

## Perspiration and Inspiration

### Parshat Shemini - 5781

On Thursday afternoon, I received a call in my office from a young man named David who identified himself as a student at the Great Plains Lutheran High School, a private Christian boarding school in Watertown, South Dakota. For his senior assignment, he was to research a world religion, and he chose Judaism- specifically, Orthodox Judaism. I asked him how he found my name- after all, he does have a “local” Orthodox Rabbi- my friend Rabbi Mendel Alperowitz, the Chabad representative in South Dakota. He said that he entered “Orthodox Rabbi in...” in Google, which filled in the word “Texas”- and my name came up! You should take pride that, according to google, your shul and your Rabbi are the go-to Orthodox institutions in the state. Once he told me that, of course I allowed him to ask me a series of questions- and he did not disappoint: Why don’t you offer animal sacrifices anymore? Do you do anything instead of offering sacrifices? How do you observe the Day of Atonement? How do you “get saved”? Do you believe there is a Messiah who will redeem you? I gamely answered all of his questions, but something was nagging at me that I couldn’t place- until it hit me toward the end of the conversation.

Why were Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, killed?

**ויקרא פרק י**

(א) ויקחו בני־אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִקֶּהֱתָנוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֹת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְקֹוֹק **אֵשׁ זָרָה** אֲשֶׁר לֹא

צִוָּה אֹתָם:

(ב) ותצא אש מלפני יקנן ותאכל אותם וימתו לפני יקנן:

From the Torah's description of the tragic episode, we get a sense as to the nature of their offense. Nadav and Avihu offered an אש זרה, a foreign fire, in the form of an incense offering. And while it is not exactly clear what is so illicit or unlawful about offering the *ketoret*, we understand the basic nature of their trespass, in that they were not commanded to do so. And yet, it seems like the Torah's explanation wasn't good enough for Chazal. Instead, they advanced several theories as to the true nature of their sin. The suggestions include:

- Anticipating and longing for the deaths Moshe and Aharon, so that they could assume the mantle of leadership<sup>1</sup>
- Issuing unbidden halachic rulings in the presence of Moshe - מורים הלכה בפני משה ואהרן<sup>2</sup>
- Drinking and possibly becoming intoxicated while performing the sacred rites in the tabernacle<sup>3</sup>.
- Missing the required clothing worn by the Kohen - מחוסרי בגדים<sup>4</sup>

While there are hints to each of these acts within the text, none are stated explicitly, and, as mentioned, are unnecessary theories to posit since the Torah has already told us what they did wrong. What, then, is the meaning behind their attempt to find a source of the sin?

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<sup>1</sup> Vayikra Rabba 20:10

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 20:6

<sup>3</sup> Eruvin 63a

<sup>4</sup> Vayikra Rabba, 20:9

Perhaps there is a common theme addressed by all these explanations. In each one, they wanted to achieve a finished spiritual product without doing the work required to get there. Waiting for Moshe and Aharon to die meant bypassing the traditional transmission of leadership, in which a younger generation learns from the wisdom and life experience of the older one. A similar idea is expressed through the theory that they ruled on a halachic matter in the presence of Moshe. Similarly, one who is missing the appropriate garb is someone who thinks that he can come to work without any advance preparation. Clothes make the man, as the philosopher Erasmus said- and wearing the right clothes was designed to place the Kohen in the proper physical state and spiritual mindset. Drinking certainly may have reduced inhibitions and opened them up to being freer with their religious expression, and there may be a value to that when properly expressed. This is why wine plays a central role in our lifecycle events and rituals. At the same time, the uninhibited high attained from alcohol may also be artificial, masquerading as genuine spirituality. In this morning's Haftarah, Michal, the daughter of King Shaul and the wife of King David, ridicules her husband for what she considered a similarly ecstatic yet empty and debasing form of religious expression. In Michal's case, she misjudged the integrity and authenticity of her husband, but her point is well taken - you can't skip steps in your avodas Hashem.

The *אש זרה* wasn't a problem in of itself; it was problematic because it was a shortcut, and the result was unearned. Nadav and Avihu attempted to bypass the hard work necessary to achieve worthwhile goals. As Thomas Edison said, "Genius is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration."

Perhaps the exact examples of Nadav and Avihu are not quite relevant to our lived experience. However, each of us may be affected by their impetuosity, and a desire to fast forward through life. We want children who are inspired about Judaism, and are fed a steady diet of exciting religious experiences to maintain their excitement- and expect the schools to which we send them to do the heavy lifting. However, we often don't recognize that a love of *yiddishkeit* is a final product that takes tremendous hard work and must be a partnership between educators and parents; it can only be sustained when it is reinforced and modeled at home.

We tend to be more enthusiastic in the beginning of a campaign than later on once we fully realize what is demanded of us in the long haul. Everyone wants to be the first to donate to a building campaign but harder to get donations a year, or two or more later.

We all want to embark on self improvement projects. Who doesn't want to have a beautiful garden, lose weight or learn a new language? Witness the buzz surrounding Yiddish DuoLingo now. But the work is difficult and the lifestyle change or the time it requires are daunting. The popularity of "fixer-upper" programs on HGTV is a powerful testament to the *אש זרה* desire that runs strong within us.<sup>5</sup> These programs often amount to a before and after - first it was a meth lab, and now, it's your dream vacation villa, with no time wasted on the painstaking steps taken to get from point A to Z. Every episode features someone taking a sledgehammer to a wall or cabinet, and then the big reveal- an accent wall on one side of

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/29/hgtv-is-getting-a-renovation>

the open concept room, and stenciled letters on the other. Forget the permits that need to be pulled, the workers who walk off the job, the delay in shipping the exact PVC pipes needed and the need for the electricity to be exactly up to code. In reality, the impressive work showcased for us on the screen would take months. This is what bothered me about my conversation with young David- aside from his references to Jews as “you guys.” He was trying to get to the end, in the form of an “A” on a written paper, without even calling more than one Orthodox Rabbi that he found after a few seconds of googling. He didn’t even type in a full sentence, let alone do the hard work of researching each of the topics he asked about, every one of which is the subject of voluminous scholarship. Perhaps this is why the Torah introduces the deaths of Nadav Va’Avihu with the words “ויהי ביום השמיני” (Vayikra 9:1), *and it was on the eighth day*. They wanted to be the High Priest before barely completing their first week- as apprentices!

Let us learn from the cautionary tale of Nadav and Avihu. If we are willing to invest the time, the reward for our spiritual and physical efforts will be ever more significant, and infinitely more satisfying.