



Balancing Love and Obedience: The Curious Case of Nadav and Avihu

Part One: The Dedication of the Tabernacle

Text #1: Leviticus 9:22–24. English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*.

ויקרא פרק ט:כב-כד.

כב וישא אהרן את-ידו אל-העם, ויברכם; וירד, מעשת החטאת והעלה--והשקמים. כג ויבא משה ואהרן, אל-אהל מועד, ויצאו, ויברכו את-העם; וירא כבוד-ה', אל-כל-העם. כד ותצא אש, מלפני ה', ותאכל על-המזבח, את-העלה ואת-החלבים; וירא כל-העם וירצו, ויפלו על-פניהם.

22 Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being. **23** 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. **24** Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces.

Text #2: Leviticus 10:1–2. English translation adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*.

ויקרא פרק י:א-ב.

א ויקחו בני-אהרן נדב ואביהוא איש מחמתו, ויתנו בהן אש, וישימו עליה, קטרת; ויקריבו לפני ה', אש זרה--אשר לא צוה, אתם. ב ותצא אש מלפני ה', ותאכל אותם; וימתו, לפני ה'.

1 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 strange fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. **2** And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord.

Part Two: What did Nadav and Avihu do Wrong?

Text #3: Sifra, Shemini 32.

ספרא, שמיני לב.

"ויקחו בני אהרן"—אף הם בשמחתם. כיון שראו אש חדשה עמדו להוסיף אהבה על אהבה.

“And Aharon’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his censer”—they, in their joy, since they saw a new fire [the heavenly fire], they arose to add love to love.



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Text #4: Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. *The Hirsch Chumash. Commentary on Leviticus 10:1.*

No place is allowed in the whole service of the offerings of the Sanctuary of the Torah for subjectively doing just what you think right...For the proximity of and getting near to God, which is the purpose of every offering, is only to be found by the way of obedience, by compliance with God's Will and subordination to it. This is one of the points in which Judaism and Paganism go in diametrically opposite directions. The Pagan brings his offering in an attempt to make the god subservient to his wishes. The Jew, with his offering, wishes to place himself in the service of God; by his offering he wishes to make himself subservient to the wishes of his God. So that all offerings are formulae of the demands of God, which the bringer, by his offering, undertakes to make the normal routine for his future life. So that self-devised offerings would be a killing of just those very truths which our offerings are meant to impress upon the bringers, would be placing a pedestal on which to glorify one's own ideas, where a throne was meant to be built for obedience, and obedience only. We can understand that the death of the priestly youths, and their death in the first moment of the consecration of the Sanctuary of God, is the most solemn warning for all future priests of this Sanctuary; it excludes from the precincts of the Sanctuary of God—which was to be nothing else but the Sanctuary of His Torah—every expression of caprice, and every subjective idea of what is right and becoming! Not by fresh inventions even of God-serving novices, but by carrying out that which is ordained by God has the Jewish priest to establish the authenticity of his activities.

Text #5: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. "A Bridge to the Infinite—Parshat Vayakhel." *Jerusalem Report. 28 February 2005.*

Building the Mishkan [Tabernacle] can be compared to constructing a spaceship. Space travel requires vehicles that can journey to distant, extraterrestrial places, but these voyages—no matter how long they are—are ultimately circumscribed by finite, physical parameters. The Mishkan, on the other hand, faced an even greater challenge: transcending the vast distance, and differences, between an infinite God and a finite humanity.

In order to build a spacecraft, one must develop a design, gather raw materials and fashion each component. Every part must be checked and double-checked, to assure that it meets the exacting specifications. All the pieces are then joined together into a cohesive unit. Finally, each part must be rechecked, each subsystem must be tested, and the whole structure must be reassembled. The Mishkan, too, was assembled, deconstructed and then constructed anew, to verify that each part perfectly complemented the others...

...On the last, climactic day of the dedication of the altar (Leviticus 9:1-9:24), the spiritual energy of God was to enter into the physical space of the Mishkan. The actions that would bring about this extraordinary, awe-inspiring event required exacting attention to detail: Moses directs Aaron (the *Kohen Gadol*, or High Priest) to perform the various sacrifices "as God has commanded" (Leviticus 9:7), and Aaron does so, "according to the law" (Leviticus 9:16), and "as Moshe had commanded" (Leviticus 9:21). It is only after the precise construction of the Mishkan and the flawless performance by Aaron, and only after Aaron and Moshe have blessed the people—creating a bond with them and among them—that God revealed Himself: "...And the glory of God appeared to the entire nation. And a fire went forth from God and consumed [the offerings] on the altar; the whole nation saw and sang with joy and fell on their faces" (Leviticus 9:23-24). The consequence of heedlessness is dramatically demonstrated in the very next verse: Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, bring "a strange fire"—an unauthorized offering...and are immediately consumed by Divine fire (Leviticus 10:1-2).

Part Three: Moses' Response

Text #6: Leviticus 10:3-7.

ויקרא פרק י:ג-ז.

