

Too Holy to Live? **Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer**

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Parshat Sh'mini

Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's sons, each brought his fire-pan and placed fire and incense upon it. It was a strange fire which they brought before the Eternal, one which they had not been commanded. Then there came a fire from the Eternal and consumed them, and they died in the face of the Eternal. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Eternal meant by saying, 'I shall be sanctified in those close to me; before all the people shall I be glorified.'" Aaron remained silent. (Leviticus 10:1-3)

We are accustomed to understanding that Nadav and Avihu were "punished" for their "sin" in bringing a "strange fire" as an offering to G*d. Thus, we are cautioned against serving G*d in any way that is not explicitly authorized. But there is another way of looking at it.

Indeed, the fire which Nadav and Avihu brought was "strange." We had never seen its like, at least not in the service of G*d. Tradition (Ramban and Ralbag are cited by Aryeh Kaplan, as is Josephus) says that they wanted to use sacrificial procedures that predated G*d's instructions to Moses. And it may well have been so.

Prior to Moses, our ancestors made offerings to G*d. Those offerings were, it seems, less systematized and less structured than the offerings made according to Moses' instructions from G*d. And Nadav and Avihu, who, alone among Aaron's sons, are mentioned for special positions in Exodus 24, sought to bring those ancient methods into the new service of G*d. Their motives were the purest. Indeed, they, alone among Aaron's sons, were of the highest level. They were the holiest among the priests, the holiest among the people.

And a flame issued forth from the Eternal and consumed them. The language is the same as that of Leviticus 9:24 – ותצא אש מלפני יהוה ותאכל; **Vatetze esh milifnei Ad*nai v'tochal.** . . . In the earlier verse, the flame consumes the burnt

offering from upon the Altar; in the latter verse, the flame consumes Nadav and Avihu. In response to the first “consuming,” the people raised their voices in praise and fell on their faces; in response to the second “consuming,” Aaron, the father of Nadav and Avihu, stands in silence.

Aaron’s silence is the response of shock; he has just seen his two eldest sons, the two who were appointed to a special position, the two who he believed would succeed him, taken by a flame from G*d, their life-force consumed before his eyes. What could he say? What could he do?

But Moses’ response is most revealing: **“This is what the Eternal meant by saying, ‘I shall be sanctified in those close to me; before all the people shall I be glorified.’”** Nadav and Avihu became offerings to G*d. And G*d accepted them as offerings, just as the offerings brought by the people at the end of the previous chapter were accepted by G*d. Nadav and Avihu were not “punished,” as the tradition would have it; they were taken up by G*d. Their life-force was not extinguished; it was raised to a G*dly level. They were rewarded for their devotion!

But, lest we feel that we can do the same, that it can be an “anything goes” system, the Torah describes them as having “died before G*d.” Nadav and Avihu were on the very highest possible human level, and they then went even higher! They became too holy to remain in the world; their “fire” was “strange” to the world, and, in an act of ultimate *Hesed*, G*d took them.

They are holy, and we are to emulate them, to find our own ways of serving G*d. But we must recognize the risks when we do so. 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.

Shabbat Shalom.