

The Revelation of God's Glory upon the Altar, and the Deaths of Nadav and Avihu

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Introduction

In this *shiur* we will jump between our *parasha*, *Tetzaveh*, and *Parashat Shemini*. The main part of the *shiur* will be devoted to the description of the dedication of the copper altar and its function. Our investigation of this subject will hopefully help us to answer some famous questions arising from *Parashat Shemini*.

The question of the significance of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu has disturbed the commentators throughout the ages. The main problem is the seeming lack of proportion between the sin and its punishment. The text tells us that they "offered a strange fire (*esh zara*) before God, which He had not commanded them." No matter how we interpret the word "strange," it is clear that they acted improperly. But their intention seems to have been positive; we are certainly not talking about one of the cardinal sins, such as idolatry, etc. Nevertheless, they died immediately, in the sight of the entire nation, in the midst of the dedication of the holy Mishkan.

We shall attempt to understand this by studying the significance of the eighth day and what happened on this day, according to the literal text. Clearly, the scope of this *shiur* does not allow for a full review of all the different exegetical approaches; the reader is warmly encouraged to engage in further research.

Part 1 – The Eighth Day: Presentation of the Problem

(*Vayikra* 9:1) "And it was, on the eighth day, that Moshe called to Aharon and to his sons, and to the elders of Israel.

(2) And he said to Aharon: Take for yourself a young calf for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering, [both] without blemish, and offer them before God.

(3) And speak to *Bnei Yisrael*, saying: Take a goat kid for a sin offering and a calf and a lamb, both of the first year, both without blemish, for a burnt offering.

(4) And an ox and a ram as thanksgiving offerings to offer before God, and a meal offering mixed with oil, FOR TODAY GOD WILL APPEAR TO YOU.

(5) So they took what Moshe had commanded them, before the Tent of Meeting, and all the congregation drew near and stood before God.

(6) And Moshe said: This is what God has commanded you to do, THAT GOD'S GLORY MAY BE REVEALED TO YOU."

Several questions arise from these verses; some relate to the chronology of the establishment of the Mishkan and the command, while others address more fundamental issues relating to the occasion.

a. The "eighth day" here is undoubtedly the eighth day following the seven days of consecration, as discussed at the end of the previous chapter (chapter 8).

Moshe commands Aharon and his sons and the elders of Israel as to the order of the Divine service, whose express purpose is the revelation of God's glory. But the text offers no advance Divine command concerning either the means (the sacrifices, and the assembly of the nation) or the purpose (the revelation of God's glory). What is the source of Moshe's command? How does he know that God is going to be revealed, if he was not told so? The Ramban admittedly comments (*ad loc.*) that there are several instances where Moshe commands something without any textual evidence of a Divine instruction, and we must assume that he was indeed commanded. But specifically against the background of the preceding sections concerning the seven days of consecration, in which the Torah takes pains to describe all that happens, and in light of the fact that an entire chapter further on in *Sefer Shemot* (29) is devoted to the Divine command, why is the eighth day, specifically, uttered by Moshe without a Divine instruction?

b. What is the date of this eighth day? In *Shemot 40* we read: "On the first day of the first month you shall set up the Mishkan of the Tent of Meeting." Was this eighth day the day of the "setting up," or did the "setting up" take place on the first of the seven days of consecration? In calendrical terms: are we talking about the 1st of Nissan or the 8th?

c. Another difficult question concerns the relationship between what Moshe promises and the closing verses of *Sefer Shemot*. There we read:

(*Shemot 40:34*) "The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and God's glory filled the Mishkan.

(35) And Moshe could not enter the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud rested upon it, and God's glory filled the Mishkan.

(36) When the cloud was lifted from over the Mishkan, *Bnei Yisrael* would travel on all their journeys.

(37) And if the cloud was not lifted, they did not travel until the day when it was lifted.

(38) For God's cloud was upon the Mishkan by day, and a fire was in it at night, in the sight of all the House of Israel, throughout their journeys."

