

After the Death, You Shall Be Holy

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Parshayot Aharei Mot - K'doshim

Usually, when we look at the week's Torah reading, we examine it on the basis of its content: "This week's portion teaches us thus-and-such, and its implication for our life is this-and-that." Or it recounts a piece of our history, and we look at the lessons we can learn from that history. The Commandments and the history are the stuff from which *divrei Torah*, Torah commentaries, are made. This week we will look at the *parshah* – actually the *parshayot*, for this week we combine two *parshayot* – in a different way. We will look primarily at the name of this week's reading and see what lessons its name has for us.

We combine two *parshayot* this week in order to make the annual cycle of Torah readings come out even. The first *parshah* is called *Aharei Mot*; After the Death. And it speaks of the events that transpired after the death of Aaron's two sons Nadav and Avihu, who brought to G*d an offering to which the Torah refers as "strange fire." It begins (Leviticus 16:1) by saying that G*d spoke to Moses ***aharei mot sh'nei b'nai Aharon; after the death of Aaron's two sons***. So we are told that the "after the death" beginning of the *parshah* refers to the death of Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, who had brought "strange fire" as an offering before G*d.

Two other *parshayot* begin by speaking of the death of individuals. In both cases, they begin by mentioning their lives. We read *Hayyei Sarah*; The Life of Sarah, which begins by telling of Sarah's death, and we read *Vay'hi Ya'akov*; And Jacob Lived, which begins by telling of Jacob's death. Now, however, we read ***Aharei Mot; After the Death of Aaron's two sons***, and – since nothing in Torah is superfluous – the different wording tells us that we must read it differently.

Back in *Parshat Sh'mini*, when Nadav and Avihu died (Leviticus 10:1-2), we read that fire from G*d came and devoured them. A similar fire, it seems (for the text uses the same words to describe it), licked up the offering of Elijah when he and the priests of Baal contested to see whose deity was truly G*d, and a similar fire, described in a Midrash (again, with the same words), licked up Abel's offering and left Cain's offering behind. The fire from G*d seems to be a fire of acceptance – witness Elijah and Abel – and not a fire of punishment. It seems that the offerings of Nadav and Avihu were so completely accepted by G*d that the offerers themselves were taken along with their offerings.

But the Torah itself describes their offerings as “strange fire;” are we blithely to ignore the plain meaning of the text? No; not at all. But our sages teach us that, while the Torah is indeed the Word of G*d, it speaks in human language. To the people watching, the offerings of Nadav and Avihu were indeed “strange fire;” apparently, however, it was not so to G*d, for G*d accepted not only their offerings but Nadav and Avihu themselves.

The second *parshah* which we read this week is *K’doshim*. It begins (Leviticus 19:2) with G*d’s instruction to Moses to tell the Israelite people, ***K’doshim tihyeh; you shall be holy***. And now we can look at the two *parshayot* together and see what their juxtaposition says to us.

Aharei mot k’doshim, after the death of the holy ones, is the full name of this week’s combined reading. Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu were indeed holy ones. They were at such a level of holiness that they found within themselves a new way to serve G*d, a way that those around them found to be strange and incomprehensible. And G*d determined that Nadav and Avihu were at such a level of holiness that they could not continue to live in this world; they had transcended the physical world, and nothing would do but to send down a tongue of flame to lick them up into Heaven. The very title of this week’s reading leads us to the understanding that Nadav and Avihu were indeed holy; *aharei mot k’doshim*.

But there is another lesson contained in the name of the combined *parshayot* and in our realization of the holiness of Nadav and Avihu. If we make a slight change in the punctuation, we may read, ***Aharei mot, k’doshim tihyeh. After the death*** [of Aaron’s sons], ***you must be holy***. After Aaron’s sons died, taking their great holiness out of this world, *k’doshim tihyeh*; you must be holy. After the most holy ones are taken from this world, then it is up to us to be holy, to manifest holiness in the world. Nadav and Avihu are gone; now it is up to us. We are to emulate them, to find our own ways of serving G*d. But when we do so, it is at a great risk. We may be viewed by the keepers of the established tradition as bringing “strange fire,” and be the recipients of their wrath. Or we may find that our way of serving G*d is so holy/wholly acceptable and pleasing to G*d that G*d will send down a tongue of fire to lick us right up into Heaven, along with Nadav and Avihu. Or it may happen – how devastating to our egos! – that nobody will even notice. But we’ll know. And G*d will know.

Aharei mot, k’doshim tihyeh.

Shabbat Shalom.

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