

WHEN A LEADER SINS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

After the seven days of excitement and joy upon the consecration of the Mishkan and the installation of Aharon and his sons as the priests of Israel devoted to the service of God and humans, tragedy strikes the family of Aharon and all of Israel. The commentators to Torah as well as the Talmud itself searched for the causes that created this sad situation. They attempted to answer the omnipresent question of life - why do bad things seemingly happen to good people? And there is a corollary question involved here as well - why did tragedy strike then and there?

Far be it for me to venture into explanations where greater people than I have been troubled and found it difficult to properly answer these questions. The will of God remains inscrutable to all of us in all times and in all circumstances. Yet Judaism, in its essence, remains a religion of logic and rationality, all rumors to the contrary notwithstanding.

Maimonides bids us to attempt to understand and explain all of God's commandments and human events to the best of our rational abilities. So, these most basic questions of human existence and personal and national purpose, of reward and punishment and Divine justice must command our attention, even if at the end of our search we still will come up somewhat short on satisfying answers. The questions underlying the events described in the parsha of Shmini go to the heart of Jewish faith and worldview. They require investigation and serious analysis.

A review of the opinions expressed in Talmud and by the commentators, do not at first glance reveal any major transgressions on the part of Nadav and Avihu. True, Aharon's role in helping create the Golden Calf may explain his being brought to grieving for his two eldest sons, but it was Nadav and Avihu who died, not Aharon.

Their sins seem to be only minor human foibles that are common to almost all of us - unwillingness to bear the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood, personal ambition to lead the people and overzealousness in their worship of God and in the service of the Mishkan by introducing a ritual of different fire on the altar not commanded by God. We see here, once again, that the Torah places great emphasis on the small things in life, on the details and not only on the grand sweep of things.

Small mistakes often lead to great tragedies. And the Torah teaches us that personal failures that can be tolerated in most humans are magnified and are not overlooked when they occur to people in positions of power and leadership. The scale of Heavenly tolerance, so to speak, is a sliding one, dependent on the status, accomplishments, abilities and public position of the human person being

judged.

There is a special sin offering reserved for the leader of Israel. The accepted usual sin offering is insufficient if we are dealing with the sins of leadership. This is one of the key lessons of this parsha. God's justice is personal and exacting. Nadav and Avihu are the prime examples of this truism.

Shabat shalom

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