These verses describe the revelation of God's glory over the Mishkan - immediately upon Moshe completing its construction and without any connection to the eighth day. But in our verses we are told that God's glory will be revealed only after the fulfillment of Moshe's command: "This is what God has commanded that you do, that God's glory may be revealed to you." What is the relationship between these two sources? It seems that God's glory already rests in the Mishkan; what, then, is Moshe promising in chapter 9 of *Vayikra* beyond what already exists?

As an appendix to this last question, we must also consider the timing of the chapters detailing the various sacrifices, in *Vayikra* chapters 1-5. Their heading testifies that they were given from the Tent of Meeting. But if God's glory only descended to the Mishkan now, in chapter 9, then either those chapters chronologically came after the Divine command, or God conveyed them to Moshe before His Presence began to dwell in the Tent of Meeting, or they were conveyed by means of the pillar of cloud that descended to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, etc. In any event, the order of the verses would seem to suggest that both the Divine command and Moshe's instruction

concerning the sacrifices preceded the eighth day. Thus, we come back to our question: in what way is the revelation of God's glory as observed by all of Israel, as mentioned in the closing verse of *Sefer Shemot*, different from the revelation of His glory as promised by Moshe on the eighth day?

These questions, as mentioned, have occupied the commentators, and the reader is referred to their commentaries on the verses quoted above [1].

We shall attempt below to address these questions.

Part 2 – Revelation of God's Glory upon the Mishkan and upon the Altar

Right at the outset of the command concerning the Mishkan, its ultimate purpose is defined as having the Divine Presence dwell in it: "Let them make Me a Sanctuary, and I shall dwell in their midst" (*Shemot 25*).

Towards the end of the command, the idea is explained further. In *Shemot 29*, God commands Moshe concerning the consecration of the *kohanim* (i.e., training them for their service), and the preparation of the Mishkan by means of anointing and sanctification:

(1) "This is what you shall do for them, to sanctify them to minister to Me...."

At the end of the chapter, the idea of sanctification is extended to the altar:

(35) "You shall do thus to Aharon and to his sons, according to all that I have commanded you; for seven days you shall consecrate them.

(36) And you shall offer every day an ox for a sin offering for atonement, and you shall cleanse the altar when you

make atonement for it, and you shall anoint it to sanctify it.

(37) For seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and sanctify it, and the altar shall be a holy of holies; anyone who touches the altar shall be sanctified."

In other words, there is a correlation between the preparation of the *kohanim* and the preparation of the altar; both go on for seven days. This seems logical, since the essence of the priestly service pertains to the altar; this is their principal function. The unit immediately following the command about the consecration discusses the daily sacrifice, followed by some concluding verses:

(38) "This is what you shall offer upon the altar: two lambs of the first year each day, continually.

(39) You shall offer the first lamb in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer towards evening.

(40) With the one lamb you shall bring a tenth measure of flour mixed with a fourth part of a *hin* of beaten oil, and a fourth part of a *hin* of wine for a libation offering.

(41) And you shall offer the second lamb towards evening; you shall offer it with the same meal offering of the morning and its libation offering, for a sweet savor, an offering by fire to God.

(42) A continual burnt offering for all your generations at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting before God, where I will meet you to speak with you.

(43) And I shall meet there with *Bnei Yisrael* and it shall be sanctified with My glory.

(44) And I shall sanctify the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and Aharon and his sons I shall sanctify to minister to Me.

(45) And I shall dwell in the midst of *Bnei Yisrael*, and I shall be their God.

(46) And they shall know that I am the Lord their God Who took them out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell in their midst; I am the Lord their God."

This command concerning the daily sacrifice deviates from the thematic framework of *Sefer Shemot* as a whole. *Sefer*

Shemot is characterized by the preparations for construction of the Mishkan, not its content (which is the subject of *Sefer Vayikra*). Chapters 6-7 of *Sefer Vayikra*, dealing with the sacrifices and uttered (according to the end of chapter 7) at Sinai, are nevertheless located in *Sefer Vayikra* because matters related to fixed sacrifices must logically appear after the setting up of the Mishkan rather than prior to it. But here, in our verses, the Torah commands us concerning the daily sacrifice, which is part of the service in the Mishkan after its construction. As we know, this *parasha* has a parallel in *Sefer Bamidbar*, among the other fixed public sacrifices. Hence, the *parasha* in chapter 29 of *Sefer Shemot* is not telling us something that we would otherwise not know. This makes our question even more pressing: the natural location for the unit discussing the daily sacrifice is in *Sefer Bamidbar*, amongst the list of other sacrifices. Undoubtedly, the command is recorded here for a particular reason, and not for the sake of conveying the details of the sacrifice. What is this special reason?

