



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Vayikra

Parshat Shmini

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Were Nadav and Avihu Really Bad?

By Ethan Katz

Most of us are taught from an early age that *Nadav* and *Avihu* sinned and died for it. I would, however, like to offer an alternative approach to this interpretation.

The *Medrash* in *Yalkut Shimoni* asks the following question: For what reason do we mention the deaths of *Nadav* and *Avihu* on Yom Kippur? The response offered by the *Medrash* is that just like *Yom Kippur* atones for our sins, so too do the deaths of *tzadikim*.

This *Medrash* then changes direction and tells us that *Aharon* was distraught upon the deaths of *Nadav* and *Avihu*, for he felt responsible due to his part in the *הַטָּא הָעֵגְלָה*. *Moshe* assures *Aharon* that while on Har Sinai, he was told that *Hashem* would consecrate the *Mishkan* through an "אָדָם גְּדוֹל" *Moshe* had thought that was referring to either himself or *Aharon*, but now he realized that *Nadav* and *Avihu* were, in fact, greater than them both, for it was through them that the *Mishkan* was consecrated.

The omission of this description, כַּמִּשְׁפָּט, in accordance with the law, implies that there could have been an issue with Aharon's personal korbanos.

Question: Reading through the *pesukim* prior to the *Nadav* and *Avihu* story, it seems like the Jewish people had already successfully atoned for the *הַטָּא הָעֵגְלָה*. Why then does the *Medrash* seem to imply that *Nadav* and *Avihu* died for exactly this purpose through a) connecting their deaths with the atonement of *Yom Kippur* and b) *Moshe's* assurance to *Aharon* that they died not as a punishment for the *הַטָּא הָעֵגְלָה*, but the opposite!?

In order to answer this question, I'd like to make a *diyuk* (inference) from the *pesukim*.

The Torah tells us that *Aharon* prepared four different *korbanos*; an *עֹלָה* and a *הַטָּאת* that were his, and an *עֹלָה* and a *הַטָּאת* of the people. However, the Torah only describes those of the people as being done "כַּמִּשְׁפָּט," in accordance with the law. (*Vayikra* 9:16) This same term is not used, though, in describing the *korbanos* of *Aharon*. The omission of this description implies that there could have been an issue with *Aharon's* personal *korbanos*.

This *diyuk* helps explain a subsequent issue pointed out by Rashi. Rashi explains that upon completion of Aharon's service, no fire came forth from *Shamayim*. However, this is not surprising if we suggest that Aharon's *korbanos* were not prepared correctly for this occasion.

The Jewish people, on the other hand, were ashamed, thinking that their *korbanos* were not accepted because they had not done enough to atone for the **הַטָּא הָעֵגְלָל**. *Moshe* responded that

there was nothing to worry about, for *Aharon* would cause the *Shechinah* to descend.

Nadav and Avihu served as the ultimate קָרְבַּן עֹלָה, the sacrifice for which we offer Hashem our very best, acknowledging that everything we own is from Him. Aharon's original preparations were not enough to affect a response from Shamayim.

However, this is not what happened. It wasn't until *Nadav and Avihu* entered that the fire came down and consumed the *korbanos*.

Based on our *Medrash*, I believe we can answer our question.

Nadav and Avihu served as the ultimate קָרְבַּן עֹלָה, the sacrifice for which we offer *Hashem* our very best, acknowledging that everything we own is from Him. Aharon's original preparations were not enough to affect a response from *Shamayim*. His two sons, realizing this, rushed to give themselves to *Hashem al pi Kiddush Hashem*. Seeing the level of *mesiras nefesh* that they had expressed and the fire descending from *Shamayim*, *Moshe* realized his flawed assumption. He concluded that *Nadav and Avihu* were truly greater than both him and *Aharon*.

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Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com*

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