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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The shock is immense. For several weeks and many chapters -- the longest prelude in the Torah -- we have read of the preparations for the moment at which G-d would bring His presence to rest in the midst of the people. Five sedrot (Terumah, Tetzaveh, Ki Tissa, Vayakhel and Pekudei) describe the instructions for building the sanctuary. Two (Vayikra, Tzav) detail the sacrificial offerings to be brought there. All is now ready. For seven days the priests (Aaron and his sons) are consecrated into office. Now comes the eighth day when the service of the mishkan will begin. The entire people have played their part in constructing what will become the visible home of the Divine presence on earth. With a simple, moving verse the drama reaches its climax: "Moses and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting and when they came out, they blessed the people. G-d's glory was then revealed to all the people."

Just as we think the narrative has reached closure, a terrifying scene takes place: "Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, took their censers, put fire into them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before G-d, which He had not instructed them to offer. Fire came forth from before G-d, and it consumed them so that they died before G-d. Moses then said to Aaron: 'This is what G-d spoke of when he said: Among those who approach Me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured.'" (10:1-3)

Celebration turned to tragedy. The two eldest sons of Aaron die. The sages and commentators offer many explanations. Nadav and Avihu died because: they entered the holy of holies; they were not wearing the requisite clothes; they took fire from the kitchen, not the altar; they did not consult Moses and Aaron; nor did they consult one another. According to some they were guilty of hubris. They were impatient to assume leadership roles themselves; and they did not marry, considering themselves above such things. Yet others see their deaths as delayed punishment for an earlier sin, when, at Mount Sinai they "ate and drank" in the presence of G-d (Ex. 24:9-11).

These interpretations represent close readings of the four places in the Torah which Nadav and Avihu's death is mentioned (Lev. 10:2, 16:1, Num. 3:4, 26:61), as well as the reference to their presence on Mount Sinai. Each is a profound meditation on the dangers of over-enthusiasm in the religious life. However, the simplest explanation is the one explicit in the Torah itself. Nadav and Avihu died because they offered unauthorized (literally "strange") fire -- meaning "that which was not commanded." To understand the significance of this we must go back to first principles and remind ourselves of the meaning of kadosh, "holy", and thus of mikdash as the home of the holy.

The holy is that segment of time and space G-d has reserved for His presence. Creation involves concealment. The word olam, universe, is semantically linked to the word neelam, "hidden". To give mankind some of His own creative powers -- the use of language to think, communicate, understand, imagine alternative futures and choose between them -- G-d must do more than create homo sapiens. He must efface Himself (what the kabbalists called tzimtzum) to create space for human action. No single act more profoundly indicates the love and generosity implicit in creation. G-d as we encounter Him in the Torah is like a parent who knows He must hold back, let go, refrain from intervening, if his children are to become responsible and mature.

But there is a limit. To efface himself entirely would be equivalent to abandoning the world, deserting his own children. That, G-d may not and will not do. How then does G-d leave a trace of his presence on earth?

The biblical answer is not philosophical. A philosophical answer (I am thinking here of the mainstream of Western philosophy, beginning in antiquity with Plato, in modernity with Descartes) would be one that applies universally -- i.e. at all times, in all places. But there is no answer that applies to all times and places. That is why philosophy cannot and never will understand the apparent contradiction between divine creation and human freewill, or between divine presence and the empirical world in which we reflect, choose and act.

Jewish thought is counter-philosophical. It insists that truths are embodied precisely in particular times and places. There are holy times (the seventh day, seventh month, seventh year, and the end of seven septennial cycles, the jubilee). There are holy people (the children of Israel as a whole; within them, the Levi'im, and within them the Cohanim). And there is holy space (eventually, Israel; within that, Jerusalem; within that the Temple; in the desert, they were the mishkan, the holy, and the holy of holies).

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The holy is that point of time and space in which the presence of G-d is encountered by tzimtzum -- self-renunciation -- on the part of mankind. Just as G-d makes space for man by an act of self-limitation, so man makes space for G-d by an act of self-limitation. The holy is where G-d is experienced as absolute presence. Not accidentally but essentially, this can only take place through the total renunciation of human will and initiative. That is not because G-d does not value human will and initiative. To the contrary: G-d has empowered mankind to use them to become His "partners in the work of creation".

