

PARASHAT SHEMINI

The Eighth Day and the Sin of Nadav and Avihu

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In this week's parasha we read about one of the most climactic moments in Israel's experience as a newly formed nation of God. After seven days during which the priests were taught about the work in the Mishkan (Tabernacle), the eighth day, on which Moshe sanctifies them, arrived.

In the beginning of the parasha we read: "On the eighth day Moshe called Aharon and his sons, and the elders of Israel." (Vayikra 9:1)

These people are known to us, in this order, from another, even greater incident, than the one in question - the covenant established between Israel and God at Sinai (the covenant of the basins - Shemot 24). There we read: "Then He said to Moses, 'Come up to the Lord, with Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy elders of Israel.'" (Exodus 24:1: and also see 24:9)

As we will explain later, the eighth day of our discussion is a direct continuation from the revelation at Mt. Sinai. Aharon and his sons [and the elders] were already distinguished at Sinai and likewise, the priests, and especially Aharon and two of his sons - Nadav and Avihu, were the heroes of the eighth day, as we will see further on.

In any case, the festive occasion reaches its pinnacle when God reveals himself on the altar, and suddenly a terrible tragedy occurs: the two sons of Aharon - Nadav and Avihu - come forward to offer and burn the incense, and as a result they die. The manner of their deaths reinforces the terrible tragedy since they are consumed by Godly fire. When comparing the verses, it appears that the same fire that consumed the sacrifices on the altar also consumed and killed Nadav and Avihu (so concluded the Rashbam on these verses). In other words, the fire that characterizes God's appearance on the altar burns Nadav and Avihu: "Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar ... And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died before the Lord." (Vayikra 9:24,10:2)

In this week's shiur we will try to understand the significance of the eighth day, and from this, about the sin of Nadav and Avihu and their subsequent harsh punishment.

In trying to understand the fiery deaths of Nadav and Avihu, our sages are divided in their opinions and as a result, so are the commentators from the Middle Ages:

Rashi here brings two explanations for why the sons of Aharon are killed by fire: "R. Eliezer said: The sons of Aharon died because the halakha (law) goes according to

Moshe, their teacher (in other words, they decided on their own that the law required them offer up the incense even though Moshe did not command them to do so); R. Yishmael said: They were drunk from wine and in such a state entered the sanctuary" (Rashi's commentary on Vayikra 10:2. The source of his comments is from Torat Kohanim Shemini, and Bavli Eruvin 63:1)

According to R. Eliezer, there is no real problem with the sons of Aharon offering up the incense. Their sin, however, is that they did it of their own accord, without a specific command from Moshe. (It is noteworthy that R. Eliezer does not blame their sin on the lack of a Divine commandment to offer up the incense but rather that they devised a new law without instructions from their teacher/rebbe on the matter.) R. Yishmael separates their actions from their sin also; the burning of the incense did not cause the tragedy, but the violation of another law (whose commandment appears adjacent to the tragic incident) - the prohibition of a priest entering the sanctuary while under the influence of wine/alcohol - was the cause.

The Rashbam (and the Chizkuni after him) brings a different explanation that focuses on the burning of the incense itself. In his opinion, before fire comes down from Heaven, Aharon's two sons bring their own fire, and this is their sin since on that day there is a special significance to the sanctification of God's name through the Divine fire reaching the altar and "eating" the sacrifices that the nation of Israel have brought before God. The Rashbam chooses to ignore the subject of the incense which is emphasized in the verse. He focuses instead on the offering of the man-made fire which precedes the Godly fire coming down from the heaven.

It is my intention to follow in the direction of Rashbam's commentary. He feels that the reason for the deaths of Aharon's sons lies in their offering up fire. However, in addition I will attempt to explain the reason for the incense emphasized in the verse ("Now Aharon's son, Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered it before the Lord..." Vayikra 10:1).

In order to understand the problem with burning incense on the eighth day, we must first understand the purpose of this day and the special role played by the inauguration of the Mishkan and the priestly work. From a simple reading of the verses it appears that Moshe emphasizes the special role played by this day already in the beginning of the parasha: "And speak to the Israelites, saying: Take a he-goat for a sin offering; a calf and a lamb, yearlings without blemish, for a burnt-offering; and an ox and a ram for an offering of well-being to sacrifice before the Lord; and a meal offering with oil mixed in. For today the Lord will appear to you." (ibid. 9:4-5) According to Moshe's words, the uniqueness of this day is that God plans to appear before the nation. Thus, also subsequently Moshe will cite this as the reason that so much preparation is invested in the day: "Moshe said: 'This is what the Lord has commanded that you do, that the Presence of the Lord may appear to you.'" (ibid. 9:6)