At first glance it is clear that the command concerning the altar is connected to the sanctification of the altar discussed at the end of chapter 29. Moreover, the closing verses also award a special place to the altar. Three entities are to be sanctified:

- the Tent of Meeting

- the altar

- Aharon and his sons

The altar has a unique status and importance. It is not difficult to understand why this is so: even prior to the Mishkan, altars existed. Avraham and Yaakov built altars; *Bnei Yisrael* built an altar at the foot of Mount Sinai. The altar is not necessarily bound up with the Mishkan, nor with the Divine Presence: "In every place where I cause My Name to be mentioned, I shall come to you and bless you."

Likewise, the Mishkan is not necessarily connected to the altar. Its main purpose is "that I may dwell in their midst"; it is a sort of "house" for the Divine Presence. We may therefore define these elements as follows:

The altar serves human needs: We offer sacrifices in order to atone, to give thanks, or to ask for mercy.

The Mishkan serves a Divine need, as it were. The Holy One desired a place to dwell in the physical world.

But the Torah binds these two entities together. The altar is located facing the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. We do not sacrifice to God wherever we choose, but only next to His House; there He receives our sacrifices. The Torah here describes the dual revelation, upon the altar and in the Mishkan:

(42) "A BURNT OFFERING FOR ALL YOUR GENERATIONS AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE TENT OF MEETING BEFORE GOD, *where I shall meet with you to speak with you there.*

(43) *And I shall meet with Bnei Yisrael there, AND IT SHALL BE SANCTIFIED BY MY GLORY.*"

These two verses, as I see it, bear a simple chiasmic structure:

The first and last arms speak about the altar; thus, the expression, "It shall be sanctified by My glory," refers to the altar.

The second and third limb talk about encounter; they refer to the Tent of Meeting itself. This conclusion arises from the fact that they accompany the expression, "Tent of Meeting before God."

In other words, the text is talking about two separate revelations: one in the Tent of Meeting, the other upon the altar [2].

If we look further on and try to understand how this Divine promise is realized, we discover the following:

"The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and God's glory filled the Mishkan.

And Moshe could not enter the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud rested upon it, and the cloud of God's glory filled the Mishkan" (*Shemot 40:35*).

Indeed, God revealed Himself in the Tent of Meeting. As the Torah tells us, the purpose of the revelation in the Tent of Meeting is the encounter itself. Still, Moshe is unable to enter the Tent of Meeting – just as he was not able to ascend Mount Sinai while the Divine glory rested upon it (see *Shemot 24 [3]*) until God called to him: "He called to Moshe," as we read at the beginning of *Sefer Vayikra*.

But the revelation of God's glory upon the altar, as promised at the end of chapter 29, has not yet happened.

This answers several of the questions that we posed above. Moshe knew that God would sanctify by His glory the altar, as well. He saw how God had made His Presence rest upon the Mishkan, and thus he knew that he had to embark on preparations for the dedication of the altar. The dedication of the altar depends upon God's initiative – i.e., the appearance of His glory. It seems that the order of the text should not be changed without compelling reason; thus, the order of events is as follows:

- a. Completion of the construction of the Mishkan
- b. Revelation of God's glory in the Mishkan (1st of Nissan)
- c. Command as to the sacrifices (which precedes the revelation of God's glory upon the altar, in order that it will be ready for the service)
- d. Consecration
- e. The eighth day, and the revelation of God's glory upon the altar (8th of Nissan) [4].

Moshe knew, then, that God was going to be revealed at the altar [5]. This is the answer to our original question: how did Moshe know the purpose and end-result of the eighth day. The order of the sacrifices, which are brought by his command on the eighth day, are meant to bring about a revelation of God's glory [6]. While there were sacrifices that were offered on the

altar prior to the revelation of God's glory on the eighth day, the purpose of these was to sanctify the altar and prepare it.

e. "The appearance of God's glory was like a consuming fire at the top of the mountain"

Part 3 – What is God's "Glory"?