However, to be true to G-d's purposes, there must be times and places at which humanity experiences the reality of the divine. Those times and places require absolute obedience. The most fundamental mistake -- the mistake of Nadav and Avihu -- is to take the powers that belong to man's encounter with the world, and apply them to man's encounter with the Divine. Had Nadav and Avihu used their own initiative to fight evil and injustice they would have been heroes. Because they used their own initiative in the arena of the holy, they erred. They asserted their own presence in the absolute presence of G-d. That is a contradiction in terms. That is why they died.

We err if we think of G-d as capricious, jealous, angry -- a myth spread by early Christianity in an attempt to define itself as the religion of love, superseding the cruel/harsh/retributive G-d of the "Old Testament". When the Torah itself uses such language it "speaks in the language of humanity" -- that is to say, in terms people will understand.

In truth, Tenakh is a love story through and through -- the passionate love of the Creator for His creatures, that survives all the disappointments and betrayals of human history. G-d needs us to encounter Him, not because He needs mankind but because we need Him. If civilization is to be guided by love, justice, and respect for the integrity of creation as such, there must be moments in which we leave the "I" behind and encounter the fullness of being in all its glory. That is the function of the holy -- the point at which "I am" is silent in the overwhelming presence of "There is". That is what Nadav and Avihu forgot -- that to enter holy space or time requires ontological humility, the total renunciation of human initiative and desire.

The significance of this fact cannot be over-estimated. When we confuse G-d's will with our will, we turn the holy (the source of life) into something unholy and a source of death. The classic example of this is "holy war" -- investing imperialism (the desire to rule over other people) with the cloak of sanctity as if conquest and forced conversion were G-d's will. The story of Nadav and Avihu reminds us yet again of the warning first spelled out in the days of Cain and Abel. The first act of worship led to the first murder. Like nuclear fission, worship generates power, which can be benign but can also be profoundly dangerous.

The episode of Nadav and Avihu is written in three kinds of fire. First there is the fire from heaven: "Fire came forth from before G-d and consumed the burnt offering..." (9:24)

This was the fire of favour, consummating the service of the sanctuary. Then came the "unauthorized fire" offered by the two sons.

"Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before G-d, which He had not instructed them to offer." (10:1)

Then there was the counter-fire from heaven: "Fire came forth from before G-d, and it consumed them so that they died before G-d." (10:2)

The message is simple and deadly serious: Religion is not what the European Enlightenment thought it would become: mute, marginal and mild. It is fire -- and like fire, it warms but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame. *© 2013 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org*

RABBI MEIR GOLDWICHT

Sefirat Ha'Omer

The days between Pesach and Shavuot are called the days of sefirat haomer. During these days we count towards Matan Torah. Why, then, don't we call these days sefirah l'kabbalat haTorah rather than sefirat haomer?

Furthermore, R' Yochanan says in the midrash: Never let the mitzvah of the omer be light in your eyes. Even though the omer comes from barley, which is animal fodder, one might consider it a mitzvah of low significance and therefore deal with it leniently. But Avraham Avinu only received the land in the merit of the omer, as it says, "And to you I gave this land" [on condition] "You keep my covenant," referring to the brit of the omer. In other words, Chazal here teach us that the omer is not simply a mitzvah, but a brit. A mitzvah with the status of brit influences all of the other 612 mitzvot, as indicated by brit's gematria -- 612. What is so special about the mitzvah of the omer that bestows upon it the status of brit? Other mitzvot with this status-milah, Shabbat, learning Torah-influence our lives in major ways. But why does omer receive this status as well?

The answers to these questions lie in the definition of the word omer. In Hebrew, the root omer has three definitions: 1) omer, a measurement-in the Desert, B'nei Yisrael were commanded to eat an omer of manna, one tenth of an eifah; 2) me'amer, gathering together twigs and the like-one of the 39 melachot prohibited on Shabbat; and 3) l'hitamer, to misuse an object in one's possession-the Torah forbids one who takes an eishet yefat to'ar (the beautiful captive) in battle and decides not to marry her to keep her as a slave, saying, "lo titamer bah." These three definitions complement one another, providing a more accurate definition of omer.

