

Parashat Acharei Mot 5782, 2022:

*The Transgression of Nadav and Avihu*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

This week's *parasha* begins with the *pasuk*: "And Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they drew near before Hashem, and they died." (*Sefer Vayikra* 16:1, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*) This is a brief reference to one of the Torah's most enigmatic *pasukim*: "And Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense (*ketoret*) upon it, and they brought before the L-rd foreign fire (*aish zarah*), which He had not commanded them (*asher lo tzivah otam*)." (*Sefer Vayikra*, Parashat Shemini 10:1, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*)

The behavior of Nadav and Avihu is very difficult to understand, since earlier in the Torah we find a passage that contains Hashem's charge to offer *ketoret* each morning and afternoon, along with the explicit *lo ta'aseh* (prohibition) against offering *ketoret* when one has not been commanded to do so:

Aharon shall make incense of spices go up in smoke upon it; every morning when he sets the lamps in order, he shall make it go up in smoke. And when Aaron kindles the lights in the afternoon, he shall make it go up in smoke, continual incense before the L-rd for your generations. You shall offer up on it (*lo ta'alu aluv*) no foreign incense (*ketoret zarah*), burnt offering, or meal offering, and you shall pour no libation upon it. (*Sefer Shemot* 30:7-9)

For our purposes, *ketoret zarah* in this passage, and *aish zarah* in the Parashat Shemini citation, are functionally the same. In addition, the phrases, "*lo ta'alu aluv*," herein, and "*asher lo tzivah*

*otam*” in the Parashat Shemini *pasuk*, convey the same message: “It is forbidden to offer any incense upon the altar unless Hashem has commanded you to do so.” Surely, Nadav and Avihu, as students of both Moshe and Aharon, were privy to this information. As such, how and why did they so radically deviate from normative halachic practice?

In addressing this question, my *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, begins by emphasizing the phrase, “*asher lo tzivah otam:*”

However, the Torah states, *asher lo tzivah otam*: On the day of their [Nadav and Avihu] installation, wearing their priestly vestments, they were overcome by ecstasy and by the need to express their emotions. The incense that they burned was identical to that which their father, Aharon, had offered. But there is one significant difference. Aharon was obeying God’s will, while Nadav and Avihu performed an action that God had not commanded. (This and the following Rav Soloveitchik quotes, *Darosh Darash Yosef*: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, pages 223-226, brackets and underlining my own.)

This passage alerts us to the Rav’s insight that “they [Nadav and Avihu] were overcome by ecstasy and by the need to express their emotions.” He notes that the Jewish way to achieving this kind of ecstasy: “... requires us to fashion our lives according to God’s discipline, as illustrated by the word *ve-tzivanu*. The reason that we perform the *mitzvah* is our absolute surrender to God’s will. However, we must progress from that surrender to a profound spiritual experience that encompasses our entire being... In brief, the road consists of two steps: obedience to God’s command and discovering the spiritual treasures inherent in it.”

In contrast, the pagan orientation, “... the antithesis of the Torah approach, begins with excitement and culminates in sin and disillusionment. It very much parallels the approach of the modern world, where one uses drugs or alcohol in order to create an artificial feeling of euphoria...” Therefore, according to the Rav’s understanding, the ecstasy that is the driving force of these pagan acts is as

false as the acts themselves. Tragically, while Nadav and Avihu embraced the correct form of a meaningful religious gesture, namely, the burning of *ketoret* upon the proper incense censers, it was nothing other than a humanly contrived act whose substance violated Hashem's Torah. As such, the Rav concludes:

Therefore, the transgression of Nadav and Avihu, whom the Torah describes as sanctified [*Sefer Vayikra* 10:3], was that "they offered a strange fire concerning which they had not been commanded." The divine command and our discipline in obeying that command are the only healthy routes to religious inspiration. Any deviation, especially by *tzaddikim*, is unacceptable and ultimately doomed to failure.

With Hashem's help, and our fervent desire, may the path of authentic Torah observance enable us to draw near to Him and achieve the religious inspiration we desire. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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Please contact me at [rdb718@gmail.com](mailto:rdb718@gmail.com) to be added to my weekly email list.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)