Moshe emphasizes that on this day, when the Mishkan is being inaugurated and the priests are beginning to carry out their work within it, God asks to appear before all

of the nation. The previous time God appeared before all of Israel was when He established His covenant with Israel at Sinai (we mentioned this earlier, when citing who the heroes of the story are). There it is written: "And they saw the God of Israel...they beheld God and they ate and drank ... The Presence of the Lord appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain." (Exodus 24: 10-17)

This connection is not coincidental, especially in light of the Ramban's opinion that the Mishkan itself is a continuation of God's revelation at Mt. Sinai. The Mishkan is essentially "requesting" that the same revelation that occurred on Mt. Sinai as a one-time only event be perpetuated, through its presence, during all of Israel's years of wandering in the desert: And the secret of the Mishkan is, that the glory that was revealed to all on Mt. Sinai will rest on the Mishkan, in secret [privately as oppose to publicly like at Sinai]. About Sinai it is written: "The Presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai ..." (Shemot 24:16) and "The Lord our God has just shown us His majestic presence." (Devarim 5:25) Similarly about the Mishkan it is written: "The Presence of the Lord filled the Mishkan." (Shemot 40:34) The glory that appeared to the nation at Sinai rested continuously amongst them in the Mishkan. And when Moshe came, he remembered the Voice that spoke to him at Sinai and the giving of the Torah: "From the Heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; on earth He let you see His great fire," (Devarim 4:36). By the Mishkan it is written: "... he would hear the Voice addressing him from above the cover that was on top of the Ark of the Pact between the two cherubim; thus He spoke to him." (Bamidbar 7: 89) (Ramban's commentary on Shemot 25:1)

The Mishkan is home to God's spirit which requests to live among the nation of Israel "And make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in your midst." (Shemot 25:8) The Divine Presence that comes down from Mt. Sinai and forms a covenant with the nation, is not returning to its place in the Heavens, but is permanently ensconcing itself within the people of Israel. In any case, the eighth day when God will rest his Divine Presence on the Mishkan and will enter the new home prepared for Him by Israel, is a direct perpetuation of the one-time only revelation of the Divine Presence at Mt. Sinai.

In addition to the comparison made by the Ramban between the Mishkan and Mt. Sinai, I would like to focus on three topics that appear in the text with regard to both events - the covenant at Sinai and the eighth day:

1. As we mentioned, the heroes of both events are Moshe, Aharon, Nadav and Avihu (the progeny of Aharon). On Mt. Sinai Moshe receives the Torah and actively forges a covenant between God and Israel. At the same time, Aharon and his sons, the priests, are distinguished from the rest of the nation and accompany Moshe up onto the mountain since in the future they are the ones who will carry on and allow the Divine Presence to rest in the Mishkan.
2. In last week's shiur (parashat Tzav) we mentioned that almost nowhere is there found a commandment to bring a peace-offering (shelamim) and certainly not a public shelamim! Public shelamim appear in the Torah only three times. The first time is at Mt. Sinai with the forging of the covenant ("He

designated some young men among the Israelites, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed bulls as offerings of well-being to the Lord." Shemot 24:5) The second time is in our parasha on the eighth day of completion ("He slaughtered the ox and the ram, the people's sacrifice of well-being." Vayikra 9:18) and the third time, it is a commandment for future generations to bring a shelamim offering on Shavuot ("... and two yearling lambs as a sacrifice of well-being." Vayikra 23:19)

It seems to me that already at a first glance there emerges a link between these three days: On Mt. Sinai the publicly sacrificed shelamim is brought because a covenant is being forged [between the nation and God] and at such an event it was appropriate to eat shelamim which symbolize a joint feast with God (as mentioned in the previous shiur). This unique event continues in two directions: The first, the direct continuation, is the Mishkan as Ramban states in his commentary, and therefore, when God rests his Divine Presence on the Mishkan, the nation offers up a public shelamim. At the same time as this continuation, which affects only the generation in the desert, there is a historical direction which is also mentioned at Mt. Sinai and this is the holiday of Shavuot. Therefore, it is the only holiday where a public shelamim is offered. Shavuot comes to renew and remind us of the covenant of Sinai (the text does not explicitly say that that Torah was given at Mt. Sinai on Shavuot although as far as we can tell, the actual event did take place around the sixth of Sivan. This subject requires further analysis).