During the forty years B'nei Yisrael traveled the Desert, the manna fell every day except Shabbat. Once they crossed the Jordan, the manna stopped and they no longer received their bread effortlessly, but became partners in its creation. Partnership with HaKadosh Baruch Hu is certainly advantageous, but contains a great risk as well. When a person toils and succeeds, he may mistakenly conclude that his own efforts caused his success, not any input from HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

The mitzvah of omer counteracts this misperception. The Torah commands us to sacrifice barley, animal fodder, so that we understand that even the lowliest of foods comes from HaKadosh Baruch Hu. In order to amplify this lesson, the Torah commands us to count up to the omer for 49 days. When a person lives in such a way, he can gather (me'amer) as much as he wants with no danger of misusing it (l'hitamer); quite the contrary, he will mete it out in proper measurements (omer).

This may be the depth behind the phrase "lichrot brit, to cut a deal." There is no greater oxymoron: lichrot means to sever, while a brit is something that connects. The idea is that the two parties to the brit must cede a little bit in order to receive. HaKadosh Baruch Hu desires to cede something to us, and He wants to cede even more. The more we use what we have properly, the more He desires to give us. The brit of the omer is therefore the brit through which Avraham Avinu merited Eretz Yisrael. To inherit the Land is only possible if we truly feel that everything not only came from Him, but continues to come from Him: "When you come to the land that I give you," in the present tense.

May Hashem grant us the ability to truly feel that everything emanates from Him, and through this may He grant us ever more.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

This week's Torah reading presents an awesome and awful scene of the heights of ecstasy merged with the depth of despair: exaltation together with extinction, ineffable transcendence alongside inexplicable tragedy. The desert Sanctuary is being dedicated, sacrifices to the Almighty are offered, and Moses and Aaron bless the entire nation. A divine fire comes forth from the heavens and consumes the offerings; the people see, sing out with joy and exaltation, and fall on their faces in gratitude to the Almighty who has miraculously signaled His acceptance of the offerings.

Two sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, caught up in the religious excitement of the moment, take a censer, place upon it fire and incense, and offer an additional tribute to G-d. In effect, they respond to the fire of Divine acceptance and grace with their own extra fire of human fervor and commitment. The Divine reaction is as immediate as it is imponderable: "And a fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed them; they died before the Lord" (Leviticus 10:1-2).

The intermingling of emotions defies the imagination: at the climax of the exodus from Egypt, and the moment of tribute to the High Priest Aaron, symbol of Divine protection and generational continuity, Aaron's two beloved sons are taken from him. This appears to be a gratuitous and merciless act on the part of G-d.

Most of our commentators attempt to justify the deaths by attributing some fatal flaw in the actions and characters of Nadav and Avihu. The Biblical text, however, makes no such attempt: "And Moses said to Aaron, 'It is as the Lord spoke saying, by means of those closest to me shall I be sanctified and in front of the entire nations shall I be glorified..." (Leviticus 10:3).

Rashi, the Biblical commentator par excellence, takes Moses' statement at face value. He does not seek to rationalize why these youths deserved their tragic fate; he merely provides the source of Moses' explanation: "Where did the Lord speak? 'And I shall be encountered there with the children of Israel and I shall be sanctified by My glory' (Exodus 29:43). Do not read the text 'by My glory' but rather read it, 'by those who glorify Me.' Moses said to Aaron, 'Aaron my brother, I knew that this Temple would be sanctified by those most beloved of G-d. I would have thought that it would have been by me or by you. Now I see that they (Nadav and Avihu) were greater than us" (Rashi, ad loc). Aaron's response is biblically reported as "Vayidom Aharon - and Aaron was silent." Perhaps this heavily pregnant silence is indicative of Aaron's feeling that if he says what he wants to say, and rails against Whom he wishes to rail, he will irrevocably destroy the most precious relationship of his life. Or perhaps it was simply the silence of an unasked question to which there is no satisfactory answer...

