

D'VAR TORAH: Parashat Shemini
Inequality for All -- March 23, 2014.
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Hubris -- excessive pride or self-confidence --

arrogance, conceit, haughtiness, pride,
self-importance, egotism, pomposity, superciliousness, superiority.
This seems to be the possible sin that led to Nadav and Abihu's death.
Here's the setting. The Mishkan – the portable Sanctuary built
by the Israelites in the desert – is inaugurated.

The High Priest, Aaron, has dipped his finger in the blood of a calf,
putting it on the horns of the altar, and pouring the rest of the blood
at the base of the altar.

The sacrifice of the fat, the kidneys and the liver have gone up in smoke.
The blood of another offering he has dashed on the sides of the altar.
Aaron offers other sacrifices. Then blesses the people.

Nadav and Avihu, two of Aaron's sons, take out their fire pans,
lay incense on them, and offer what is referred to
in this week's Torah portion, Shemini,
as "strange or alien fire." They are immediately zapped by fire and die.

The fact that each took his own fire pan leads many of our commentators to
see these men as arrogant, bringing an unbidden offering on their own,
neglecting to consult with their elders, not even consulting with each other!
One commentary¹ says that they were "overwhelmed by joy
on perceiving the new fire" so each became totally caught up
in his own love for God.

As Rabbi Jay Strear points out, these men,
who are supposed to serve the people, instead,
become consumed by their own passion.

In other words, they are consumed by their own egos.

Rabbi Strear also points to the connection with our Haftarah,
which relates the return of the Ark to Jerusalem under King David.

In the haftarah, David asks the sons of Adinadav to bring the Ark out
and to place it onto a cart in order to transport it to Jerusalem.

"They immediately assumed an inappropriate position ahead of the cart;
they literally took an arrogant stance," says Strear.

¹ *Sifra* 24

When the oxen pulling the cart stumbled, one of the sons, Uzzah, reached for the Ark to steady it.

And the same thing happens to him as to Aaron's sons.

He is struck down by God.

According to 11th century French commentator, Rashi, there was no risk of the Ark falling to the ground.

It was only out of arrogance that Uzza's thought he needed "to save that which needed no saving," says Rabbi Strear.

I think that the hubris being discussed in this week's Torah portion – the egotism in particular --is something that is affecting our society as well.

There is a marked lack of concern for the larger community and a narrow and selfish focus on personal and narrow agendas.

Think about corporations in today's world.

Have any of you seen "The Wolf of Wall Street"?

Leonardo di Caprio portrays real life broker Jordan Belfort who exemplifies greed and hubris gone wild.

Belfort becomes a billionaire through stock market fraud.

He loves the money as well as the decadent lifestyle filled with sex and drugs, and most of all, he loves the power the money affords him

So what if some poor soul handed over his entire savings of \$5,000 only to lose it to Belfort's crooked scheme?

His attitude is: If they are gullible enough to buy Belfort's smooth talk, they deserve to be snookered.

In 2008, we saw how Wall Street brokers, playing games with mortgage derivatives also made a killing while bringing the world economy to its knees. And we continue to see that, while corporations are making record profits and record returns for their investors, the little guy, the worker, is being squeezed more and more. In real dollars, adjusted for inflation, the salaries of CEOs have soared while the salaries of the average worker have stagnated and even, fallen. In the meantime, the cost of living has skyrocketed, particularly in the areas of health care and education.

