

VAYOMER ELIYAHU

Inspiration and Encouragement on Topics of Trust and Faith in Hashem Yisborach
Based on the Weekly Torah Portion

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In English



בס"ד

No Matter How Much Effort and Enthusiasm Goes Into Your Avodah, if it is Not What Hashem Wants From You, It Is Not Accepted!

» Why Did Nadav and Avihu Die?

The *pasuk* in this week's Parshah states (10:1): "And Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it, and they brought before Hashem a foreign fire, which He had not commanded them."

Rashi relates several explanations for why Nadav and Avihu were punished with death. He states: "Rav Eliezer says: Aharon's sons died only because they rendered halachic decisions in the presence of Moshe, their teacher. Rav Yishmoel says: They died because they had entered the Mikdash after having drunk wine. The proof is that after their death, Hashem admonished the survivors that they may not enter the Mikdash after having drunk wine..."

The Meforshim write numerous other reasons why Nadav and Avihu died, many of which are found in the words of Chazal; however, the Torah itself only mentions one transgression that they committed. It always says that their sin was that they brought "a strange fire" before Hashem.

It is also noteworthy that a previous Rashi (Shemos 24:11) states another reason why they were deserving of punishment that he does not mention here. The *pasuk* there states: "And upon the 'atzilei bnei Yisroel' (nobles of the children of Yisroel) He did not lay His hand, and they perceived Hashem, and they ate and drank." Rashi quotes Medrash Tanchuma as saying that the "atzilei bnei Yisroel" are Nadav and Avihu and the elders. The *pasuk* is saying Hashem did not lay His hand upon them even though they deserved that a hand be laid upon them because: "They perceived Hashem: They gazed at Him with levity, while they were eating and drinking."

This seems to indicate that Nadav and Avihu deserved to be punished for a transgression they committed even before Matan Torah.

We may also ask that the verse in our Parshah seems repetitive. It says that they brought a "strange fire" which "they were

not commanded" to bring. The words "a strange fire" indicate that there was no command to bring this fire, so why is it necessary to repeat that they were not told to offer it?

The Maharal (Gur Aryeh) answers one of these questions by saying that even though Rashi says that Nadav and Avihu were already deserving of death before Matan Torah, Hashem did not want to kill them at that time. The "moment of His anger" thus subsided and He decided not to punish them for that sin at that time. They only were punished after committing a different *aveirah*.

He says that the sin they later committed at the time of the inauguration of the Mishkan was an outcome of their first *aveirah*, as one sin leads to another, and they ultimately were punished for the second *aveirah*, which occurred as a result of their first sin.

» They Rebelled "With" Hashem, Not "Against" Him!

We can better understand the words of the Maharal by explaining one of the Six Zechiros that we are obligated to remember every day – the remembrance of the sin of the *eigel hazahav*. This is stated in the verse (Devarim 9:7): "Remember do not forget, how you angered Hashem, your G-d, in the desert; from the day that you went out of the land of Egypt, until you came to this place, you have been rebelling with Hashem."

We may ask why it says that the nation rebelled "with Hashem" (*im Hashem*), rather than saying that they rebelled "against Hashem" (*neged Hashem*), which would seem to make more sense.

The Ramban explains the story of the *eigel* by stating that one should not read the *pesukim* to literally mean that the people wanted to make their own god. It is impossible to believe that they were so unintelligent as to think they could make something themselves and claim that it took them out of Egypt. Rather, they wanted to create a replacement for Moshe, which would serve as an intermediary between them and Hashem.

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The complaint against them was that they tried to come up with their own ideas of how to connect to Hashem. When they did this, they acted in ways that He did not command and did things He never told them to do.

Thus, the *pasuk* is saying that they tried to go “with Hashem”. They didn’t want to go “against” Him; rather, they were looking for a way to be close to Him. However, since they acted in a way that He did not command them to do and tried to come up with schemes and plans on their own, they were found to be deserving of punishment.

