

Nadav and Avihu: The Pathology of Narcissism

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The tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's two eldest sons, the crown princes of the Jewish people, looms large over our *sedra*, and Sefer VaYikra as a whole. A day meant to be defined by sublime joy, celebrated, as it were, of the Almighty Himself, יום שמחת לבו¹, was marred by their sudden and shocking demise. What was their sin?

Rashi² cites two different views found in a Midrash. The first view, that of R. Eliezer, assumes that Nadav and Avihu may have brought an incense offering which was, in the technical sense of the term, correct, but that they did so under the influence of alcohol. It seems to me that we are not meant to interpret this sin as merely the legal consequence of having brought an offering under the influence of alcohol³, but as symptomatic of a deeper pathology. Time and again, the Torah stresses that the sacrificial realms, the dimension of mikdash and korbanot, is not meant to be an irrational, escapist, hedonistic flight from the cognitive roots which are so characteristic of the halakhic system. It is not for naught that the highest legal body, the Sanhedrin, had their chambers but a few meters from the courtyard of the Mikdash, where sacrifice were brought⁴. If this interpretation is correct, one can readily understand why, despite the undeniably draconian nature of the punishment, it was essential to establish the proper ethos of the mishkan on the very first day of its functioning.

R. Yishmael adopts a different view, namely, the Nadav and Avihu were guilty of a different sin, that of ruling in front of a senior halakhic authority. As explicated in the Talmud⁵, Nadav and Avihu preempted Moshe, in determining that, despite the supernatural events of the first day of the Mishkan's functioning, the incense offering should be brought with not only a heavenly flame, but an earthly fire as well. Rashbam⁶, in developing this position, notes that Nadav and Avihu were not only guilty of issuing a halakhic ruling in the presence of a qualitatively superior halakhic authority, but in so doing, prevented a greater sanctification of God's name, which would have been triggered had the incense, on that day, been burnt only through a heavenly flame.

While these two opinions differ in their specifics, one might argue that they agree, in large measure, in substance. After all, according to both views, Nadav and Avihu failed to appreciate the importance of boundaries when dealing with the sacred realm in which the Divine presence was most intensely felt. According to the view of R. Yishmael, their ecstatic,

¹ ויקרא רבה (וילנא) פרשת אחרי מות פרשה כ. לעומת זאת, עיין משנה מסכת תענית (ד:ח) שמגדיר "יום שמחת לבו כבניו בית המקדש, ולא השראת השכינה באהל מועד.

² רש"י ויקרא י"ב ותצא אש

³ עיין רמב"ם הלכות ביאת מקדש א:א

⁴ תלמוד ירושלמי מכות ב:ו

⁵ תלמוד בבלי מסכת עירובין סג עמוד א

⁶ רשב"ם ויקרא י"א ד"ה ויקחו בני אהרן נדב ואביהו. ויש להעיר שאם כן, חטאם של נדב ואביהו מקביל לחטא של משה רבינו במי מריבה, "יען אשר לא האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל".

hedonistic flight into a state of inebriation literally deprived them of the capacity to render proper judgment, while according to the view of R. Eliezer, they lacked the religious and spiritual discipline to recognize a crucial boundary, that of respect for halakhic authority and seniority. In distilling these two views even further, one cannot help but detect a strain of narcissism concerning both of these possible sins; according to the former approach, instead of relating to the sacrificial rite as an opportunity to serve God, they used it as an opportunity for their own spiritual pleasure⁷. According to the latter approach, that of ruling in the presence of a superior halakhic authority, the narcissism is self-evident.

It is instructive to consider a parallel Talmudic text⁸ in light of this interpretation. The Talmud portrays Nadav and Avihu, walking behind their father and uncle, in conversation with one another. Nadav says to Avihu, 'when will these two aged ones pass away, so that the two of us will lead the generation.' In light of the analysis above, one can certainly imagine such a conversation, or a similar one, crass as it may be, having transpired.

In reflecting upon the premise that narcissism was the underlying spiritual pathology which caused Nadav and Avihu to bring an unwanted incense, and, tragically, led to their demise, what is perhaps most tragic is that these were the sons of Aharon. No one had more reason to be jealous than Aharon, who was bypassed for his younger brother for the position of national leadership. Yet, when he became aware of this leadership decision, the Torah testifies to his genuine happiness for his younger brother, ⁹ושמח בלבו. If only Nadav and Avihu had not been waiting and watching for their father's expiration, but had been studying his character more closely.

⁷ עיין רש"י שמות כד: "א דיה ויחזו את האלוקים, שנדב ואביהו הגיסו לבם גם בהר סיני לזון עיניהם מזיו השכינה שלא כראוי."

⁸ תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין נב.

⁹ שמות ד:יד.