The theological construct expressed by Rashi harks back to the haunting Biblical scene, at the very dawn of our history, of the "covenant between the pieces." In the introduction to the covenant comes the Divine guarantee, "I am the Lord who took you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land as an inheritance"

(Genesis 15:7). However, what immediately follows is the blood, smoke and fire of sacrifice, the prophesy that Jewish redemption requires a prelude of alienation, servitude and affliction on the part of the nation. Then, as a result of his awesome vision, a dark fear descends upon Abraham. To be sure, the Covenant concludes with a confirmation of our continuity and territorial integrity; but our salvation will only come at the price of ultimate sacrifice: "And so the sun set, and a heavy cloud overcast. And behold, a smoking furnace of ashes and a torch of fire which passed between these (bloodied) pieces. On that day the Lord established His covenant with Abram, saying, 'to your seed have I given this land from the River Nile of Egypt to the great River, the Euphrates' " (Genesis 15:17-18).

From this perspective, we understand the intermingling of the sacrificial blood of the paschal sacrifice with the joyous freedom of the wine which together mark our celebration of Passover, the "Hillel sandwich" which mixes the matzah of redemption together with the bitter herbs of suffering. And from this perspective we understand why Yom HaZikaron, Israel's Memorial Day for her fallen martyrs of the IDF, enters into-and merges with-Yom HaAtzmaut, Israeli Independence Day. And, as amazing as it is, parents, spouses and orphans almost uniformly respond to these ultimate sacrifices as did Aaron of old, with a heavy, pregnant and accepting silence.

As a very young boy, I remember attending the very first Shabbat circumcision ceremony celebrated by the Kloizenberg-Tzanz Hassidim after they located for a brief time in Bedford Stuyvesant, where the community's remnants emigrated after the Holocaust before they settled in Netanya. The Rebbe, of blessed memory, recited the circumcision blessings, and with tears coursing down his cheeks could barely be heard as he choked upon the words, "And I see you wallowing in your blood; and I declare unto you, by your blood shall you live, by your blood shall you live." (Ezekiel 16: 6)

And then the Rebbe spoke. He explained that the Hebrew word damayich, "by your blood" can also be translated "by your silence" (dom is attentive silence, while dam is blood). We continue to live as Jews, we propagate and plant and build, because-despite our tragic sacrifices - we remain silent before G-d, as did our forbear Aaron.

"However," he continued, looking upwards and speaking with a voice which seemed to shake the very foundations of the building, "You, G-d, dare not remain silent. As the sweet Psalmist King David declared, 'Lord, You must not be silent (al domi lakh), You must not hush your voice, G-d, you must not be quiet, Because, behold, Your enemies are shouting out loud... (Psalms 83:2-3). You, O G-d, must cry out, I have forgiven, according to your words '. You, O G-d, must cry out from the ramparts, 'For a short moment did I forsake you and with great compassion do I gather you, say 'the Lord your redeemer' (Isaiah 54, 7-8)!

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And Moshe called to Misha'el and to Eltzafan, the sons of Uzi'el the uncle of Aharon, and he said to them, 'go closer and carry your brothers (i.e. your relatives, referring to Nadav and Avihu, their cousin's sons, who had just died when they brought a strange fire before G-d) from before the face of the holy to the outside of the camp.' And they came closer and they carried them in their tunics to the outside of the camp, as Moshe had spoken." The last three words of the second of these verses (Vayikra 10:4-5) would seem to be extraneous; why reiterate that they had done what Moshe asked of them if we were just told that Moshe asked them to do it? Isn't it obvious that they were following Moshe's instructions?

Almost as if to highlight the issue, the very next verses (10:6-7) contain instructions Moshe gave to Aharon, Elazar and Isamar that conclude with a similar expression; "and they did as Moshe had spoken." There, however, the narrative does not include that Moshe's instructions were followed; we only know that they were from these concluding words. Regarding Misha'el and Eltzafan, on the other hand, we're given the "play-by-play" of their following Moshe's instructions before being told that they did so "as Moshe had spoken." What do these words add?

Netziv suggests that since the Levi'im were chosen to move the dead bodies from the Mishkan because Yisra'elim weren't allowed there, once the corpses were removed from the Mishkan, the task of taking them "outside the camp" could have been handled by Yisra'elim. Yet, Misha'el and Eltzafan did it themselves; we might have thought that doing so was not included in Moshe's instructions. Therefore, the Torah says it was "as Moshe had spoken," i.e. his instructions included taking the corpses outside the camp, not just removing them from the Mishkan complex (as having such important people do it gave honor to the dead). Nevertheless, Moshe's instructions (10:4) include the exact same words ("to the outside of the camp") as their fulfillment (10:5); I'm not sure why we would think they mean different things in the two consecutive verses.