Moshe promises the nation, "God's glory will be revealed to you." God Himself promises, "It shall be sanctified by My glory." What does this expression mean?

In a previous *shiur* we showed that "God's glory" is His appearance in the form of fire. The verse teaches, "The appearance of God's glory was like a consuming fire at the top of the mountain"; we find many similar expressions. The "glory" is a shining light or fire. We quote here from our *shiur* on *Beshalach*:

"God is always manifest in fire from within a cloud. The cloud conceals and hides the fire in its midst. We may assume that the cloud is the result of the waves of heat and moisture around the fire. This is not necessarily a cloud of water. It should be remembered that Tanakh offers various expressions in its description of the cloud: arafel, ashan, etc.

A striking and relatively clear description is provided in Sefer Shemot, where the Torah speaks of the Divine glory resting upon Mount Sinai, and later on the descent of God's glory to dwell in the Mishkan. There is a clear literary parallel between the two descriptions [6], and they point to one another. It is therefore worthwhile paying attention to the correspondence between them:

Shemot 24 – Mount Sinai:

- a. "The cloud covered the mountain"
- b. "God's glory dwelled upon Mount Sinai"
- c. "The cloud covered it for six days"
- d. "He called to Moshe on the seventh day from the midst of the cloud"

Shemot 30 – Ohel Mo'ed:

- a. "The cloud covered the Ohel Mo'ed"
- b. "God's glory filled the Mishkan"
- c. "For God's cloud was upon the Mishkan by day"
- d. "He called to Moshe"
- e. "And fire was in it by night"

The parallel is clear: God dwells upon Mount Sinai, the glory of God rests within the cloud. The expression "the glory of God" means the revelation of the Divine Presence. Clearly, it has many kinds of functions; in this context, the main function would seem to be speech. But how is it recognizable to those witnessing it? The text explains, "Like a CONSUMING fire at the top of the mountain." In other words, God's glory appears like a fire. The fire is covered with a cloud. God's glory calls to Moshe – who previously was not able to approach. In the case of the Ohel Mo'ed, we are told this explicitly. Why could Moshe not come to the Ohel Mo'ed? "For the cloud dwelled upon it." What kind of explanation is this? How and why does the cloud prevent him from approaching? The answer is to be found in the second part of the verse: "And the glory of God filled the Mishkan." Moshe is prevented from coming before the glory of God which is fire! The same message arises from chapter 40: "Fire was in it by night."

Specifically "in it" – for previously we were told that the cloud was covering, therefore now the text is explicit; "For the cloud of God was UPON the Mishkan by day." But His glory "fills the Mishkan" – and therefore "in it." Clearly, Moshe is not able to enter. For the very same reason he is prevented from approaching God at Mount Sinai – for the appearance of God's glory is like a consuming fire. This is an expression implying threat: "For the Lord your God is a CONSUMING fire, a jealous God." This is the full description of the revelation, both at Mount Sinai and in the introduction to the Divine Presence coming to dwell in the Ohel Mo'ed. The structure is well defined:

God's glory, appearing as a fire, is revealed with a veil of cloud. The cloud is on the outside; the fire is on the inside.

The cloud is above the Mishkan; the fire is within it. Hence, the last verse of Sefer Shemot, describing the revelation of the cloud by day and the fire by night, is recounted from the perspective of the nation that is watching. From an objective point of view, the fire (God's glory) and the cloud both remain there all the time.

"Moshe and Aharon entered the Tent of Meeting, and they emerged and blessed the nation, and God's glory was revealed to all the nation" – the Rashbam adds: "How?"

Attention should also be paid to the following parallel:

(24) 'A fire emerged from before God and consumed the burnt offering and the fats upon the altar, and when all the nation saw it they shouted and fell upon their faces.'

