

NEHAMA LEIBOWITZ

NEW STUDIES IN VAYIKRA
(Leviticus)

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THE SIN OF THE SONS OF AARON

Psalm 27:4 expresses the Psalmist's sublime goal:

תהלים אחת שאלתי מאת־ה' אוֹתָהּ אֶבְקֹשׁ
 כז ד שְׁבֹתִי בְּבֵית־ה'
 — — —
 לחזות בְּנַעֲמֵהּ' — — —

One thing have I desired of the Lord — that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord... to behold the delight of the Lord.

The same idea is phrased, somewhat differently, in Psalm 16:11:

טו יא תוֹדִיעֵנִי אֵרַח חַיִּים
 — — —
 שְׂבַע שְׂמֵחוֹת אֶת־פְּנֵיךָ

You will show me the path of life: in Your presence is fullness of joy.

At this juncture all Israel were elevated to the privileged estate of beholding the Divine Presence with their very eyes:

ויקרא וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד־ה' אֶל-כָּל־הָעָם.
 ט כג וַיֵּרָא כָּל־הָעָם וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם.
 ט כד

Lev. 9:23-24

And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people
 And all the people saw and shouted and fell on their faces.

At the height of this exaltation in the Divine glory which the Lord had bestowed on them, they were suddenly stunned by the spectacle of doom:

י א וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶמְתוֹ
 וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשִׂמוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֶת
 וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם.
 י ב וַחֲצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם
 וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי ה'.

10:1

And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took each one his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He commanded them not.

10:2

And there went fire out from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.

This act of Divine retribution has puzzled many commentators down the ages. Several other passages refer to this tragedy:

ויקרא וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן
 טז א בְּהַקְרִיבָתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וַיָּמָתוּ.

Lev. 16:1

And the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they came near before the Lord, and died.

במדבר וַיָּמָת נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא לִפְנֵי ה'
 ג ד בְּהַקְרִיבָם אֵשׁ זָרָה לִפְנֵי ה' — — —

Num. 3:4

And Nadav and Avihu died before the Lord, when they offered strange fire before the Lord...

כמדיבר נִמְתַּח נְדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא
 כו סא פְּהִקְרִיבֶם אֶשֶׁר-זָרָה לִפְנֵי ה'.

26:61

And Nadav and Avihu died,
 when they offered strange fire before the Lord.

We note that the reason of their death is not identical in all four places. Thus, it is doubtful whether their sin and punishment is at all explained in the above verses. Indeed, בקרבחם “when they offered...” may indicate the time rather than the cause of the tragedy. Let us consult *Vayikra Rabba* 20,8:

Because of four things did the two sons of Aaron die: For drawing near, for sacrificing, for the strange fire, and for not consulting one another. For drawing near — having entered into the innermost sanctuary; for sacrificing — having offered a sacrifice which they had not been commanded; for the strange fire — they brought the flame from the kitchen; and that they did not consult one another — as it is said: “Each one his censer” — each one acted on his own initiative.

The problems posed by this Midrash are summed up in *Tzedah laDerekh*:¹

All the commentators ask why our Sages saw fit to offer different reasons for the death of Aaron's sons since it is unequivocally stated here and in the Parashiyot *Aharei Mot* (Lev. 16:1) and *Pinhas* (Num. 26:61) — “when they offered strange fire.”

Let us consider the views of our Sages, and we may find the answer to the above question. Ostensibly, the reason for the punishment is evident:

¹ An incisive and detailed study of Rashi's commentary on the Torah by R. Ber Eilenburg, first printed in Prague 1622, reprinted in Jerusalem 1973.

א י נִקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֶשֶׁר זָרָה לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם.

10:1

And offered strange fire before the Lord, which He commanded them not.

However, this verse harbors an ambiguity pointed out by *Baal haTurim* who offers the following solution:

“Strange fire... which He had commanded them not”:

This does not read A) He had not commanded them to bring strange fire; neither B) that He had not commanded them not to bring. Rather אשר “לא” ציווה אותם means אשר לא ציווה אותם

The apparent contradiction in this comment is resolved in the annotated edition of the *Baal haTurim* by R. Y.K. Reinitz: (3rd ed., Bnei Brak 1974)

He means to say that both options are problematic: if we are told that they had not been commanded to bring an offering, this could hardly account for their punishment since they had not been warned to refrain from the act; and should be read that they had not been commanded not to bring it, this could certainly not evoke capital punishment. The solution therefore is that God had issued a negative order “לא” ציווי של “לא” that they must not bring the strange fire. And where do we find this prohibition? I submit it appears in the verse, “You shall offer no strange incense on it” (Ex. 30:9), whereupon Rashi's comments “No free-will incense, but only this one — all the others being strange.”

Here also the incense is meant, which they brought of their own initiative and which is “strange” in the eyes of God, and hence the fire they brought is likewise called “strange fire.”

In his commentary *Imre Noam*,² R. Ya'akov Dileshkash elaborates:

² A commentator who lived in France, first published in Constantinople 1540.