The Shem M’Shmuel (Ki Sisa 5679) also explains the sin of the *eigel hazahav* in this manner. He writes that their sin was not following Hashem with *temimus* and accepting His commands as the only way to properly serve Him. They transgressed by searching for their own “*chochmahs*” to serve Him as they saw fit.

He refers to this type of behavior as a “*pegam b’nefesh*” (a blemish in the soul), which is considered a dire *aveirah* as the nation should have followed Hashem and trusted in Him, rather than thinking that they had to come up with their own ways to get close to Him.

He writes: “If they had followed Hashem with *temimus* and not worried about the future, they would not have fallen to this problem. One sin led to another and their *yeitzer hara* overcame them...”

Thus, our obligation to remember the story of the *eigel* includes remembering the source of the sin, which was a desire to get close to Hashem in a manner that was not prescribed by our *mesorah* and taught to us by our forefathers and teachers. We are commanded to recall how such conduct leads to terrible *aveiros* because we are only permitted to attempt to connect with Hashem in the ways that He commands. We must obey His will and follow Him with *temimus* and without our own plans and ideas of what we believe to be the correct thing to do.

The concept of remaining true to our *mesorah* and not introducing new concepts based on our own reasoning is seen from the Rabenu Bechaya on the *pasuk* (Bereishis 26:18) that says that Yitzchok re-dug all the wells that his father’s servants had dug “and he gave them the same names that his father had given them.”

Rabenu Bechaya writes: “He did this for the honor of

his father. From the fact that the Torah tells us about this, it seems that this was considered meritorious. We certainly see that one should not change anything from the ways of his fathers. Yitzchok would not even change the names of the wells from what his father called them, so we can learn that we certainly shouldn’t change the conduct and *mussar* of our fathers...”

Sefarim Hakedoshim also discern this from the fact that it is forbidden to eat even a minute amount of *chametz* on Pesach. This is the only prohibition in the Torah wherein even an infinitesimal amount of something is forbidden.

They explain that *chametz* represents the *yeitzer hara* and all the evils of the world. The difference between *chametz* and *matzoh*, which represents purity and faithfully following the ways of Hashem, is merely a bit of leavening. Additionally, the letters of the words “*chametz*” and “*matzoh*” are almost the same, with a small line in the letter “*ches*” being the sole difference between the two opposite words.

This is all symbolic of the fact that if one changes any form of conduct and veers from the ways of the Torah even a tiny bit, he is already “*chametz*” and is no longer acceptable, even if he has very good intentions.

» *The Source of the Sin of the Eitz Hadaas*

Even slightly changing our *mesorah* and turning away from the ways of the Torah can end up leading to severe transgressions, as is seen from many sources.

In fact, the Shem M’Shmuel (Parshas Emor 5670) writes that this type of lack of perfect trust in Hashem and His commands was the root of the world’s first *aveirah*, the sin of Odom and Chava eating from the Eitz Hadaas.

He writes that Odom and Chava’s sin came about because they lacked *temimus* and did not unquestioningly obey Hashem’s command without any thoughts of their own. They failed to accept that whatever He says is for his own good and must be fulfilled without question.

When the serpent told Chava that if she eats from the tree she will become “like a G-d who knows what is good and what is bad” (Bereishis 3:5), she should have realized that whatever Hashem does is as good as can be. Therefore, even if the snake is saying the truth and she

*“...On Pesach,
Yidden observe
many chumros...
with everyone
keeping the
customs passed
down to them
from their
fathers. We learn
from Parshas
Shemini that one
must keep up his
mesorah. One
may not change
anything at all
about the way
he observes
Pesach or any
mitzvah...”*

could become “like a G-d”, she shouldn’t have listened to him because if it isn’t the *ratzon Hashem*, it can’t be for her benefit. So too, when the serpent said that the fruit of the tree “is good”, she should have reasoned that even if it is good, if Hashem did not tell her to eat it, it must not be beneficial for her to do so.

Thus, the only reason Chava fell to sin was because she was not perfect in her *middah* of *temimus*. She thought she could do things on her own to better her situation, rather than solely relying on Hashem and trusting Him completely.