According to Rabbi Akiva (Toras Kohanim, Sh'mini, M'chilta d'Milu'im 35), Nadav and Avihu died inside the Kodesh HaKadashim (i.e. literally "before G-d," see 10:2). In order to avoid entering the inner sanctum unnecessarily, Misha'el and Eltzafan used metal spears (or long-handled hooks) to grab onto their garments and pull them out. It is possible that in order to make sure we know that the manner in which they removed the corpses ("by their tunics") was also included in Moshe's instructions (not just that they

should remove them), the Torah added "as Moshe had spoken."

Midrash Lekach Tov says that the reason there are two musical notes under the word "go closer" is because Misha'el and Eltzafan were afraid to do so, so Moshe had to tell them twice. Oznayim L'Torah adds that this is why the Torah says Moshe "called them" and then "said to them," as they were afraid that they would be swallowed up by the fire that had consumed Nadav and Avihu, and had to be asked twice. If so, it is possible that the extra "as Moshe had spoken" also alludes to Moshe having to ask them more than once (with his communication with them being described in three ways; calling, saying and speaking).

There are several other places in the Torah where the expression "as was spoken" or "as was commanded" is used despite it being accompanied by words that already indicate that the instructions were followed properly. For example, when the nation was commanded to send all who were ritually impure out of the camp(s), we are told that "the Children of Israel did so, and they sent them to the outside of the camp, as G-d had spoken to Moshe, so did the Children of Israel do" (Bamidbar 5:4). The words that are most similar to the extra words in our verse are "as G-d had spoken to Moshe," but the Sifre includes them with the rest of the verse, understanding the double clause to mean that not only did the nation send out those who were ritually impure, but those who needed to leave did so without having to be forced to by others. When the Sabbath violator was stoned to death (Bamidbar 15:36), after G-d instructed the nation to stone him (15:35), and we are told that they did stone him (15:36), the Torah adds, "as G-d had commanded Moshe." The Sifre explains that the verse is telling us that "He told them to stone him, and they stoned him; He told them to hang him [afterwards] and they hung him [afterwards]." Again the extra clause teaches us an additional aspect not explicit in the verse. When the blasphemer was stoned (Vayikra 24:23), the instructions were laid out (24:14), they were carried out (24:23), and then we are told that "the Children of Israel did as G-d had commanded Moshe. Like the Sifre, Toras Kohanim understands these extra words to refer to the additional aspects of the "stoning" process (see Rashi and Ramban). The implication is clear; adding that "it was done as had been spoken" or "as had been commanded" means that all the aspects of the commandment were fulfilled. In regards to removing the bodies of Nadav and Avihu, it could refer to finding a way to do so without entering the Kodesh HaKadashim, or to removing the corpses from the camp even though they could have asked a Yisra'el to do it once they were outside the Mishkan.

After Ramban quotes Toras Kohanim, he adds that the additional clause (by the blasphemer) teaches us that the motivation behind the action was pure; the nation stoned the blasphemer because it was what G-d had commanded them to do, not because they held a grudge against the blasphemer (who was the son of an Egyptian and was fighting with a Yisra'el). If we were to apply this to our verse, it could be suggested that the Torah is informing us that Misha'el and Eltzafan followed Moshe's instructions because Moshe asked them to, not because of any personal motivation. What kind of personal motivation could they have possibly had? Korach, and other Levi'im, were jealous of Aharon and his sons for being chosen over them as Kohanim (see Oznayim L'Torah on 10:5 regarding Kohanim having special clothing that Levi'im couldn't wear). Did Misha'el and/or Eltzafan feel this kind of jealousy? Did they experience any sort of glee when their cousin's sons, who were chosen over them to have a more primary role in the Mishkan, died when they weren't careful enough with their special access to G-d's sanctuary? Did they relish the opportunity to be the ones to remove their corpses when their lofty position contributed to their downfall? "And they came closer and they carried them in their tunics to the outside of the camp, as Moshe had spoken." Not for any other reason or any other motivation; only because Moshe told them to do it.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