ג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, הֲיִשָּׂא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-מִשְׁחַת אֲהָרֹן וְאֶת-מִשְׁחַת אֶלְעָזָר בְּנֵי עֲזִיָּאֵל, דִּד אַהֲרֹן; וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם, קִרְבוּ שָׂאוּ אֶת-אֲחֵיכֶם מֵאֵת פְּנֵי-הַקֹּדֶשׁ, אֶל-מַחֲוֵיץ, לְמִתְנָה. ה וַיִּקְרְבוּ, וַיִּשָּׂאֵם בְּכַתְּמֵתָם, אֶל-מַחֲוֵיץ, לְמִתְנָה--בְּאַשְׁרֵי, דִּבְרַי מֹשֶׁה. ו וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְלְעֹזֵר וְלְאִיתָמָר בְּנֵי רָאשֵׁיכֶם אֶל-תִּפְרְעוּ וּבְגִדֵיכֶם לֹא-תִפְרְמוּ, וְלֹא תִמְתּוּ, וְעַל כָּל-הַעֲדָה, יִקְצַף; וְאֲחֵיכֶם, כָּל-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל--יִכְבּוּ אֶת-הַשְּׂרָפָה, אֲשֶׁר שָׂרַף ה'. ז וּמִפֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא תֵצְאוּ, פֶּן-תָּמָתוּ--כִּי-שָׁמֶן מִשְׁחַת ה', עָלֵיכֶם; וַיַּעֲשׂוּ, כְּדִבְרַי מֹשֶׁה.

3 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.” And Aaron was silent. 4 Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, “Come forward and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp.” 5 They came forward and carried them out of the camp by their tunics, as Moses had ordered. 6 And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, “Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and anger strike the whole community. But your kinsmen, all the house of Israel, shall bewail the burning that the LORD has wrought. 7 And so do not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die, for the LORD’s anointing oil is upon you.” And they did as Moses had bidden.

Text #7: Rashbam. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

רשב"ם, ויקרא י:ג.

ויאמר משה אל אהרן: אל תתאבל ואל תבכה ואל תחדל מן העבודה, כי הדבר הזה אשר אני אומר לך: הוא אשר דבר בקרובי אקדש - בכהנים גדולים הקרובים אלי לשרתני אני רוצה להתקדש ולא שיתחלל שמי ועבודתי... ועל פני כל העם אכבד: זהו כבוד השכינה, שרואה בניו מתים ומניח אבלו בעבודת בוראו.

And Moses said to Aaron: Do not mourn or cry, and do not desist from your work, for I have told you: This is what the Lord spoke, saying through My close ones I will draw near—through My High Priests who are close to me to serve Me I wish to be sanctified that my Name and Service will not be desecrated...

And before all the people I will be glorified: this is the honor of the Heavenly Presence, that [Aaron] sees his sons have died and sets aside his mourning in favor of the service of his creator.

Text #8: Rashi. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

רש"י, ויקרא י:ג.

הוא אשר דבר וגו': היכן דבר ונועדתי שמה לבני ישראל ונקדש בכבודי (שמות כט מג). אל תקרי בכבודי אלא במכובדי. אמר לו משה לאהרן אהרן אחי יודע הייתי שיתקדש הבית במיודעיו של מקום והייתי סבור או בי או בך, עכשיו רואה אני שהם גדולים ממני וממדך:

This is what the Lord spoke: But when did He speak? [It was when He said], "And I will meet with the children of Israel, and it will be sanctified through My glory" (Exod. 29:43). Do not read בְּכְבוֹדִי, "through My glory," but בְּמִכְבוֹדֵי, "through My honorable ones." Moses said to Aaron, "Aaron, my brother! I knew that this House was to be sanctified through the beloved ones of the Omnipresent, but I thought it would be either through me or through you. Now I see that they [Nadav and Avihu] were greater than I or you!"

Part Four: Aaron and His Sons Push Back

Text #9: Leviticus 10:16–20.

ויקרא פרק י:טז-כ.

טז וְאֵת שְׁעֵיר הַחַטָּאת, דָּרַשׁ דָּרַשׁ מִלִּשְׁה--וְהִנֵּה שָׂרָף; וַיִּקְצַף עַל-אֶלְעָזָר וְעַל-אִיתָמָר, בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן, הַנּוֹתָרִם, לֵאמֹר. יז מִדּוּעַ, לֹא-אָכַלְתֶּם אֶת-הַחַטָּאת בַּמָּקוֹם הַקֹּדֶשׁ--כִּי קֹדֶשׁ קִדְשִׁים, הוּא; וְאֵתָה נָתַן לָכֶם, לְשֵׂאת אֶת-עוֹן הָעֵדָה, לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם, לְפָנָי ה'. יח הֵן לֹא-הוּבָא אֶת-דָּמָהּ, אֶל-הַקֹּדֶשׁ פְּנִימָה; אֲכֹל תֹּאכְלוּ אֹתָהּ בַּקֹּדֶשׁ, כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי. יט וַיַּדְבֵּר אַהֲרֹן אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, הֵן הַיּוֹם הִקְרִיבוּ אֶת-חַטָּאתָם וְאֶת-עֹלֹתָם לְפָנָי ה', וַתִּקְרָאנָה אֹתִי, כְּאֵלֶּה; וְאֲכַלְתִּי חַטָּאת הַיּוֹם, הֵיטֵב בְּעֵינָי ה'. כ וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה, וַיִּטֵּב בְּעֵינָיו.

16 Then Moses inquired about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and said, **17** "Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and He has given it to you to remove the guilt of the community and to make expiation for them before the Lord. **18** Since its blood was not brought inside the sanctuary, as I commanded." **19** And Aaron spoke to Moses, "See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would the Lord have approved?" **20** And when Moses heard this, he approved.