The Shem M’Shmuel continues to say that if mankind would have obeyed Hashem with *temimus* and would not have questioned His ways, there would have been no concept of death in this world

The Arizal writes that death occurs when forces of impurity attach themselves to a person and force the *neshama* to leave the body because it cannot stand to be confined together with those impure forces. If, however, a person is bound and connected fully with Hashem, and obeys Him without question, forces of *tumah* cannot come near him. The only reason death does exist is because a lack of *temimus* allowed these forces to enter the body.

This explains why Chazal say that Yaakov Avinu never died. Since he was an “*ish tam*” who followed Hashem unquestioningly, he was immune to evil forces that cause death. The word “*tam*” (*tes mem*) is the opposite of “*meis*” (*mem tes*), which indicates that serving Hashem with simplicity and without question, as Yaakov did, is the way to avoid death.

This is further seen from Yaakov’s words that he said to his mother (Bereishis 27:11): “I am an *ish chalak* (smooth man).” The Medrash (Bereishis Rabbah 65) explains this to mean that he had a “*chelek* of Hashem” with him, as is stated (Devarim 32:9): “A *chelek* of Hashem is with Yaakov.” He was telling his mother that he didn’t need to do any *hishtadlus* to get the *brachos*. If Hashem wants to give them to him, he will get them, and if He doesn’t, then it is pointless to try to get them. This was what it meant to be with a “*chelek* of Hashem.” It means to accept whatever He does and not to worry about anything else.

The Shem M’Shmuel further states that this explains why a kohen is not allowed to come into contact with a dead body. The job of a kohen is to connect with higher forces of holiness and bring those influences down to this world. To do this, a kohen must serve Hashem with *temimus*. Therefore, he is not permitted to have any connection with the forces of impurity that are caused by a lack of *temimus*.

»» *The Damage Caused by the “Strange Fire”*

This also explains the sin of Nadav and Avihu. Of course, they were holy and lofty men whose greatness is

well beyond our comprehension and we cannot claim to fully understand their transgression. Moshe Rabenu applied to them the words “with those close to Me, I will be sanctified” (10:3). Rashi explains that Moshe told Aharon, “I knew that the Mishkan would be sanctified with those who are close to Hashem. I thought it would be me or you but now I see that they were greater than us!” We see from this how truly remarkable Nadav and Avihu were.

Still and all, the Torah speaks about their death and Chazal offer numerous reasons to explain why they were deserving of some form of punishment. Therefore, it is clear that we are meant to learn a practical lesson from this.

The Sefas Emes (Taf Resh Lamed Vov) quotes his grandfather, the Chidushei Harim as saying that their main transgression is found in the verse itself. It states: “And they brought close a strange fire before Hashem which He did not command them to do.” This indicates that their entire mistake was performing an act on their own, without a command from Hashem. One’s service of Hashem must be through annulling one’s thoughts to Him and only doing His will and His commands. This is as Moshe said: “This is the thing Hashem commanded to do.” This means that it must be done solely because Hashem commanded it.

This helps us understand the Maharal’s words that both of their sins caused their downfall. The root of their transgression was the fact that before Matan Torah, they tried to get close to Hashem on their own, making attempts that went beyond what was commanded of them to do. This led to their second sin, which was based on this same problem.

We may say that this is why the Parshah of Shemini falls out on the Shabbos after Pesach during every non-leap year. On Pesach, Yidden observe many *chumros* that go above and beyond the letter of the law, with everyone keeping the customs passed down to them from their fathers. We learn from Parshas Shemini that one must keep up his *mesorah*. One may not change anything at all about the way he observes Pesach or any other mitzvah, and one may not even push himself to take on additional things and to rise to a level that he is not holding by, even if his intentions are good.

The Sefas Emes concludes by saying that every individual must take this lesson for himself. Nadav and Avihu were holy men who certainly did everything they did for the sake of Heaven. Still and all, they were punished for doing something without being commanded by Hashem to do so. Therefore, the opposite is certainly true. If even a simple person does a mitzvah with the sole intention of fulfilling the will of Hashem, his action is greatly beloved by Hashem and is a great source of pleasure for Him.