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.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Among the directions given in this week's portion is a command to Aaron the High Priest by God not to drink wine before officiating in the Tabernacle. (Leviticus 10:9) Rashi explains the prohibition to mean that the priest "[may not drink] wine to such an extent that it has an intoxicating effect." Indeed, an opinion in the Talmud maintains that one has violated this prohibition only if an intoxicating wine of at least a re'vi'it — approximately 4-6 fluid ounces has been consumed. (Keritut 13b) In such a state, Rambam adds that the priests could go astray by entertaining some improper thoughts or by becoming unclear and erring in a matter of law, thus violating the spirit of the Tabernacle rite.

In moderation, however, drinking is permissible. In fact, wine plays a crucial role in virtually every rite of passage — i.e. circumcision, marriage ceremony. And, wine is used to usher in most important days of our calendar year — i.e. Shabbat, Yom Tov, etc. Why is this so? It can be suggested that wine is the symbol of joy. Therefore, in proper measure, it is drunk on the happiest of occasions and on the happiest of days.

Also, using wine on holy occasions teaches that while wine can intoxicate, when imbibed in moderate amounts and for lofty purposes, it can sanctify. Hence, we drink wine during kiddush and kiddushin (the marriage ceremony). Not coincidentally, both of these terms come from the word kadosh, holy. What this teaches is that everything in the world, even that which has the potential to be destructive, can be used for the good and even for the holy.

There is another explanation that is mystical in nature. Adam and Eve disobeyed God when they drank wine squeezed from grapes. Every Shabbat, and, for that matter, at other religious ceremonies, we drink wine as a way of fixing that mistake. In Eden, Adam and Eve drank wine improperly. On Shabbat we "return" to Eden, but in Eden where we celebrate and drink wine in accordance with the will of God.

Finally, wine can alter the senses; it has the capacity to change our mood and demeanor. It is, therefore, transformative in nature. Thus, wine is drunk when we go through important spiritual moments of transition, like when moving from the weekdays to Shabbat, or when experiencing a rites de passage.

Still, even as the Torah speaks openly about the holy potential of wine, it warns us of its deleterious effects. The fact that the Torah warns us about intoxication means that substance abuse, including alcoholism, is a human reality. As a religion that advocates the use of wine in moderation, we must realize that alcohol abuse is also a very real Jewish problem. We must never overlook this reality and make religious excuses for it. We have the responsibility to address it head-on while reaching out to embrace and show endless care and love for those afflicted with this terrible disease.

In this way we will show a true and real relationship with the wonderful and, at the same time, destructive nature of wine.

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Crime and the Complexity of Punishment

Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's sons, each took his fire-pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it. They offered a foreign fire that Hashem had not commanded them. A fire went forth from before Hashem and consumed them. They died before Hashem.

Rashi: R. Eliezer says [in contradistinction to an opinion that he cited earlier that Nadav and Avihu sinned by ruling on a halachic matter without consulting Moshe their teacher] that they entered the mikdosh while intoxicated. The next section makes this clear, by

instructing the kohanim in the prohibition of performing the avodah while under the influence of intoxicating beverage. The Torah speaks in the manner of one who notes a tragic problem, and immediately acts to prevent its reoccurrence. (The names attached to the two opinions differ between our text of Rashi, and the way they are cited by Maharal.)

Maharal: Rashi offers these alternative opinions because our pesukim beg for some explanation. A fire had miraculously descended upon the outer altar. The miracle apparently ended there; Heaven did not follow up with a parallel fire to inaugurate the inner incense altar. Nadav and Avihu quickly understood that opportunity beckoned with an opportunity to perform a mitzvah unique in history. They seized the moment. Their service does not strike us as foreign at all. Rashi therefore presents us with some of the missing context, which helps us understand why Nadav and Avihu's actions were flawed. Having done that, however, he seems to solve one problem by creating another. If the "real" sin of Aharon's sons was disrespecting the mikdosh by serving while inebriated, why does the Torah make no mention of it, and speak only about the "foreign" flame? It seems to us that Rashi has labored for naught!

