



April 6, 2024



Parshas Shemini

27th of Adar 2 5784

Nadav and Avihu and The Mona Lisa

The story of Nadav and Avihu is as disturbing as it is bizarre. Here are two children of Aharon, the first and greatest Kohen Gadol in history, grandchildren of Amram, the leader of the generation, and great-grandchildren of Levi, one of the twelve illustrious shevatim. Yet, they act disobediently on the very first day of the Mishkan's installment! They go where they shouldn't, into the Mishkan, to bring their own version of a korban. They subsequently get burned by a Heavenly fire as a punishment. What were they thinking? What propelled them to act this way?

What's even more peculiar is the discrepancy in Chazal as to exactly what they did wrong. In Maseches Eiruvim (63a), it says that their sin was that they ruled on a halacha, albeit correctly, in the presence of their teacher Moshe. Chazal (Vayikra Rabbah 20:6-11, Sanhedrin 52a) offer four other reasons for their deaths. Some say it was because they chose to remain unmarried. Some say it was because they entered the Mishkan after drinking wine. Some say that it was because (as the Torah describes it) they brought an "alien fire" before Hashem. And some say it was because when they walked behind Moshe and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu would say to each other, "When will these two elders die so that we can lead the generation?"

Now let's take a step back for a second. Who does that? Who exactly were these people? From the way Chazal describe it, they appear to be two adventurous young men who act on impulse in bringing an alien fire to Hashem, along with a host of other negative traits: power-hungry, drinking wine, unmarried, not exhibiting proper respect for Moshe and wishing for the deaths of their very own uncle and father. And yet, they were Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aharon. How could it possibly be? Secondly, what exactly do these reasons have to do with each other? Are they all random negative traits that were harbored by Nadav and Avihu? Or is there some sort of common thread that runs through all five reasons?

Youthful Energy

Reb Reuven Katz (Duda'ei Reuven, vol 2, pg. 29) writes the following marvelous explanation. Nadav and Avihu were certainly not disobedient, power-hungry young men hoping to grab the reins of power from their father and uncle. Not a bone in their body had bad intentions. They merely believed that they could bring a new and fresh vibrancy to serving Hashem. A new spirit that would energize the younger generation to better fulfillment of mitzvos. New, innovative

ideas beyond the performance of the elders. Delaying marriage to enable one to mature and gain independence. Using alcohol as a means to ignite passion in one's service of Hashem. Bringing new fire into the Mishkan. Bringing new life into the younger generation who might not relate to the instructions of the elderly.

So confident about the rightness of their views were they, that they were willing to decide on these matters without consulting their elders. So confident and passionate were they in their new and energetic way of serving Hashem, that they aspired for the day that they could disseminate their ideas and make them a part of the nation's heritage. Since this would be impossible as long as their "old-school" mentors lived, they were relegated to waiting for the day that Moshe and Aharon would die, thus enabling them to introduce the people to their ideas. Ideas the Torah refers to as "alien fire."

Nadav and Avihu, although righteous and completely well-meaning, discounted the power of tradition. The power of the elders. The power of doing things the way our parents did them. They overestimated the value of change and innovation, failing to see that the inability of the younger generation to connect was more a problem with the younger generation than a problem with the system itself.

Hashem's harsh and quick removal of this "alien fire" sent a very strong message: just because we can't connect to the avodah doesn't mean there is something wrong with the avodah in itself. It means there is something wrong with us. If we don't feel connected to Shabbos, it doesn't mean there is something wrong with Shabbos; it means there is something wrong with us. If we don't connect to prayer, it doesn't mean there is something wrong with prayer; it means there is something wrong with us. If we don't connect to the Torah, it doesn't mean there is something wrong with the Torah; it means there is something wrong with us. With our outlook. With our emotional investment. With our enthusiasm. Hashem is telling us that we must be cautious with innovation and change in Judaism, and we can't be too quick to assume that any flaws stem from the way it's been done by our parents before us.

The Tour Group

A tour group was once taking a tour of the Louvre, the most famous art museum in the world, located in Paris, France. Amongst the group was a simple corn farmer from Nebraska. When the group entered the room housing the Mona Lisa, considered by experts to be one of the most sophisticated and beautiful paintings in the world one that is valued at over 1.5 billion dollars, the farmer took one look at it and said, "What's the big deal? It's a woman with a half-smile on her face!"

The tour guide stopped the tour, looked to see who uttered those words. He turned to the farmer and said, "Hundreds of art experts, art enthusiasts, art auctioneers, art collectors and artists came through these doors over the years and were in complete and sheer awe of this painting. This art gallery is not on trial. *You* are on trial. If you don't see the genius in the art, it's not a lack in the art; it's a lack in you." And with that he marched off and went on with the tour.

Thousands of kings, prophets, mekubalim, Rabbis, sages, scholars, and holy Bubbies and Zaidies throughout our history walked through the doors of our world and were in utter awe of Hashem and his Torah. Avodas Hashem is not on trial. We are on trial. Will we bring "alien fire" into our lives, or will we bow at the feet of tradition and work on ourselves to see its unparalleled beauty?