

“Shemini: The enigmatic sin and punishment of Nadav and Avihu”

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Our sidrah relates the enigmatic sin and punishment of Nadav & Avihu, sons of Aaron, who were struck down by a heavenly visitation while at the peak of the eight-day celebration of the consecration of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and their inauguration into the priestly office.

Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aaron, took, each of them, his censer and put fire and incense (*ketoret*) therein, offering strange fire *before the Lord – asher lo tziva otam – which He had not commanded them*. And there came forth fire *from before the Lord*, and devoured them, and they died *before the Lord*. Then Moses said unto Aaron, “About this matter the Lord spoke, saying – *bikrovai ekkadesh* – “Through them *that are close to Me* I shall be sanctified, and before all the people shall I gain honour.” And Aaron held his peace.

(Lev. 10:1-2)

That their ritual act was unauthorised and their intention wholly at variance with the divine will is underscored by the four-fold repetition of the notion of defiance, as italicised above. Yet the text leaves unclear the precise nature of the act that merited such severe retribution: Whether it lay in having done something that they were expressly forbidden to do, or in having done that which they were not commanded to do. If the former, we would have expected the text to have read, *asher tziva otam lo l’havi* – ‘which He commanded them not to bring.’ If the latter, it would exemplify the rabbinic principle, *kol ha-mosif gorei’a* – ‘whosoever increases – such as in the observance of additional or exaggerated personal pietist stringencies – decreases.’¹

Now, if we wish to know how our earliest tradition interpreted a phrase, it is necessary to refer to the text’s punctuation notations which are also our guide to the accompanying musical chanting. If we look under the word *lo*, in our phrase *asher lo tziva otam*, we find

one of the rarest of the musical notations in the Torah, called *mercha kefulah*. The tradition is clearly employing this in order to clarify the meaning of our ambiguous wording by emphasizing the negative. The sense is, therefore, ‘a strange fire...about which He commanded –lo– “No!”’ (Had the meaning been “about which He did not command them,” it would have required a regular *mercha*.) The *merchah k’fulah* detaches the word *lo* from what follows, to give the sense, ‘which, “no” – He commanded them.’ The suggestion is that Nadav and Avihu had clearly countermanded a divine instruction.

The variety of theories suggested by the Talmudic sages to determine their sin underline the lack of any definitive tradition on the matter and allow for a measure of speculation. A popular Talmudic approach is that of *semuchin*, to look for context, or proximity of biblical topics, which, for many of the sages, allows for inferences from one to the other.² Thus, in the very same chapter, God tells Aaron that the priests must not enter the Sanctuary under the influence of drink (vv. 8-9), and hence the view that that was the key to the sin of Nadav and Avihu. Other sages picked up on the reference to priestly garments in vv. 5-6 and suggested that their sin lay in having ministered without having donned all the prescribed ritual robes. The fact that they compounded their sin by failing to consult Moses regarding what they had in mind is also suggested by the Talmud as their sin. This is referred to as *morei halachah bifnei rabban*, ‘deciding on a halachic issue without recourse to one’s teacher, and is viewed as most serious’³

The extent of the rabbinic imagination is also reflected in another suggestion, that their sin lay in an attitude of social superiority. In the words of the Midrash, ‘They felt themselves aristocratic to the extent that they never married,’ finding no woman to match their status.⁴

This was based on the verse, ‘And Nadav and Avihu died before the Lord when they offered a strange fire before the Lord in the desert of Sinai, *and they had no family* [lit. ‘children’] (Nu.3:4).⁵

The fact that the Torah alludes to this tragedy in three further passages, the first as a passing introductory time-reference to the sidrah *Acharei-mot* which deals with the unconnected topic of the rituals of Yom Kippur (See Lev. 16:1), and again in Nu. 3:4 and 26:61, suggests that it was regarded by the Torah as an act with profound national consequences as well as one which it was hoped would send a strong message of obedience to future generations. (It is in this spirit that we shall proceed to offer our own suggestion of the sin of Nadav and Avihu, below.)

The Midrash identifies Nadav and Avihu as the ones referred to vaguely as *atzilei b'nei Yisrael* ‘the nobles among the Israelites’ who gazed at God while eating and drinking’ (Ex.24:9).⁵ According to R. Chaim b. Mosheh ibn Attar, 18th cent. Moroccan commentator and Kabbalist, their punishment was delayed until the great public spectacle of the 8th day of consecration so that a lasting example and warning to others could be imposed.⁶

The most popular explanation for their sin follows that of the *Sifra* (Midrash on the Book of *Vayyikra*) which views as most significant the reference to their having taken firepans on which to burn incense. Since this was a prescribed daily ritual, it suggests that they wished to demonstrate their love of God in the traditional manner. However, their zeal was misplaced in that, instead of offering the holy incense supplied by the Sanctuary, they brought from their home-produced supply into the Holy of Holies and proceeded to offer it.

Ramban and *Rabbenu Bachya* contend, however, that Aaron's sons would not possibly have had the temerity to offer the incense in the Holy of Holies, wherein only their father, the High Priest, had access on Yom Kippur. Their explanation of the sin was that Nadav and Avihu took from the Sanctuary's stock of daily incense and offered it on the Inner Altar, though *they* had not been specifically nominated to do so - *asher lo tziva otam* – with the emphasis on the last word.

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For our own insight into this enigmatic episode, we shall have to re-examine Moses' disclosure to Aaron after the sudden death of his sons:

Then Moses said unto Aaron, "About this matter the Lord spoke, saying – *bikrovai ekkadesh* – "Through them *that are close to Me* I shall be sanctified, and before all the people shall I gain honour." And Aaron held his peace.

