

PARSHAS SHEMINI

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

[The Chassidic Masters never saw the various cases of Israel's backsliding in the desert as having political, social or economic causes nor as them being the result of a slave mentality due to their enslavement in Egypt. Rather they were guided by the maxim of Hazal that, 'the generation that left Egypt was a 'dor deah' - a knowledgeable generation, one that merited great and wondrous miracles and Matan Torah. They saw all the incidents in the desert as the results of misguided religious concepts or a lack of faith in their own religiosity or an attempt to reach higher spiritual levels than they were ready for. The Shem Mi Shmuel is part of this tradition as we see from his various explanations of the acts of Nadav Ve Avihu].

'And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein and laid incense thereupon and offered strange fire before the Lord which He had not commanded them' (Vayikrah, 10:1).

It is difficult to understand how these two holy men, who were recognized by Moshe and Aharon as being greater than them, should have made such an error.

'That eighth day of the consecration of the Mishkan there was rejoicing before Hashem, akin to the day of the creation of Heaven and Earth' (Megillah10b). This underlay the actions of Nadav and Avihu. They thought that this was the time of the 'Tikkun HaKlali, just as in the future Messianic times everything would be completed and corrected, and there would be nothing left that was strange or deficient in Avodat Haboreh. So they thought that it was not necessary, in view of that 'Tikkun HaKlali' to have specific holy fire from Heaven in the offering of the incense and that it would be fitting for them to use the fire that they, in their great joy and ecstasy, brought. Chazal taught that the simcha of the consecration of the Mishkan was marred by the death of these two'. They however did not conceive that they would die as a result of their bringing the fire and thought that the pleasure and rejoicing was complete. In truth, the simcha was not complete. In Heaven, present and future tenses have no relevance so that there could be rejoicing with the Mishkan and with Messianic days together. However, in human terms, present and future are very different. Nadav and Avihu did not have the ability to know this Heavenly distinction and judging according to the great simcha at the consecration understood only that there was the same simch in Heaven as at the time of the Creation, and that the 'Tikkun Klali' was complete. So they erred and brought foreign unholy fire.

'The sons of Aharon laid down halakhah in the presence of Moshe Rabbeinu' (Vayikra Rabbah, chapter 20), explains the Midrash.

Now the Arie z'l wrote that they embodied 2 streams of the error of Cain. The name Cain is derived from 'kinyan', the act of possession, as Chava said when she gave birth, 'I have acquired a man with the help of the Lord' (Bereishit, 4:1). Cain thus denotes actions, effort and initiative. So he has self-value and self esteem, and the inability to recognize any limits. The resultant arrogance brought him to error and sin. However, this same trait contains a very positive element in that it can bring one to be strong and zealous in the service of Hashem; 'And his heart was elevated for the ways of Hashem', and so one is not easily turned away from that service or deterred from it. So Nadav and Avihu were determined to correct the sin of Cain by using his trait of action and effort for holy purposes. They sought to use their power and desire to be elevated in the holy service, to offer the incense according to their own perception that it would be to G-d's pleasure and will [perhaps out of a condition of unlimited ecstasy], without waiting for a ruling from their teacher Moshe. Good intentions, however, are never lost. It is known the Zohar (Part 3, 215b), taught that the souls of the 2 sons of Aharon were merged in Pinchas [who is Eliyahu]. The whole nature and characteristic of Pinchas, is the elevation of his heart and his striving for the word of G-d, and his zealous actions for it, so he did not wait for the ruling of Moshe nor did he ask for his guidance.

Perhaps we can understand their actions in the light of the answer to the Wise son of the Haggadah. The Wise Son asked, 'What are the testimonies, statutes, and social laws that Hashem, our G-d has commanded you' (Devarim, 6:20). The Anei Nezer said that root of the question is that since all G- d's laws and commandments are only to our benefit and bring life to us, it is difficult to understand why the Torah always uses the language of commandments, mitzvot, and not, 'as Hashem said to you'. Surely it would have been sufficient just for the Torah to ask or suggest that we do or refrain from certain actions, then, as everybody wants life and goodness, people would have naturally obeyed? [In our language, why does Judaism have to be a coercive religion?] His reply was that it is because the actions and intentions of flesh and blood do not have permanence and standing, since they themselves are transient and temporary. However, since the mitzvot of Hashem are His messengers and His agents, and agents have the power of the principal, therefore, they are eternal and lasting just as He is. That is why the whole answer to the Wise Son is, 'And the Lord commanded us to do all statutes, to fear Him, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is this day' (Devarim, 6:24).

When we base our Avodah on anything other than His command, then the chitzoniim have a place to insert them-selves in that Avodah and pervert it. We cannot say that Nadav and Avihu did not declare halakhah before Moshe, since there was no halakhah involved. However they guided the halakhah according to their own spiritual greatness. They assumed that even at this time it was possible to worship G-d merely as a result of His advice or words. However, because outside factors and foreign considerations could grasp and pervert His words, all our Avodah has to be couched in the form of commandments, tzivu and not dibbur.

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