

Parashat Shemini 5779, If You Play with Fire ...

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“If you play with fire, you might get burned.” There’s good advice behind that cliché, but it doesn’t mean we should never associate with fire. There’s too much good that can come from it.

On Thursday, our Jewish medical ethics class discussed genetic testing, which is commonplace today. I strongly encourage every bride and groom to be tested for Tay-Sachs and other diseases associated with the Jewish community. And I’m not the only one. The campaign to encourage genetic testing has been so effective that Tay-Sachs is now less likely to occur in the Jewish community than in the community at large.

But there is another side. During the Progressive era, eugenics, the “scientific” attempt to improving the genetic quality of the human population, led to racism and nativism in this country. States passed compulsory sterilization laws targeted at individuals in mental institutions. And, of course, the Nazis took eugenics to the next level.

Towards the end of the 20th century, states passed anti-discrimination laws to protect privacy and ensure that, for example, insurance companies cannot use the BRCA gene as justification for raising insurance premiums. It’s a real issue. Without certain protections and assurances, people might be to skip the test even though we know that these tests save lives.

The point is that we have to be careful. And at the same time, because we understand the potential benefit, we know we cannot avoid genetic testing entirely.

That is the lesson of the Torah’s story of Nadav and Avihu, which we read today. Aaron’s sons learned it the hard way: If you play with fire, you might get burned.

Now Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-2).

The Torah doesn’t tell us exactly what they did wrong. Maybe they used the wrong recipe; maybe they were drunk; maybe they entered the space without permission. There is textual evidence for each of these assertions. And we also have to remember the important principle of Talmud study: if there are multiple answers to any question, the real answer is that we don’t know.

I think it comes down to Nadav and Avihu not being careful enough. The 14th-century scholar Gersonides says they were punished for treating such an important ritual causally, preventing it from having the desired effect and, worse, setting a negative example for others.

The passage talks about two heavenly fires. A fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them, “וּתְצַא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וְתֹאכַל אֹתָם;” and there is another fire three verses earlier that consumes

Aaron's offering: "ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל על המזבח את העולה", A fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burn offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw and shouted and fell on their faces." The 12th-century scholar Rashbam says it was the same fire. When the ritual was conducted deliberately, with care and respect, the fire consumed the offering and everyone was duly impressed; when the ritual was conducted haphazardly, the same fire consumed the priests. If you play with fire, you might get burned.

But the Torah never suggests that priests should stay away. A version of the word "קרוב, near" is repeated at least 11 times in this section. The sacrificial system was supposed to bring worshippers close to God. That is a worthy and necessary goal.

Several chapters after the story of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron receives instruction on how to enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. "The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, אחרי מות שני בני אהרן בקרבתם לפני ה' וימתו, who died when they were drawing near to God." It is good to draw near to God; Moses says 'בקרבי אקדש', God is sanctified by those who draw near to Him; Aaron is commanded to enter the Holy of Holies. But it is not done absent-mindedly. It requires preparation and understanding of what can go wrong. The Talmud describes how the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies with a rope tied around his ankle. If he was to make a mistake and be struck down, nobody would be able to enter the Holy of Holies to remove the corpse. The Rabbis thought of everything. And the Talmud tells us that, because of their extensive care, that security rope never had to be used.

But that's the lesson. We need the fire. The priests have to be careful, but the Torah cannot comprehend walking away and abandoning the opportunity to experience God in this intimate way.

I think about that lesson in light of my experience at the AIPAC Policy Conference earlier this week. There were a lot of questions going in. This is election season in Israel, and Prime Minister Netanyahu has done some outlandish things to sure up his chances. I was sure he would use the Aipac crowd as evidence that the entire American Jewish community supports him. He touts his close relationship with President Trump, a president far more popular in Israel than the US. Aipac is supposed to be non-partisan, but many see a tilt towards the political right. I have spoken with members of our community who don't want to associate with that. "Don't go to Aipac," some say. "Aipac is playing with fire and we could get burned."

Without naming names, there were references to the well-publicized comments by Representative Ilhan Omar, suggesting that Jewish money gives the Israel lobby undue influence and accusing some members of Congress of dual loyalty. Whether motivated by conviction or partisan politics, we heard the suggestion that the Democratic party isn't as committed to Israel as it could be. And that's a problem for the majority of Jews who vote Democratic. Are they playing with fire? Are we aligning ourselves with the wrong team? We heard from Joan Pryor, a member of British Parliament and chair of Labour friends of Israel. Pryor walked away from the Labour party when antisemitic tropes became mainstream. She gave stern warning about what happens if extremists take over a mainstream political party.

We are playing with fire on the left and the right. But the lesson of the Nadav and Avihu experience is that we can't walk away. Israel is too important. The US-Israel relationship is too important. For some of us, shared values with the Democratic party are too important. We have to draw closer. We have to draw near with eyes wide open. Policy Conference does something very important. Senator Chuck Schumer, Representative Steny Hoyer, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Mayor Bill DeBlasio, so many Democratic leaders affirmed their belief in the importance of Israel. Where there are challenges, we have to help leadership continue to affirm its commitment to Israel. We can't leave the important work of the US-Israel relationship to only one party.

I attended a breakout session on minorities in Israel, a moderated panel in which Mohammed Darawhe, Ramzi Halabi, and Dr. Yasmin Abu Friaaha spoke frankly about Israel's failures in its treatment of its Israeli Arab, Druze, and Bedouin citizenry. The session was eye-opening. But more than that, the very existence of the panel underscored the truth that one does not have to deny that problems exist to affirm love and support for Israel. These courageous speakers exposed a fire within Israel; we can get burned; it is dangerous. But we dare not walk away from the 71-year experiment in restoring Jewish sovereignty to our ancient land.

These are polarizing times – for the Jewish people, the American electorate, the American Jewish community. We yearn for a simpler time when we could all agree, when values were clear and defined. I conclude with a song, written by the Israeli poet Rachel Blawstein – although she was famous enough to be known simply as Rachel. Rachel made Aliyah at the age of 19. She left Israel to study agriculture in France, and when she returned to Palestine a few years later, she had contracted tuberculosis and could no longer withstand the rigors of kibbutz life. I hear in her poem a longing to return to the land from which she was so cruelly separated, perhaps a longing for something that never actually existed.

And I hear a prayer for us, that we might return to achieve a relationship with the land that is built on the promise of redemption, grounded in sacred values of peoplehood, justice, and equality for all. I pray for the fortitude to withstand the fire, to navigate the challenges that lie ahead as we draw near to our land, to our God, and to humanity. *V'ulaj*, And Perhaps – even if that reality never actually was, perhaps one day it may be.