“which He did not command” — This verse must be turned around — אשר ציווה אותם : לא תקריבו — which He had commanded them not to offer. אשר thus denotes a prohibitory injunction, as in, “and has gone and served other gods... or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded” (Deut. 17:3) — i.e., which I have commanded not to worship. Those unfamiliar with such transposition ask: obviously God did not order them not to offer strange fire, and since they had not been forewarned, why were they punished? Indeed, they fail to comprehend the role of transposition in the interpretation of the Scriptures.

However, the majority of the commentators deny that there was a negative or positive commandment concerning the offering.³ This appears to be Rabbi Eliezer’s view, quoted by Rashi, whereby they had acted of their own accord without consulting Moses. *Shem Olam*⁴ comments:

“which He did not command them: There is an implicit praise in the censure: They only performed what they were not commanded to do, but not that which they were commanded not to do.

Yet how can their severe punishment be explained?

Let us re-examine the Midrash: “For drawing near,” as stated explicitly in *Aharei Mot*, “when they came near before the Lord, and died.” This is a difficult text, for what is the meaning of, *After the death... when they came near before the Lord, and died?*

Or haHayim:

Scripture tells us that they had not actually entered the innermost chamber but that they pressed forward, and died. We are thus taught

- 3 Moses’ pronouncement “I will be sanctified in them that come near Me” lends support to this view; had they transgressed an explicit prohibition, Moses would not have referred to them as near and dear to God (see Rashi on the next verse).
- 4 A profound and detailed commentary on Leviticus — including comments on *Sifra* — by Rabbi Eliezer Lipman Lichtenstein, Warsaw 1877.

to reject the notion of a violent bid for closeness to the Divine even at life’s expense. This occurs when man has set his heart and soul on the attainment of a goal even if it entails the loss of one’s life. The apparently unnecessary repetition of “and they died” emphasizes that Aaron’s sons perished without achieving this goal. This is a lesson to be mastered.

This final stress on the “lesson” contains a warning. The author, well versed in *Kabbalah*, warns us not to overstep the limits so as to gain the proximity of God; this cannot be achieved by force — not even through self-sacrifice.⁵

This sheds light on the account of Nadav and Avihu’s sin *Sifra* 24:

Overwhelmed by joy on perceiving the new fire, they sought to redouble their love, whereupon they “took each one his censer...”.

The *Biur* elaborates:

Nadav and Avihu were towering personalities; they certainly did not maliciously transgress the word of the Lord. But in their superabundant joy they lost their judgement and entered the Holy of Holies to burn fine incense although this was not commanded by Moses. They acted of their own accord, and this is the meaning of “which He had not commanded them.” But, the fire they took from the outer altar in accordance with the daily rite... Thus the “strange fire” does not here signify actual fire, but rather a *repast of fire*, אשה ריח ניחוח “a sin offering of sweet savor,” as if Scripture had stated, “a donation of strange fire which they had not been commanded.” It was not designated קטורה זרה “strange incense” as rendered by Onkelos דבוסמין נוכראין “incense of strange spices” because this was not their offense. They offered properly constituted incense... They put fire in the censer and placed incense on it though such a fire offering is not mentioned in the Torah elsewhere, except on the Day of Atonement, when the High Priest offers such incense in the Holy of Holies. However, the ritual of Yom Kippur had not yet been specified, since it is recorded only after the death of the two sons of Aaron.”

5 Cf. *Ha’amek Davar* on “this is the thing” cited above pp. 105-107.

Accordingly, "which He had not commanded them" means that He had not prescribed such incense for this particular day and not that they had disregarded "he shall not come into the Sanctuary at all times," which had not yet been promulgated. However, men of exalted saintliness such as Nadav and Avihu should have been more modest, as it is written "and to walk modestly with your God" (Mica 6:8). They should have dreaded entering the Sanctuary unless summoned and avoided bringing a fire offering on their own initiative... Not that they, God forbid, transgressed an explicit prohibition of the Torah; they certainly did not spurn a Divine command transmitted by Moses not to burn fire in the Tabernacle on that day so that the Divine Name might be sanctified by fire from heaven. Moses never issued such a command and there is no trace of this in Scripture. Indeed, these prominent leaders did not flout any explicit prohibition, but merely exceeded the limits set by discipline and modesty, which was considered sinful owing to their exalted rank, and so they perished. Then I read in *Torat Kohanim* the comment of our Sages: "on perceiving the new fire, they sought to redouble their love..." and this agrees with our own observation that in their excessive love... they were eager to minister before the Lord with the new incense, in addition to the dedicatory offerings of the day.

Evidently, Nadav and Avihu did not offend against any ritual precepts but sinned by reaching for God through the dictates of their own hearts rather than through the path set by God. Submission to the yoke of Heaven — the ultimate aim of the Torah — was here supplanted by unbridled religious ecstasy. Hence their punishment.