Former Harvard Professor and former Secretary of Labor, currently UC Berkeley Professor, Robert Reich gives details on this widening income gap in his documentary, "Inequality for All." For example, he tells us that the top 1% of earners now take in more than 20% of all income—three times what they did in 1970. The 400 richest Americans

now own more wealth than the bottom 150 million combined. In 1978, the typical male US worker was making \$48,000 a year (adjusted for inflation). Meanwhile the average person in the top 1% was making \$390, 000. By 2010, the median wage had plummeted to \$33,000, but at the top it had nearly trebled, to \$1,100,000. Reich attributes this to a combination of anti-union legislation and deregulation of the markets in addition to which the tax rate on the highest income earners has fallen dramatically in the last few years from a high of 70%. Nick Hanauer, who is interviewed in the film, maintains that this shrinking of the middle class is really bad for the economy because billionaires don't spend as much of their money as do the middle class. Hanauer should know – he is one of the 1 %. "I mean, I drive the fanciest Audi around, but it's still only one of them..." he says. "Three pairs of jeans a year, that will just about do me." Hanauer says he pays 11% income tax on a eight-figure income.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, writing at an earlier time, tells us that, "If the ultimate goal is power, then modern man has come of age. However, if the ultimate goal is meaning of existence, then man has already descended into a new infancy... This is an age in which even our common sense is tainted with commercialism and expediency." ² He continues: "I would say that the major religious problem today is the systematic liquidation of man's sensitivity to the challenge of God... Overwhelmed by the power he has achieved, man now has the illusion of sovereignty...

to destroy the illusion that man is his own center cannot be done easily."³

"We have lost our sense of wonder, our sense of radical amazement at sheer being."

What Heschel described 40 or 50 years ago, is even more true today.

² P. 294, Moral Grandeur.

³ P. 251, Moral Grandeur.

In a sense, what we need to regain is humility – to rid ourselves of the arrogance of thinking that the world revolves around us, that we have ultimate control.

Moses and Aaron, two other brothers, are a contrast to the arrogant Nadav and Avihu. When Moses tells Aaron to begin his role as High Priest, the Torah says: “Moses [then] said to Aaron, ‘Approach the altar, and prepare your sin offering and burnt offering, thus atoning for you and the people. Then prepare the people’s offering to atone for them, as God has commanded.’”⁴

Our sages interpreted Moses direction, “Approach the altar,” to indicate that Aaron was standing afar, perhaps reluctant to come near. They said: “Initially Aaron was ashamed to come close. Moses said to him, ‘Do not be ashamed. This is what you have been chosen to do.’”⁵

Why was Aaron ashamed? The 13th century Spanish commentator, Nahmanides suggests that Aaron was overwhelmed by trepidation at coming so close to the Divine presence.

The rabbis likened it to the bride of a king, nervous at entering the bridal chamber for the first time.

What is more, according to Rabbi Leslie Bergson, “Moses and Aaron are a model of cooperative leadership. They are forever holding one another up. One’s shortcoming is mitigated by the other’s strength. They rescue each other.

Nadav and Avihu are not equipped to rescue one another, so when they come to a dangerous impasse, it kills them. Lack of communication is deadly to shared leadership.”

Rabbi Strear notes that, “In stark contrast to the brotherly dynamics throughout Genesis, Moses and Aaron harbor no feelings of envy towards one another. Each has unique personal attributes and brings them to bear in service of Israel and of God.”

The midrash similarly praises their relationship, underscoring the concern and respect Moses and Aaron feel for one another.⁶

⁴ Lev. 9: 7

⁵ Rashi to Lev. 9: 7, quoting Sifra. From Jonathan Sacks.

⁶ Midrash Tanhuma, Shemot.

So let us be more like Moses and Aaron, and less like Nadav and Avihu. Let us cooperate rather than compete. Let us also hold accountable those who prefer profit over the welfare of their fellow citizen. When we invest our money in stocks or retirement, we might think about how much a company pays their workers versus how much the CEO is paid. We might also let our elected representatives know that we believe in livable wages. If you are interested in seeing Robert Reich's documentary and engaging in a discussion about these issues, there will be a Screening of "Inequality for All" followed by a panel discussion including Mark Takano, Professor Roger Ransom and Bill Hedrick at: UU Church of Riverside, 3525 Mission Inn Avenue in Riverside on April 13 at 2pm.