

Parshat Shemini Mr. David Barnes

Our parsha this week tells of the disturbing deaths of Nadav and Abihu for offering “alien fire” on the altar. Many explanations are given to address the questions of both what they had done wrong, as well as why they had to die.

One thing does seem certain - they made a mistake and this cost them their lives. So what caused them to make the mistake in the first place?



The Torah states almost immediately after their deaths:

“And Hashem spoke to Aharon, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicants, you or your sons, when you enter the Mishkan that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout your generations, for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean; and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which Hashem has imparted to them through Moshe (Vayikra 10: 8-11)

Commenting on this idea, the Midrash Vayikra Rabah alludes to alcohol as the cause of their grave mistake. For example, it states: "Just as an adder separates life from death ... so wine caused a separation between Aharon and his sons in the matter of the death penalty." Furthermore, R. Shim'on expounded on this idea: "The two sons of Aharon died only because they entered the Tent of Meeting when they were drunk."

So it seems that the case can be made that it was likely Nadav's and Abihu's intoxication that led to their mistake and ultimately to the loss of their lives.

But there is another question. Certainly Nadav and Abihu would know to be careful when performing their service to Hashem. How could they have made this grave mistake in the first place?

The late Rav Avraham Twerski, who dedicated his life to working with alcoholics and addicts, answers the question this way - he once wrote that “according to Rabbi Yishmael, the ‘alien fire’ is figurative. The sons of Aharon felt that they could intensify the spiritual experience of the Divine service if their spirits were lifted with wine. But this was a defiance of Hashem's will. One's spiritual experience is not enhanced artificially by mind-altering chemicals.”

One more question: Why do the laws of kashrut immediately follow this story? Although unusual, I would like to offer a way of understanding the answer based on my own life experience.

I personally have struggled with food addiction my entire life and I was often too unaware of the harm I was causing myself and those I loved. When challenged, I often used celebration, including the chagim, as an excuse to justify my inability to control my consumption and excesses. Furthermore I have had first hand experience with the effects of alcohol addiction, including the grief caused when alcohol consumption on the part of another leads to the loss of someone you love. In our case, the untimely death of my wife Sarah's sister Christen, committed by a drunken driver, last year in the spring.

I suggest that one possible reason for the connection of the laws of kashrut to this episode involving Aharon's two sons is as follows:

By limiting our ability to consume both food and drink (the laws of kashrut, as well as the prohibition of drinking when entering the mishkan) the Torah is teaching us that in our desire to serve Hashem, we must be sure not to utilize food and drink beyond their intended purposes. The Torah reminds us that the gifts Hashem has given us for celebration such as good food and wine are not meant to be excessive, and certainly not addictive, and to use them this way would be an affront to Hashem, and to his holiness. And as we see both in our parsha, and in the lives of those we love, can lead to tragedy.

May we all grow in greater awareness and compassion for both those who struggle with addiction of any kind, as well as for those they may have harmed and also seek to serve Hashem, mindful of the intended purposes of that which he has given to us to use in our avodah of Him.

Shabbat Shalom!