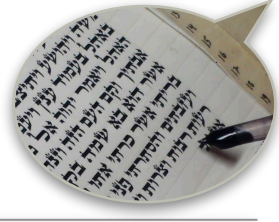




The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Vayikra

Parshat Shmini

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The Closeness of Distance

By Daniel Fiskus

This week's *parsha* includes a short and strange story about the death of *Aaron's* two sons, *Nadav* and *Avihu*. At the culminating moment of the dedication of the *Mishkan*, they were killed by God Himself, apparently as punishment for bringing an offering that they were not commanded to bring. But why did God respond so harshly to the two sons of the High Priest who just wanted to earn extra credit?

The Torah does not say much except that the offering the brothers brought was one that God had not commanded, **אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם**. (*Vayikra 10:1*)

We may be able to extract an additional layer of interpretation with a parallel story that appears much earlier in the *Chumash* — a story where specific details and language align with the story of *Nadav* and *Avihu*. Rabbi David Fohrman highlights the parallel to the story of *Adam* and *Chava* in the Garden of Eden.

Both stories follow a pattern that contains the same 4 elements. For example, the story in *Parshat Shmini*:

1. Time: After the 7 days of inauguration where *Aaron* and his sons were to watch over the *Mishkan* day and night. This story begins on the 8th day.
2. Sin: *Nadav* and *Avihu* each took his pan and put fire on it, and placed incense on top. The sin is categorized by two verbs: **וַיִּקְחוּ** and **וַיִּתְּנוּ**

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אֶהֱרֹן נֹדֶב וְאֶבִיהוּא אֵשׁ
מִחֹתָתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיַּעֲשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קֹטֶרֶת
(*Vayikra 10:1*)

Now Aaron's sons *Nadav* and *Avihu* each
took his fire pan, put fire in it, and **laid**
incense on it ...

3. Death and Consumption: They were killed by a fire that **consumed** them - **וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ**
4. Extraction and Clothing: Their bodies were taken outside the camp, but the Torah makes a point to mention that their bodies were carried out with their **tunics** - **בְּכִתְנֹתָם** (*Vayikra 10:5*)

Where have we heard all of this before? And what is the Torah teaching us through the parallels between the stories?

Going back to the first sin recorded in the Torah, we find a similar pattern:

1. Time: After the 7 days of creation, right after the Torah talks about *Shabbat*.
2. Sin: *Chava* took from the fruit and ate and gave to *Adam*, and he ate – The Torah uses the same verbs to describe this sin as the sin of *Nadav* and *Avihu*: וַתֵּקֶחַ and וַתִּתֵּן

וַתֵּקֶחַ מִפְרִיָּו וַתֹּאכַל וַתִּתֵּן גַּם-לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּהּ וַיֹּאכַל
(Bereshit 3:6)

... she **took** of its fruit and ate. She also **gave** some to her husband, and he ate.

3. Death and Consumption: In this story, it's the people who do the consuming. While *Adam* and *Chava* don't actually die (even though God warned them that they would), there is a death that befalls mankind who become mortal beings that must toil for their livelihood for all time.
4. Extraction and Clothing: *Adam* and *Chava* are then removed from the Garden of Eden, and God fashions clothing for them: כְּתָנֹת עֹר וַיְלַבֵּשֵׁם – this is the same word used to describe the clothing of *Nadav* and *Avihu*. (Bereshit 3:21)

In *Bereshit*, God had just created the entire world for humankind in 6 days, rested on the 7th, and on the 8th day, man sinned.

In *Parshat Shemini*: Man created a place for God in this world (the *Mishkan*), dedicated it for 7 days, and on the 8th day, man sinned.

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us an important insight into the relationship between man and God, as well as the relationship between individuals. In both of these stories, the central figures were in an exceptionally close relationship with God and wanted to get even closer (by eating the fruit or bringing an extra offering). While these actions may have been driven by good intentions, *Adam/Chava* and *Nadav/Avihu* overstepped the boundaries outlined by God.

These two parallel narratives teach us that in a relationship with God or with another person, an unwelcome step forward can be a step backward — indeed, sometimes a step back is a step forward. Honoring distance — or boundaries — can bring one closer.

Daniel and Taryn Fiskus live on Harlan Drive with their two daughters, Caroline (8) and Annabelle (4). They moved into the community in the summer of 2020 and, so far, so good.

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