Issue #1 *Parshat Acharei-Mot Kedoshim*, 6th of *Iyar* 5772 ב״ה

The Wonders of Your Torah

Choice Excerpts from the Teachings of Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh Shlit"a

The Death of Aaron's Two Sons

"And God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they approached God and they died." There are many opinions and interpretations that explain why Nadav and Avihu died. No explicit sin or mistake is mentioned in this verse and it appears that their death was the result of spiritual elation to the extent that their souls left their bodies in spiritual ecstasy, as the holy Or Hachayim explains. But the Torah obviously emphasizes the death of Nadav and Avihu to teach us not to do as they did. We should therefore contemplate which aspects of their service needed refining.

No Consultation, No Preparation

The sages teach us, "Since it says, 'and Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan,' we can glean that 'Aaron's sons' did not consult with Aaron, and 'Nadav and Avihu' did not consult with Moses. Furthermore, the words, 'each took his fire pan,' teach us that each one did as he felt and they did not even consult one another" (*Torat Kohanim*). This teaching clearly suggests that Nadav and Avihu acted totally spontaneously; each one of them felt an urge to serve God in the way they did, and it was as if the fact that they met at the critical moment and died together was mere coincidence.

The reason why it was necessary for Aaron's sons to prepare for what they did by consulting with their elders was because the type of service they chose was not explicitly commanded by God, as stated clearly in the verse, "And they sacrificed before God a foreign fire **that He had not commanded them**." Being given an explicit commandment from God is considered sufficient preparation before conducting any service. But there is a minimal requirement to consult with a higher authority before acting voluntarily as Nadav (whose name stems from the root meaning "to volunteer") and Avihu did.

From the verse in Joel that reads, "Prepare yourself towards Your God, Israel," we learn that we should always prepare ourselves before performing any commandment. Indeed, the Zohar too suggests that the main flaw in Nadav and Avihu's act was that they did not prepare themselves. Later in this Torah portion, God commands Moses to tell Aaron that he should not come into the sanctuary "at any moment," emphasizing the extent to which Aaron must take care not to do as his sons did. Even the High Priest should only enter the sanctuary after all the appropriate preparations have been made.

In fact, according to the Ba'al Shem Tov, the preparations for observing a mitzvah are actually the most important part of one's service while the actual implementation of the commandment should be carried out quickly, as if it was happening of its own accord. The essential preparation necessary for observing any mitzvah is the awareness that I am doing a mitzvah. Someone who eats matzah on the first night of Passover, for example, has only fulfilled his obligation if he is aware that he has eaten matzah. But this aspect is completely absent when someone does something spontaneously, because he feels an urge to do so – like the act of Nadav and Avihu. Under these circumstances, when one acts on instinct, without the crucial procedure of preparation, the act itself nourishes the forces of evil, as we learn in Kabbalah. What happens is that instead of the act being one of total selflessness towards God, completely pure and holy, the egotistic lower levels of our psyche become entangled in the act, turning it from a holy fire into "a foreign fire."

Fear as Preparation for Joy

The explanation of the Zohar on this verse begins by stating,

> *Rabbi Yitzchak opened with the following verse, "Serve God with fear, and rejoice with trembling." Yet, another verse states, "Serve God with joy, come before Him with rapturous praise," these two verses seem to contradict one another! The explanation is, "serve God with fear," means that any service that a person does before his Master must first be with fear. Once*

he has incorporated fear into his service, he should serve with joy.

Aaron's sons desired to serve God with joy alone and they thought that they could omit fear from their service. However fear must always precede joy and love. One indication that they only sought joy is that the middle letters of the phrase, "Aaron's two sons" (**שני בני אהרן**) spell the word translated as, "rapturous praise" (**רננה**).

This idea is consistent with the abovementioned explanation concerning the need for preparation. Fear provides the essential grounding for all eager service that stems from love and joy. As the Tanya states, fear "is the beginning of [God's] service and its core and root" (ch. 41). Without this preparation, joy becomes overenthusiastic and degenerates like yeast dough that has been left to rise for too long, turning holy fire into foreign fire.

Yet, the Zohar continues to explain that the phrase, "rejoice with trembling," applies only to mundane matters, meaning that the joy that we experience from mundane matters must be limited and protected by the "trembling" of fear. This implies that in heavenly matters, there is no need to fear excessive joy. However, as we have seen above, this is only true in the case of an explicit commandment, in which God's command suffices as preparation. However, with regard to a completely voluntary and spontaneous act, such as that of Nadav and Avihu, it is necessary to precede expression of joy with fear, thus restraining the act within the boundaries of sanctity.

Running without Returning

True service of God must be composed of both "run and return" (**רצוא ושוב**), two opposite mental states that are correctly balanced in harmony. Running is the aspiration towards spiritual elevation—running enthusiastically towards Divinity—while return is the downward descent back towards the physical reality in which God has placed us. In Chassidic interpretations of Nadav and Avihu's act, there is an emphasis on the fact that their act was one of "run" without "return."

The combination of "run and return" is a fundamental dynamic throughout the Torah, as can be gleaned from the fact that the numerical value of this phrase (**רצוא ושוב**) is 611, the numerical value of "Torah" (**תורה**). In the case of Nadav and Avihu, the usual explanation is that their "run" towards God was unrestrained and stemmed from the sense that this was the most pleasant and sweet of all desires, while the "return" should have been the understanding that God does not want us to die but to live here in this world, as stated later in the same Torah portion, "You shall keep my decrees and laws, those that a man shall perform and live by them."

Short and Sweet

In his book, Pri Ha'aretz, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitevsk explains that someone who is at the level of "nothingness" can change his nature but is constantly in danger of falling. The state of nothingness is like the disintegration of a seed before it begins to grow. The new reality can either be good, or not so good, God forbid.

"Where [*me'ayin*] have you come from?" also means, "you have come from nothingness [*ayin*]" this is positive growth from nothingness. "And where [*le'an*] are you going to?" Refers to the negative state of falling into nothingness.

However we can offer a more profound insight into this explanation by saying that "running" refers to the joy and love of God's Presence, and "returning" refers to the actual Divine command. God's will is concealed in every mitzvah. As we ascend to serve Him in joy (running) there must follow a balancing descent intended to reveal God's will in the world (return).

Nadav and Avihu, who acted spontaneously, without proper consultation that would have guided them in settling their enthusiasm with the correct rational advice, ran without returning and they thus ran away altogether like a flame without a wick to connect it to the candle.

When we feel a voluntary need to serve God spontaneously, with joy and enthusiasm, we need to take greater care and prepare ourselves correctly for the act by preceding our joy with fear. We can do this by connecting ourselves to the Divine command or by taking advice from a higher authority who can offer us a suitable framework in which to express our spontaneous joy.

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