

Today's *Parasha, Shemini*, begins with great exultation, but quickly leads to tragedy in one of the most difficult sections of Torah.

To set the stage, we read (Lev. 9:23-4) of the Inaugural Offerings brought to the *Mishkan*, the portable Tabernacle:

וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל-אֱלֹהִים מוֹעֵד וַיִּצְאוּ וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת-הָעָם וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד-יְהוָה אֶל-  
כָּל-הָעָם: וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת-הָעֹלָה וְאֶת-הַחֲלָבִים וַיֵּרָא  
כָּל-הָעָם וַיִּרְנְנוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם:

Moses and Aaron came into the Tent of Meeting, and then they left and blessed the people. Then God's Glory appeared before the entire people. A fire came forth from God and consumed the Burnt Offering and the fats on the Altar; the people saw (this) sang exultingly, and fell on their faces.

Immediately after this, for an unknown reason, *Nadav* and *Avihu* bring a strange incense offering. It is interesting to note that *Nadav* means voluntary (offering), and *Avihu* means He (God) is my father. Keep these in mind as we explore this issue.

We see (Vayikra 10:1,2)

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אֱהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אֵישׁ מִחֶמְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְוֹת  
וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם: וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם  
וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:

Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took their firepans, placed fire in them and put incense on them; they brought before God a strange fire that they had not been commanded (to bring). *A fire came forth from God and consumed them* and they died before God.

This is very shocking – we have exactly the same language for God accepting the Inaugural sacrifices, as for God consuming *Nadav* and *Avihu*. Did God accept *Nadav* and *Avihu* as human sacrifices? I would say not – after all, in two weeks, we will read, in *Parashat Aharei Mot*, (Vayikra 18:21)

וּמִזְרְעֶךָ לֹא-תִתֶּן לְהַעֲבִיר לְמַלְאָךְ וְלֹא תַחֲלִיל אֶת-שֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי ה' :

You shall not bring your children to pass through the fire to *Molekh*, and do not defile the name of your God, I am H'.

In other words, God tells us that human sacrifice is forbidden, and specifically not your children. Since we are all God's children, would God sacrifice us by fire, after commanding us not to?

So, how do we make sense of this troubling text? The *Mepharshim*, the commentators on the Torah offer varied explanations for this:

Rashi: They died because they taught Torah in front of their Rabbi, Moses (R' Eliezar). They drank wine before entering (R' Shim'on).

Ibn Ezra – they used their own strange fire, rather than God's fire from above.

Hizkuni (Hezekiah ben Manoah, 13th century France) – they used incense that was not for the public community; further from the concept of *Mida k'neged Mida*, loosely rendered as the punishment fits the crime, because they offered a strange fire, so God consumed them with a fire.

Sa'adia Ga'on – Because what they offered they were not commanded to do.

Rashbam (Rashi's grandson) Because Moses had not commanded them to bring ordinary incense.

The *Netivot Shalom*, R' Shalom Abisror (19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century Israel) brings many additional suggestions from Talmud and Midrash:

- They were not wearing the proper clothing.
- They did not wash their hands or feet prior to entering.
- They did not yet have wives or sons.
- They asked when the elders, Moses and Aaron would die, so they could take over, because they had huge egos.

- That they needed to wait until after the Heavenly fire came to consume Holy incense, before they offered the ordinary incense.

The *Netivot Shalom* continues by saying that *Hazal*, the early sages, needed to offer so many suggestions, because they didn't know what the true offense was. Finally he suggests that Nadav and Avihu didn't follow the ways of the righteous.

Nahama Leibowitz offers "Evidently, Nadav and Avihu did not offend against any ritual precepts but sinned by reaching for God through the dictates of their own hearts rather than through the path set by God."<sup>i</sup>

She also cites two *Midrashim*, *Midrash Vayikra* (20:8)

"Bar Kappara in the name of R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar said: Aaron's sons died on account of four things: for drawing near to the holy place, for offering, for the strange fire, and for not having taken counsel from each other. 'For drawing near, since they entered into the innermost precincts of the sanctuary.' 'For offering, since they offered a sacrifice which they had not been commanded to offer. 'For the strange fire: they brought in fire from the kitchen. 'And for not having taken counsel from each other, as it says, Each of them his censer implying that they acted each on his own initiative, not taking counsel from one another."<sup>ii</sup>

*Vayikra Rabba* 12:1, a *Mashal* or parable:

R. Pinhas said in the name of R. Levi: This may be compared to the case of a king who had a faithful attendant. When he found him standing at a tavern, he severed his head... We would not know why he put the first to death, except for this: You must not enter the doorway of taverns; thus we know why he killed him... We would not know why they died, but for God commanding Aaron: DRINK NO WINE NOR STRONG DRINK. We know from this that they died because they drank wine (before the strange sacrifice).<sup>iii</sup>

Leibowitz of course does not provide a definitive answer; rather she asks more questions about this strange event. We therefore, despite having so many suggestions, don't know the real reason Nadav and Avihu died; we can only make inferences from this.

Nonetheless, we certainly can take many lessons from this strange event.

1. Make sure you have a clear head and are not intoxicated when performing ritual.
2. Follow established practices for organized communal ritual.  
Creative practices have their place, but they are problematic in the synagogue.
3. Don't act unilaterally in a communal setting – the community's voice is vital in determining community practices.

4. Always have God in mind in carrying out ritual – do not make self-aggrandizement the reason for your practices.

Shabbat shalom

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<sup>i</sup> Leibowitz, N. *New Studies in Vayikra*. Jerusalem: Haomanim Press. 1995. P. 124.

<sup>ii</sup> Davka Soncino Classics Edition 2009

<sup>iii</sup> Op Cit Davka (adapted).