

Strange Fire: Thoughts for Parashat Shemini, **March 22, 2014**

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By

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Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aaron the High Priest, offered a “strange fire” on the altar, an offering that had not been commanded by the Lord. As a consequence of this sin, a fire consumed them. This terrible tragedy occurred during the ceremonies dedicating the Mishkan (sanctuary).

What was the nature of the transgression of Nadav and Avihu? Why was their offering of a “strange fire” so serious as to merit the death penalty?

Rashi (Vayikra 10:2) cites two Midrashic explanations. Rabbi Eliezer opined that Nadav and Avihu died as a punishment for having made halakhic rulings in the presence of their teacher Moses. These two young men arrogated to themselves authority that was not rightly theirs. Moses, after all, was the one who gave instructions from God as to how to conduct the services in the Mishkan. Nadav and Avihu apparently thought that they knew better. They thought that they could improve on the instructions of Moses, and that they could disregard his authority. Their sin, at root, was egotistical presumptuousness.

Rabbi Yishmael suggested that Nadav and Avihu sinned by entering the sanctuary while they were drunk. Their sin was their gross lack of decorum when performing sacred tasks. Instead of conducting themselves with dignity and gravitas, they acted in a light-headed, frivolous fashion. Instead of acting like priests of the Lord, they acted like clowns.

Another Midrash described Nadav and Avihu as saying to each other: “When will these two old men, Moses and Aaron, die, so that we can take over as leaders?” According to this view, Nadav and Avihu saw themselves as the “progressive” new generation who wanted to usurp leadership from the “old timers.” Nadav and Avihu disregarded the greatness of Moses and Aaron, and over-estimated their own talents and abilities. They brought a “strange fire” to the altar as a demonstration of their independence; they did not feel bound by the “old” rules, by the strictures set by Moses and Aaron. If only the “old timers” would be sapped of authority,

Nadav and Avihu thought they could innovate as they pleased.

But Nadav and Avihu were dreadfully mistaken. They were destroyed by their egotism. They were undermined through their frivolity and their lack of gravitas. They were punished for their impudence and their impatience to do things their own way rather than to follow the rules as set forth by Moses and Aaron.

According to these Midrashic readings, Nadav and Avihu were not intrinsically evil people. They may well have been reasonably good and pious men. Yet, they allowed their personality flaws to overcome good judgment and proper behavior. Strange fire destroyed them.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)