3. It seems to me that the most important element relates to the eighth day, as we mentioned in the beginning of the shiur. From the perspective of the nation, it is no less important than the giving of the Torah which involved a direct meeting (as much as possible) between God and the nation at Mt. Sinai. There the nation was fortunate enough to see the glory of God revealed on the mountain. There is no doubt that this was a powerful spiritual experience that left a deep impression on the nation which was standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai. In our context, when the Mishkan is inaugurated and God stands ready to dwell within it, there is a need for another such meeting, that will perpetuate the singular and unique contact that took place at Mt. Sinai. This is the reason for Moshe's focusing on this day on God's appearance and this is the purpose of the day itself, "that the Presence of the Lord may appear to you."

With this in mind, it seems to me, that we must examine the activities of Nadav and Avihu on this day of Divine Revelation. In the previous revelation at Mt. Sinai, Nadav and Avihu went up together with Moshe (up to a certain point) on to the mountain. They distanced themselves from the nation, since they, the priests, were in the future to continue the revelation of Mt. Sinai in the Mishkan. If we return to the verses that deal with God's appearance at Mt. Sinai, we will prove that there were two distinct congregations that were privileged to see the revelation of the Divine Presence. First the text focuses on the distinguished personalities that went up the mountain: "Then He said to Moshe: Come up to the Lord, with Aharon, Nadav and

Avihu, and seventy elders of Israel ... Then Moses and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel ... Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God ..." (Shemot 24:1-11)

Until here, the text focuses on the leaders of the nation who began to ascend with Moshe. They are meritorious and behold the Divine Presence. Only a few verses later do we hear that all of the people merited seeing the Divine Presence, but at a time when Nadav and Avihu were cut off from the nation: "Now the Presence of the Lord appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire on top of the mountain." (Shemot 19)

It is certainly possible that Nadav and Avihu do not know that all of the nation had merited this Divine Revelation, and they reasoned that only they, as priests, were entitled to such an honor.

The same fire that Israel saw on Mt. Sinai ("Now the Presence of the Lord appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire"), comes down on the eighth day onto the altar and this is the revelation that takes place on the eighth day. The nation again sees the revealed Divine Presence, and the response to this sublime event is hardly indecisive: "And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces." (Vayikra 9:24)

Nevertheless, at this moment, Nadav and Avihu take up their pans and fill them with incense and offer them up before God. We discussed the role of the incense in our shiur on parashat Tetzaveh (<http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.58/20tetzav.htm>.) We commented there that whenever there is an act of Divine Revelation (usually through fire), there is a need for a cover to prevent man from experiencing direct contact with the Presence of God (thus, about Yom Kippur it is written: "In the cloud (the incense) I will appear over the curtain," and many other textual sources). It seems to me that here too this was the role of the incense. Nadav and Avihu are worried that there will be direct contact between man and God. If the Divine Presence is being revealed and fire is falling down from the heavens onto the altar, the incense has to be quickly offered up in order to block such a revelation.

The eighth day is a continuation of the revelation at Mt. Sinai, but Nadav and Avihu do not know this. They reason that only the spiritual elite are privileged on this day to Divine revelation, and the masses are not entitled to such direct contact with God.

However, on this special day, the rules of covering and uncovering do not apply. Just as the nation was allowed to see God's presence at Mt. Sinai (and perhaps as we stated Nadav and Avihu did not know this was the case at Sinai), so too on the eighth day all of the nation is allowed to see the revelation of the Divine Presence. The same fire of God that descends and consumes the sacrifices on the altar, continues to consume the priests that are trying to cover up and screen this fire from the nation.

When Moshe comes later to explain to Aharon what has happened, he says: "This is what the Lord meant when He said: 'Through those near to Me I show myself holy, and gain glory before all the people.'" (Vayikra 10:3) I feel that this sentence "this is what the Lord meant when He said" can be understood in our context. What is it the Lord meant? "Through those near to Me I show myself holy and gain glory before all the people." Granted that through those close to me, says God, I am made holy. The priests who have the honor of being close to God do indeed make Him holy, however, "and gain glory before all the people," meaning that God also gains glory in this case through the people. Throughout the whole parasha, the language of glory appears as the revelation of the glory of God, and here too, before all the people (and not only before those who are close to God), the glory of God will be revealed.

Nadav and Avihu come to worship God in the Mishkan with an elitist perspective that gives the priests a special status, and does not allow the simple Jew to draw near to the Presence of God. God requests that his Divine Presence be bestowed in a different manner - before all of the nation - the great as well as the small, priests and Israelites together - I will gain glory.