In fact, Rashi offers a solution that not only addresses the questions, but stands up to a series of other challenges. Avodas Hashem requires absolute clear-headedness. Nadav and Avihu should not have attempted any avodah while under the influence of alcohol. By desecrating the quality of the avodah, they turned the fire they offered into a "foreign" one. It was not foreign in the sense of imported from another culture, but in the sense of outside the bounds of propriety. Although their behavior in attempting to inaugurate the inner, golden altar was externally indistinguishable from what people might have expected to see, their actions were foreign to the proper spirit of the avodah. Ignoring that spirit reduced their actions to a profane exercise, something that Hashem "had not commanded them." Their death by fire matched their crime of turning the flame of the ketores-avodah into a foreign fire.

We could also explain the "foreign fire" in a manner closer to the plain sense of the term. R. Eliezer may concede that there was no place for Nadav and Avihu's introduction of a fire to the golden altar without specific instruction from G-d. Their fire did not really belong to the avodah; it was fully foreign to the mikdosh. The pesukim, though, still leave us puzzled. Absent some special circumstance or consideration, death decreed by Heaven does not strike people dead in a moment. Generally, it moves towards its target at a slow crawl, providing opportunity for remorse and teshuvah.

Rashi therefore presents two ways to understand why Nadav and Avihu died so atypically -- struck down instantly for their malfeasance. One opinion faults Nadav and Avihu for determining a halachic course of action without seeking Moshe's counsel and instruction. They acted precipitously; they jumped the gun. Appropriately, their death sentence also ignored the usual allowance of time, and was carried out immediately.

Another opinion finds Nadav and Avihu acting under the influence of intoxicating drink. This is particularly offensive to the kedushah of the place, which has no tolerance or room for drunkenness where people strive for attachment to Hashem through sharp focus and dedication. Contrary to the ordinary course of a Divinely decreed death sentence, Nadav and Avihu's came instantly, as their action was entirely incompatible with the holiness of the place.

At this point, we would seem to stand on a secure footing, if not for what Rashi has told us elsewhere. From their privileged position along the mountain slope, Nadav and Avihu mismanaged their part in the Torah's revelation at Sinai by "gazing" at G-d. Rashi (Shemos 24:10) wrote that they deserved to die then, but Hashem was loathe to mar the festive mood of the giving of the Torah with a display of Divine wrath. He determined to wait for a different occasion to use their death as an object lesson about the exactitude of His expectations. Their sentence was deferred till the occasion of our pesukim -- the inauguration of the Mishkan. If so, we do not need any explanation at all for the deaths of Nadav and Avihu -- they were marked men from the Shavuos before!

This question fails again to account for how Divine sentences are carried out. If a person manages to survive that flickering of Divine wrath at the moment it occurs, he buys himself time. The sentence will be carried out -- but only on the occasion of another transgression that should be punishable by death. Thus, Nadav and Avihu not only escaped punishment at Sinai, but they were safe, in a sense, until their next serious error.

You may find this unsatisfactory. If they would not be punished until violation another major transgression, they in effect escaped punishment for their first sin! This, however, is not true. The sins were connected. They would not have acted inappropriately at the inauguration of the Mishkan had they not first sinned at Sinai. As the Zohar explains (Zohar Chadash, Noach 28), the same haughtiness that led them to peer more intently than they should have at the display of the Shechinah at Sinai led them to the error of the foreign fire.

We are making progress, but not quite done. Rashi (Devarim 9:20) tells us that the deaths of Nadav and Avihu served as punishment to their father Aharon for his role in the sin of the eigel. Once again, any explanation in our pesukim other than relating to the eigel should be out of place! This, however, is not so. Ordinarily, Hashem does not punish children for the sins of their fathers. Chazal tell us, however, that if children

persist in the sins of their evil father -- in other words, if they take up their father's sin as their legacy -- the punishment of the father is visited upon them.