Notwithstanding the regular translation of the phrase *bikrovai*, as derived from *k-r-v* in the sense of 'to be close,' the verb is also found in the nuance of 'to be close *menacingly*' and hence the phrase, *yom k'rav*, 'the day of battle.' Thus, the phrase that Moses quoted in the name of God, *bikrovai ekkadesh*, may also yield the meaning, "I shall be sanctified in the face of those who threaten [My sanctity]." In other words, God had assured Moses that no rebel against Him would succeed.

So, what was the sin of Nadav and Avihu that was so grievous as to justify the description of 'rebels against God'? We suggest that the key to this mystery lies in the

reference to the incense that they offered independently of its normal time and place in the ritual.

Incense was no ordinary spice. It was credited with special properties, symbolising – and, at the same time, promoting – a special fellowship-relationship between God and the spiritual leader who represented divine authority and carried the divine word to the nation. And, because it symbolised selection and election, it was the focus of a most intimate and sacred ritual on the Day of Atonement when the High Priest had permission to enter into the Holy of Holies, symbolising his unique right, as the representative of God and Israel, to stand and atone for the nation in God's innermost sanctum.

The incense (*ketoret*) offered on that day would also ensure the safety of the High Priest, 'that he might not die' (Lev. 16:2), notwithstanding his intrusion into God's innermost domain. That protection was afforded by means of the incense's special capacity to enhance the special relationship and bonding of the High Priest with God. That sense is reflected in Aramaic which employs the verb *k-t-r*, identical with the Hebrew *k-sh-r*, in the sense of 'to bind, bond, or tie together.'⁷

Because incense was only for the elect of God, the Golden Altar on which it was offered was kept in the inner court of the Sanctuary, away from the gaze of the common people. The incense ritual was exclusively for the supreme religious leader, for the one in a special relationship with God. A private individual was even forbidden to make up the incense formula for his own purpose.⁸ It contained eleven ingredients;

and, because of its spiritual potency, its formula was kept secret throughout Talmudic times as the exclusive prerogative of one family – the house of Abtinas – to make and to supply to the Sanctuary.⁹ It could be added, however, to certain communal offerings, but not to an individual's *korban nedavah*, 'free-will, or thanksgiving, offering.'¹⁰ The community could lay claim, collectively, to being the elect of God – 'a kingdom of priests.' An individual could not.

In ancient Near Eastern culture, the only individual who laid claim to being the elect of the gods, as well as the embodiment of the community spirit, will, and authority, was the king. Thus, in representations of worship on the walls of temples, a common depiction is that of a king offering incense. He holds a censer in one hand, and with the other he throws small incense pellets on to it. This offering of incense was intended to symbolise his unique position as leader by divine right, as well as his special relationship – or identification – with God.

The significance of incense was particularly recognised in ancient Egypt:

One of the most remarkable passages in the Pyramid Texts employs the ceremony and the suggestiveness of incense-burning as a sympathetic agency by which, as the odorous vapour arises from earth to the gods, it bears aloft the fragrance of the king to mingle with that of the gods, *and thus to draw them together in fellowship and association* (my italics.). The passage is of importance as a very early priestly interpretation of the significance of incense as fellowship with the gods.¹¹

Against this background, we may understand why, when Korach made his bid to seize the leadership from Moses and Aaron, Moses threw down a challenge to the rebel and his cohorts by employing a ‘trial by incense’ (See Nu. 16:1-19). The heavenly fire taking hold of Aaron’s censer demonstrated symbolically his ‘special relationship with God’ and provided validation of his claim to the highest spiritual position.

We can now appreciate the significance of the incense that Nadav and Avihu brought on that occasion as serving the identical purpose, namely, to substantiate their bid to be regarded as the natural successors to Moses and their father, Aaron. This reading of the episode is hinted at by the Talmud which depicts them as walking in the procession behind Moses and Aaron, bemoaning their own subsidiary positions:

Nadav said to Avihu: “When will these two die, so you and I may exercise authority over the community.”¹²

That it was the incense offering – with all that it symbolised – that was responsible for the deaths of Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu, is underscored by the fact that the Torah refers to that happening in its introductory verse to the offering of incense on Yom Kippur by the High Priest (Lev. 16:1, 13). Aaron is then assured that he need have no fear at the thought of handling the incense, which had proved fatal for his sons, since, if he followed the divine instructions, ‘he would not die,’¹³ for he was the true elect of God.

A further illustration of the symbolism of the incense was that of King Uzziah of Judah who felt impelled to arrogate unto himself the additional position of High Priest and spiritual leader. He made his bid by entering the Temple and offering incense on

the altar (II Chron. 26:16), expecting heavenly fire to descend and vindicate his authority. Instead, he was struck down with leprosy.

**Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Jeffrey**

NOTES

1. Tal. *San.* 29a.
2. See Tal. *Yev.* 4a; *Ber.* 10a; *Sifrei* (on sidra Balak, sec. 131).
3. See Tal. *Eiruv.* 63a.
4. Mid. *Vayyik. Rabb.* 20 (10).
5. See Mid. *Tanchuma and Rashi ad loc.*
6. See *Ohr HaChayyim ad loc.*; *Rashi* on Lev. 10:3.
7. See Jastrow, *Dictionary*, pp. 1352-3.
8. See Ex. 30:37-8.
9. Tal. *Yoma* 38a.
10. Tal. *Men.* 50a-b.
11. J. H. Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (Harper and Row, Torchbook, N.Y. 1959), p.126.
12. Tal. *San.* 52a.
13. See *Rashi* on Lev. 16:1).

