

Parshat Shmini
4-22-17
By Howard Handler



Nadav and Avihu

In the first two parashiyot of Leviticus (VaYikra, Tzav) the basic modes and types of sacrifices are outlined in chapters 1-7. Toward the end of last week's Parashah, Tzav, formal worship at the Tabernacle (Mishkan) is initiated. In Leviticus ch. 8 the priests (kohanim) and the tabernacle (Mishkan) are consecrated. Moses leads Aaron and his sons in the very first sacrificial offering. Last Shabbat's (before Pesah) parashah then concluded with Aaron and his sons observing a seven day period of ordination prior to beginning their service as priests (kohanim) in the tabernacle (Mishkan). This week's parashah, Shmini, opens with the first sacrifice in the tabernacle. Again Moses guides Aaron and his sons in the correct performance of the sacrificial rites. The Torah makes clear that the system for worshipping God at the Tabernacle is up and running successfully:

Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering ... And all the people saw, and shouted and fell on their faces. –Leviticus 9:23-24

Despite their week long training with Moses at the Tabernacle the Torah next tells us:

Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu 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. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord meant when He said: "Through those near to me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people." - Leviticus 10:1-3

Although the Torah mentions here and in three more places, (Lev. 16;1, Num. 3:4, Num. 26;61) that Nadav and Avihu drew close (too close?) and offered alien fire, it is not at all clear what their sin was. It is equally unclear what was the meaning of their death. We find the Rabbis indicting them severely in a number of sources such as Bavli Sannhedrin 52a:

Moses and Aaron once walked along, with Nadav and Avihu behind them, and all Israel following in the rear. Then Nadav said to Avihu, 'Oh that these old men might die, so that you and I should be the leaders of our generation.' But the Holy One, blessed be He, said unto them: 'We shall see who will bury whom.'

In other Rabbinic passages they are accused of drunkenness, violating all that they were trained to do at the sacrificial service, and more. However if they were so arrogant and impious how can we explain the Torah's words "through those near to me..."? Other Midrashim (eg. Tanhuma Aharei Mot) emphasize the holiness of Nadav and Avihu. Taking his cue from these Midrashim Hayyim ibn Attar in Or haHayyim, ascribes an unstoppable desire to draw nearer to God. Nadav and Avihu may even have been aware of the fatal consequences of their spiritual hungering from the outset. We find this spiritual frame of mind described in the book of Psalms 27:4

"One thing I ask of the Lord,/only that do I seek;/to live in the house of the Lord/all the days of my life,/to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord/to frequent His temple."

Traditionally we are left with two diametrically opposed views of Nadav and Avihu. Either the severity of their punishment reflects the depth of their impiety or their nearness to God proves the depth of their spiritual devotion to God even though it endangered the equilibrium of the required worship at the Tabernacle. For this reason God took them away but recognized them as the most faithful ever of the people of Israel.

I would like to pursue a different symbol not commented upon by the traditional commentators. At the beginning of this week's Parashah fire comes forth and consumes the offering indicating that the first sacrifice in the Tabernacle is a success. The next thing we read is how Nadav and Avihu are consumed by a fire from the Lord. What can we understand from the image of fire in the Torah? The first fire from God in this week's Parashah is entirely positive. If we think of Korah who appears later in Numbers (*beMidbar*) we see fire as a negative punishment from God. Fire from God has a positive sense in Genesis 15 during the Covenant (*brit*) between Abraham and God. The Pillar of Fire protects the People of Israel as they travel through the wilderness. The fire at the burning bush, Exodus 3:2-6 is also a very positive image. How can we understand the fire that consumes Nadav and Avihu. It is a killing fire and that can hardly be positive. Perhaps the dual nature of fire tells us something about the Torah itself. We want to harness the warmth and power of fire. This parallels our desire to find warmth and spiritual strength in the Torah. However the Torah is like any fire. It can grow too strong and we can come too close. In both cases we risk the danger of fire just as Nadav and Avihu did. How can we determine how close we can stand to the Torah and how strong a fire from the Torah should be. The answer must be different for every person. Our comfort with the warmth and power of the Torah can change and hopefully grow. We will have to remember that sometimes one can get singed.