

Parshat Acharei Mot Mr. Nachshon Wyma



The Context

In Parshat Shemini, the Mishkan is finally ready to be put to use. The special eight days of inauguration are completed and the sacrificial service conducted by Aharon and his sons begins. In the midst of all the ceremony and spiritual energy, Aharon's older two sons enter the Mishkan with *אש זרה*, alien fire. In a virtually identical repeat to what had just happened to the morning sacrifices, a fire went out from G-d *וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם*, "and consumed them." The national joy is marred by the sudden need to take care of two bodies followed by G-d's command that kohanim avoid intoxicating wine in order that they not approach G-d and die. It is hard, given the juxtaposition of tragedy and cautionary command, not to assume Nadav and Avihu got drunk and died as a consequence.

The Conflict

Jump to the beginning of this week's parsha. G-d gives the laws concerning when and how the Kohen Gadol is allowed to enter the Sanctuary: he has to be dressed a certain way, there has to be a cloud of incense, he conducts each step of the Yom Kippur service in a very specific order and fashion, when and how often he washes himself and changes his clothing... And herein rests a significant challenge. If Nadav and Avihu were mere drunks who violated G-d's Sanctuary, why are the laws of Yom Kippur, the most sacred time of the year when atonement is being secured for every Jew, given in the parsha named "After the Death?" More enigmatic is G-d's statement to Moshe, *בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדָּשׁ*, "Through those who are nearest Me I will be sanctified."

What did Nadav and Avihu do that was wrong? Equally as important, what about what they did was wrong? Were they drunk when they should have been sober and careful? Did they brazenly enter G-d's Sanctuary with no concern for the One Whose presence they would encounter? If yes, then why does Moshe explain their death with G-d's statement about being sanctified by those "nearest Me?" After all, how much closer could one get? Perhaps a story from the Talmud will help shed light on this question.

In Chagigah 14B there is the story of four brilliant Torah sages who enter Pardes (G-d's Orchard). One by one, all four glimpse the Divine Presence. Ben Azai dies. Ben Zoma goes crazy. Elisha ben Avuya becomes a heretic. Akiva alone leaves Gan Eden with shalom. Why was Rabbi Akiva alone able to leave in peace? Perhaps the answer can be found in the phrase the Yerushalmi Talmud adds to the story, "Akiva niknas b'shalom." The Rebbe *רבינו* says that it is precisely *because* Akiva entered in shalom that he was able to leave in shalom. That is, Akiva entered Pardes with the necessary sense of balance or peace between the supernal realms of Torah and this mundane reality.

The conflict for Nadav and Avihu was the conflict faced by every Jew. Ratzui and shuve, like the two parts of a heartbeat, form the life experience of B'nei Yisrael. Unfortunately, Nadav and Avihu were drawn to the Divine Presence without a sense of mission or purpose and (like ben Azai) didn't have the path of return in place to safely shuve. They didn't have the shalom, the balance between spiritual and material, necessary to take the holiness of Torah into the everyday.

The Connection

Last week we completed the Festival of Liberation. We've embraced the Seder and the mesmerizing evening of reliving the destruction of Egypt and the Divine Presence leading our fathers and mothers into the desert. If ever there was a need to have a plan to shuve after the ratzu of experiencing the holy, certainly this is such a time. Returning to the mundane world after Shabbat and Pesach may not feel like such an appetizing goal...without shalom.

The Challenge

Times of holiness are not meant to be an escape. Think of Shabbat and the Chaggim as an opportunity to recharge our internal battery. Our goal should be to enter and leave such times in shalom, to enter the passion of Shabbat and the Chaggim with the goal of carrying what we experience forward into the upcoming week, months, and year.

A final thought in closing. It is unfortunately possible that we can all use a little more ratzon in our lives. Perhaps part of what makes it difficult for us to understand the motives of Nadav and Avihu is that we don't often feel an unrestrained passion to draw near to G-d's Presence. This challenge is, however, the heartbeat of every Jew – the ratzon (passion) to ratz (run) to G-d in shalom (balance) with a plan in place to shuve (return) and carry what we experienced into the material world. When we make the proper effort to enter Shabbat and the Chaggim in a receptive, G-d honoring frame of mind coupled with the commitment to carry the spiritual into the mundane after the return, then we can be one of those through whom G-d is sanctified.