to Rashi, the death warrant against Nadav and Avihu had already been issued following

Mattan Torah - the giving of the Torah. At the end of Parshas Mishpatim the Torah recorded (Shemos, 24:9-12) how Moshe, Aharon, Nadav, Avihu, and the 70 Elders shared a vision of "the G-d of Israel, and under his feet was the likeness of sapphire brickwork" The episode concludes with the words, (according to Rashi's interpretation) "G-d did not punish the great men of the Children of Israel although they were eating and drinking at the time of the vision." Rashi explains that Nadav and Avihu and the 70 Elders were irreverent in their behavior. They should not have been eating and drinking at such a momentous occasion. Their insensitivity to the proper protocol and boundaries in their relationship with G-d branded them as unworthy. However, G-d withheld His disfavor so as not to mar the joy of Revelation with their deaths. (Rashi, Shemos, 24:10) Nadav and Avihu's actions in the aftermath of Mattan Torah exhibited the same insensitivity to the boundaries of their relationship with G-d as they exhibited at the time of their deaths.

The Mishnah in Taanis (3:8) records the famous story from where Choni Hamagul - Choni of the Circle received his unusual name.

Israel was suffering from a drought. In desperation, the Rabbis turned to Choni for help. Choni told the Rabbis to return to their homes and prepare for rain. At first he prayed and his prayers were not answered. He then drew a circle on the ground. He stood in the center of the circle and proclaimed, "G-d, your children have placed their trust in me. I swear by Your great name that I will not budge from this circle until You extend Your mercy to them." Needless to say, it began to rain.

At the end of the story the Rabbis said to Choni, "If not for the fact that you are Choni, we would excommunicate you for your apparent irreverence toward G-d. However, what can we do to you? You sin before G-d and nevertheless He does your will! You are like a son who sins toward his father and nevertheless the father does as his son desires!"

Why didn't G-d punish Choni for his chutzpah - arrogance? Why did G-d listen to his demands? Choni was clearly a unique individual. However, we need to understand why he was so unique? Why did he have the ability to challenge G-d and still receive the showering of His divine blessings?

The key to understanding Choni Hamagul is the Hebrew word "Ratzon - will". The Mishnah in Avos (2:4) records the statement of Rabbi Gamiliel. "Make your will as the will of G-d so that G-d will make your will as His own." The total Eved Hashem - Servant of G-d defines his own will by the will of G-d. The true Eved - Servant has entirely subjugated himself to the will of G-d. The true Eved defines his needs, desires, and dreams by the boundaries of Halacha - Jewish Law. The true Eved is a truly humble individual.

Choni's uniqueness was in the totality of his humility. When Choni stood within the circle and challenged G-d to do his will, Choni the person ceased to exist. Instead, a servant of G-d and a servant of His children stood in the circle. Choni did not challenge G-d for his personal aggrandizement. There was no Choni to aggrandize! The person challenging G-d to be merciful on His children was a person whose entire self was defined by doing the will of G-d. Choni wanted one

and only one thing, that G-d shower His mercy upon His children. Therefore, G-d did what Choni wanted because in essence it was what He wanted!

This was not the case with Nadav and Avihu. Even though we believe that Nadav and Avihu were far greater than even Choni Hamagul; nevertheless, G-d judges His closest servants with the most exacting criteria. On their level, Nadav and Avihu had not totally disengaged their egos in relation to G-d. When they brought their "illegal offering" of love they were not doing the will of G-d - they were doing their own will. It was not for the sake of His children. It was a reflection of their own desire removed from the limits imposed by G-d. Therefore, Nadav and Avihu had to die.

Their deaths are immediately contrasted with the service on Yom Kippur that could only be performed by the Kohain Gadol - the High Priest. Aharon and Moshe were the only ones worthy of doing so because they were the only ones who had attained the requisite degree of humility. The Kohain Gadol in the Holy of Holies had to facilitate forgiveness for the entire nation. In order to do so he had to awaken G-d's mercy for His children. Therefore, he had to have subjugated his will to the will of G-d in the manner of Choni Hamagul. Moshe and Aharon had done so. Nadav and Avihu had not.

The prohibition against sacrificing outside of the Temple follows perfectly. The gift of prayer is the gift of our ability to have a personal relationship with G-d. However, the parameters of that relationship are set by G-d, not us. The essence of that relationship is accepting our total dependency upon G-d. The essence of that relationship is subjugating our will to the will of G-d. Regardless of personal convenience or desire, the right to pray, the right to offer sacrifice is only to the extent that it conforms to G-d's rules. Therefore, the true Servant of G-d offers homage and thanksgiving the way G-d wants him to do, not the way he himself feels like doing. To do any less or more is to be self-serving rather than serving G-d.

The last topic, the 15 prohibited intimate relationships, is the perfect finale for this week's first Parsha. The Rambam in Hilchos Dayot - the Laws of Character Traits and Dispositions, explains that human characteristics exist on a continuum. Each Midah - character trait can be graphed as existing between two opposing extremes. (E.g. Arrogance vs. Meekness) Depending on the person, his character development, and the immediate circumstances, the characteristic will be expressed closer to one extreme or the other. The goal of a true Servant of G-d is to understand how G-d wishes us to express each of our characteristics. That is accomplished through studying how G-d Himself responds to the circumstances of the world. Once we understand what G-d wants we can train ourselves to respond in a similar way.

The Midah of Chesed - kindness is special to the Jewish people. It defined the personality of Avraham Avinu and it is the most succinct description of how G-d interacts with the universe. However, there is an extreme form of Chesed that is its evil counterpart. On the one side of the continuum is Chesed - loving-kindness. On the other side of the continuum is Arayos - inappropriate

intimacy. The parent who, G-d forbids, abuses his child believes that he is expressing the purest form of love. He or she believes that they are connecting to their child at a level that is only reserved for the most trusting and loving of relationships. They believe that they are benefiting their child. However, we know how tragically wrong they are. We know how tragically evil their actions really are.

The Torah presented the fundamental laws of personal purity and morality at the end of Acharei Mos because physical intimacy between people can either sanctify or defile. To sanctify it must conform to the established boundaries of G-d's will; otherwise, it will defile and destroy.

Nadav and Avihu did not conform to the established boundaries of their relationship with G-d and they died. In order for the Kohain Gadol to successfully facilitate forgiveness for the Jewish nation he had to conform to the established boundaries of his relationship with G-d. The individual who wanted to grow closer to G-d by offering a sacrifice could only do so if he conformed to the established boundaries of his relationship with G-d and brought his offering to the Temple. The individual who wishes to express his or her love for another person is permitted to do so if the expression of that love conforms to the established boundaries of his relationship with G-d. Otherwise, his actions will destroy the very love and intimacy he thought to create.

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