In a different manner, Hashem will sometimes punish a great tzadik through his children. Although this is not His usual practice, an argument can be made in din that all consequences of a cause are no stronger or better than the initial cause. (Gur Aryeh, Devarim 9:20 offers two alternative explanations of this phenomenon.) Children owe their existence to their parents (as well as many defining elements of their existence and personalities). The behavior of parents in the physical world directly -- and sometimes fatefully -- impacts upon their progeny. The same could happen in the spiritual realm. A spiritual shortcoming of a parent will redound to the child. This could even mean extinguishing the life of a child, who in din is an extension of the parent.

As stated above, Hashem does not often employ this argument. Sometimes, however, in regard to a great tzadik, with whom He is more likely to deal with the midah of din, He will employ this argument, and punish a parent through the death of a child. Even here, though, He will not punish the child unless that child is guilty of some sin himself. Had Nadav and Avihu not sinned in some manner or form at the Mishkan's inauguration, Aharon's sin would not have been visited upon them.

One last citation stands in the way of squaring all of Rashi's references to the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Rashi (Vayikra 10:3) reconstructs Moshe's reaction to the tragedy. He tells Aharon that Hashem had hinted that He would be sanctified through the deaths of those close to Him. He had thought that he, Moshe, or Aharon would be the vehicles for this kiddush Hashem, but now understood the greatness of Nadav and Avihu. Once again, we find an argument for Nadav and Avihu dying without cause.

This is not accurate. Hashem did not and would not harm them without cause. His foretelling that Nadav and Avihu would die at the chanukas ha-Mishkan only meant that He knew that they would sin, and their quick punishment would be a cause for kiddush Hashem. And as is always the case, His foreknowledge of the choice that man will make does not interfere with that choice, and therefore man's responsibility for it. *(Based on Gur Aryeh, Vayikra 10:2)*

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week's parsha, Shmini, teaches the dietary laws of which animals can and can't be eaten. "These are the animals that can be eaten from amongst all of the animals of the land. All those that have split-hooves and chew their cud... [11:2-3]" These kashrus laws apply and affect us on both a physical and spiritual level. Whenever someone takes issue, claiming there's no evidence that these foods cause any physical harm, I invariably counter that I am, in fact, much older than I look. I was actually born B.C. before cholesterol... In those years, people had never heard of cholesterol. It wasn't found on a single supermarket label. It wasn't recognized as the number one cause of heart attacks. So much for what science knows as of today. We all know that twenty-five years from now we'll be looking back on the antiquated ideas, understandings and methods of the year 2003.

The same way that the physical composition of the food affects us in a physical sense, the spiritual make-up of the food affects us in a spiritual sense. Though we have some knowledge of the physical, how different things would impact upon us spiritually is clearly out of our league. Our only hope is to follow the directives of the Master Healer outlined in His Torah.

An interesting comparison is drawn between different nations and the animals that represent them. Yisroel is compared to a sheep, Esav {the modern western world} is compared to a pig and Yishmael {the Middle Eastern world} is compared to a camel.

(An interesting side point is that these animals are the staple foods of their respective nations. The Jews eat lamb but not pig or camel. The western world eats pig as one of its staples. The Moslem, Arab world doesn't eat pig but eat camel.)

Sheep have both of the necessary attributes in order to be kosherthey chew their cud and have split-hooves. Pigs have split-hooves but don't chew their cud, while camels chew their cud but don't have split-hooves.

The hooves have to do with travel. That idea of always moving forward is exemplified by the western world. A father is termed "the old man." Technology renders yesterday's wonders obsolete. With the theory of evolution, there's not much of a basis to respect the earlier generations who are simply a few steps closer to having been apes. The movement is forward, forward, forward with hardly a look behind. Having split-hooves but not chewing the cud.

Chewing the cud is a regurgitation of the past. The Middle Eastern world looks back on the success and glory of their history. Developments in mathematics and science are no longer their domain. Even their present is backward, a regurgitation of the past, indicating a fairly bleak future. Chewing the cud but not having split-hooves.

The sheep and other kosher animals both chew their cud and have split-hooves. Yisroel is manifested by a deep respect and reverence for the pastthose that are generations closer to Adam HaRishon {the first man} and to those that stood at Sinaiand a confident faith and hope in the future and glory that it holds.

"Do not become defiled with these because I am Hashem, your G-d, sanctify yourselves because I am holy... [11:43-44]" It is this commitment to the laws of kashrus that will help bring about that glorious future.