It is neither through momentary passion nor even through self-sacrifice that the religious goal is attained but rather through the discipline spelled out in the precepts of the Torah. Many consider such submission to the commandments, as against spontaneous worship stimulated by personal and subjective sentiments, as mechanical and objectionable. Yet, we learn from the *Sifra*, it was precisely the unrestrained desire to ascend to forbidden heights that constituted an unpardonable sin.

S.R. Hirsch, elaborating on the *Biur's* exposition, sheds a light on

the contemporary situation. Hirsch led the fight against the Reform ideal of subjective religion in the "spirit of the times," in disregard of the *halakhah*. He draws on various comments in the *Sifra*:

"Sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu" — "and did not consult their father"; or felt exempted from any consultation *because* they were Aaron's sons. Yet they were no more than Nadav and Avihu, two individual members of the nation, and did not consult the leader of the nation; or it was their self-esteem that invested them with what they deemed to be sufficient authority. "Each one his censor" — Each acted on his own accord, without even consulting the other; though their intention was doubtless laudable — for does not God Himself call them, those that "are near Me"? — an intention that *Torat Kohanim (Sifra)* depicts as "heaping love upon love", nevertheless the fact that at the nation's most joyous moment of God's manifest nearness they felt the necessity of offering a special sacrifice bears witness that they were not imbued by the proper Jewish priestly spirit. The Jewish priest is part of the nation, and his position is not an isolated one before God, but one that he occupies only within and through the nation... Even though some of the acts of the offering had not been forbidden, their not having been commanded would have sufficed to forbid them. There is no room for any subjective discretion in any part of the sacrificial service in the Sanctuary. Precise limits and forms are prescribed even for the free-will offerings which must be strictly adhered to. The closeness of and approach to God, which we seek with every offering, may only be found through obedience to and acceptance of God's will. This is one of the points on which Judaism and paganism are diametrically opposed. The latter uses the offering as a means to achieving the divinity's aid to fulfill one's wishes. The Jewish offering means to place the offerer at God's service, i.e., he wants to fulfill God's wishes through his offering. All offerings are therefore forms of Divine demands which the offerer through his offering accepts as the guidelines for his future conduct. Self-devised sacrifices would destroy the truth which is meant to achieve man's submission to it by the very sacrifice, and would mean the glorification of arbitrary subjectivity and placing it on the throne which should be dedicated wholly and exclusively to obedience to God... The Jewish priest's functions must be executed through the accomplishment of God's ordinances, not by inventing new ways of worship.

Questions for Further Study

1. Rashi on 10:2 does not mention any of the four views stated in *Sifra* and *Vayikra Rabba*, but cites two other views found in: "And a fire went out": Rabbi Eliezer says: Aaron's sons died only because they pronounced *halakhah* in the presence of their teacher Moses. Rabbi Yishmael says: They went into the Sanctuary in a drunken state. Indeed, after their death Scripture warns the drunken to refrain from entering the Sanctuary. This can be compared to a king who had a close friend etc. as related in *Vayikra Rabba* 12,1. The parable in the Midrash is as follows: A king had a favorite courtier. One day the king found him at the entrance of a tavern, quietly decapitated him and replaced him by another courtier. The reason for killing the first courtier remained unknown until the king admonished the second courtier not to enter a tavern, whereupon it was evident why the first courtier had been executed. Likewise, we do not know why Aaron's sons died, but infer it from the verse in which Aaron was commanded, "Drink no wine..." (Lev. 10:9). This proves that they died solely for drinking wine.

A. Why did Rashi quote these views rather than the other views listed here?

B. Rabbi Yishmael's view elicits the following question in *Tzedah laDerekh*: In the Torah all punishment is preceded by a warning. How then could Aaron's sons be punished when the restrictions on wine had not yet been formulated?

What would you answer?

2. Rashbam:

"And the sons of Aaron took": They had taken their censers before the fire came down from heaven in order to burn incense on the

golden altar in the inner Sanctuary, since the morning incense preceded the daily morning sacrifice. They put strange fire in the censers which Moses had not ordered them to do on that day. Though on other days it is stated: "And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire upon the altar" (Lev. 1:7 — see Rashi), on that day Moses did not want them to bring common fire because they were expecting the flame to descend from heaven that all the people might witness the sanctification of God's name. Similarly, Elijah had called out: "but put no fire" (I Kings 18:25), as he sought to sanctify God with the descent of the flame from heaven! "And a fire went out" (10:2) refers to the fire mentioned in the earlier verse (9:24), as I explained in (Ex. 19:8) "and Moses reported the words of the people", or in (Judges 17:3-4) "he restored the money to his mother," which appears twice in the account of Mica's idol, and refers to one and the same thing. Here, too, both verses merge... The fire from heaven went first into the inner Sanctuary to burn the incense, and there struck Aaron's sons. It then came out to consume the offerings on the great altar.

- A. Wherein does Rashbam's explanation differ from the four views cited in Midrash *Vayikra Rabba*?
- B. What does Rashbam seek to prove from Ex. 19:8 and Judges 17:3-4?