



PARSHAS SHMINI – LESSONS WE CAN LEARN FROM NADAV AND AVIHU – BY DR. J. H. FREILICH

After the seven days of consecration of the *mishkan* and the priesthood, related in Tzav, this week's sidra commences with the order of service on the eighth day. This was Rosh Chodesh Nissan of the second year from when the Bnei Yisroel went out of Mizraim. The Torah describes in detail the offerings that were sacrificed and the procedures that would have been followed meticulously, as those of us learning Kodoshim, would appreciate. Nevertheless the Torah states Nadav and Avihu, the two eldest sons of Aaron HaCohen, "offered before Hashem, *aish zara* - strange fire - which He had not commanded them" (Leviticus X v. 1). As a consequence, "A fire went out from before Hashem and devoured them, and they died before Hashem" (v. 2). Although the Torah clearly says that the sin they committed was bringing *aish zara*, there are *midrashim* which appear to indicate otherwise.

In one *midrash*, we find Rabbi Eliezer saying that the reason they died was because they taught a halachah in the presence of their rebbe (Moshe Rabbenu). In Eruvin 63a, the particular halachah is explained to be that although fire comes down (on the outer altar) from heaven, it is a mitzvah for mortals ie the cohanim to kindle the wood-pile. For the inner altar, one is required to transfer fire from the outer altar (see Torah Temimah on the possuk). The *midrash* continues with Rabbi Yishmoel saying the reason they died was that they entered the *mikdash* in a state of inebriation from wine. A major problem with understanding Rabbi Yishmoel is that the cohanim were not commanded to abstain from performing *avodah* - on pain of death - while under the influence of drink, until after the episode of Nadav and Avihu. So how do these statements fit in with what the Torah says? The Ksav Sofer explains them as follows. The sons of Aaron mistakenly thought they should bring the fire themselves (directly onto the inner altar). How did these *gedolim* come to make this mistake? By acting improperly and not consulting their rebbe. Had they sought advice, they would not have erred and consequently died. However, this in turn begs the question how did these *tzaddikin* come to decide a halachah in the presence of their rebbe? Surely they would not have had the audacity! On this, Rabbi Yishmoel adds that they had drunk wine and wine causes haughtiness and levity. This resulted in a measure of disrespect for their rebbe by way of deciding the halachah for themselves which in turn led them to err. The defining sin though, according to this interpretation, was the bringing of strange fire which He had not commanded. We note that the *pashtus* of the *sugya* in Eruvin 63a is that the defining sin of Nadav and Avihu was not that they had made any mistake (burning the incense on the outer altar) but that they taught a halachah in the presence of their rebbe. Either way, there is a message here to show respect for one's rebbeim.

There is yet another *midrash* which says they died because they did not marry and have children, in contradiction to the mitzvah of *peru urevu*. Further, they walked after Moishe and Aaron and said when will these elders die and we will lead the community! If, as *chazal* say, they were *tzaddikim*, how could we ascribe such actions to them and how does this *midrash* fit with the *posukim*? The Ksav Sofer explains as follows. Nadav and Avihu saw that the sons of Moishe Rabbeinu were not of the calibre one would have expected from sons of a great leader. This they attributed to the fact that Moishe was too pre-occupied with communal matters. Similarly, we find *chazal* say this phenomenon occurred with Shmuel HaNovi and his sons. On the other hand, Aaron was not that burdened with the *tzibbur* and was able to give his sons more attention so that they did grow up as *tzaddikim*. However they reasoned that eventually when Moishe and Aaron passed on, the mantle of leadership would fall on themselves. If they married and had children, either they wouldn't be able to give them proper *chinuch* or they wouldn't be able to give their full attention to the *tzibbur*. They concluded that they would be serving Hashem better by not marrying. The *midrash* relates the concerns of Nadav and Avihu on assuming responsibility when Moishe and Aaron passed on, not that they were *chas veshalom* looking forward to it. However, the argument for them not having children, while logically sound, is fundamentally flawed. When one has a *mitzva*, such as *peru urevu*, to perform, one is obligated to get on with it and leave 'hidden matters' to HaKodush Boruch Hu. That is the essence of *emunah*. We find a similar occurrence with the *tzaddik* King Chizkiyahu. He foresaw that his offspring Menashe, would be a *roshoh* and so was prepared to abstain from having children. When however, he understood he was about to die over it (see Yeshayahu Chap 38), he relented. Thus although Nadav and Avihu were *tzaddikim*, their *kannous* was *aish zara* which Hashem had not commanded. The moral is as long as our objective is to perform Hashem's *mitzvos*, we should have *bitochon* that He will help us through the challenges of life.

Dedicated to the memory of two family matriarchs:

Maras Chaska Bas R' Chaim Baruch (27th Nissan) and Maras Rivka Bina bas R' Avraham (3rd Iyaar)