Shemot 13:

- a. *"God went before them*
- b. *By day – in a pillar of cloud, to show them the way*
- c. *And at night – in a pillar of fire, to make light for them*

In other words, the description of the fire emerging is the verse's internal explanation for what is written previously: "God's glory appeared." I.e., through the fact that the fire emerged and consumed the burnt offering and the fats, God's glory was revealed to the people. Then, immediately, "They shouted and fell upon their faces." The need for an explanation here arises not because the Torah wants to identify the glory as fire – since this is clearly understood, as explained above. Rather, the Torah wants to describe the precise path of the emergence of the fire from before God until the altar; this is what we learn from this verse that we would not have known otherwise.

Shemot 40:

- a. *"And the cloud covered the Ohel Mo'ed, and God's glory filled the Mishkan*
- b. *For God's cloud was upon the mishkan – by day*
- c. *And fire was in it by night."*

In summary, God's glory (appearing in the form of fire) already dwelled in the Mishkan, as we are told at the end of *Sefer Shemot* ("And fire was in it at night"). Thus, the promise that God would dwell in the Tent of Meeting had been fulfilled. But God had not yet been revealed upon the altar, showing that He accepted the offerings of the nation of Israel. Now the revelation was completed, for fire emerged and came to the altar. The revelation of the Divine Presence was now disconnected from its esoteric trappings. The revelation in the Tent of Meeting was by definition, private; it was reserved for Moshe or Aharon, who were worthy of hearing God's word. The revelation upon the altar, coming in the wake of sacrifice, is democratic; it is meant for all and is suited to the spiritual level of the masses.

Thus we learn that in the same way that God was revealed when Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, so He was revealed to them on Mount Sinai. And in the very same way He was revealed in the Ohel Mo'ed. And just as in the two latter cases His glory was manifest as fire within cloud, so it was in the first case. Thus, there are not two separate pillars, but rather only one. By day it is perceived as cloud; by night it looks like fire. And thus the final verse of Sefer Shemot ends – "in the sight of all of Bnei Yisrael, throughout their journeys."

Part 4: Why Did Nadav and Avihu Die?

The significance of the promise, "God's glory shall be revealed to you," is therefore a precise one: God's fire will be revealed before your eyes. The Rashbam gives this explanation for the verses which, further on, describe God's revelation; he adds only one word;

The question that arises now, as set out at the beginning of the *shiur*, assumes that God's fire emerged from heaven and struck specifically at Nadav and Avihu. Hence, there must be some grievous sin deserving of such a terrible punishment. Indeed, many commentators seek such a sin and point to various possibilities. But in light of our understanding of the situation thus far, and again in light of the Rashbam, we

may present a different picture, such that the question ceases to exist.

Let us examine the order of the verses describing the revelation, and then add some explanation, quoting the Rashbam at the appropriate points:

"Aharon lifted his hands towards the nation and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the goodwill offerings."

Aharon stood upon the altar. In absolute terms, he lifted his hands eastward, towards the nation, and then descended the ramp southward. (Imagine: the altar in the middle, facing the entrance to the Tent of Meeting; to the west of it – the entrance; to the east – the '*ezrat yisrael*,' the nation.)

(23) "And Moshe and Aharon entered the Tent of Meeting, and they emerged, and blessed the nation."

Moshe and Aharon together enter the Tent of Meeting – why? "To pray for the descent of the fire" (Rashbam). In other words, following the mortal service described above, the time has come for the Holy One to demonstrate His love and Divine will.

Then they emerge and bless the nation. In order for the altar not to separate them and the nation, they must have stood to the east of the altar, facing eastward, towards the nation, in order to bless them. And then, suddenly, "God's glory was revealed to all the nation" – to the entire nation, not only Moshe and Aharon.

(24) "And fire emerged from before God and consumed the burnt offering and the fats upon the altar, and when all the nation saw it, they shouted and fell upon their faces."

The emergence of the fire happens while Moshe and Aharon are alongside the nation. The fire emerges from before God – i.e., from the Holy of Holies. This point is of critical importance. Since God's glory was already present in the Mishkan, we cannot say that the fire emerged from heaven, as several commentators claim. The expression "from before God" proves our contention, since this expression universally refers to the Mishkan, and specifically to the Holy of Holies. The path taken by the fire, then, was from the Holy of Holies, via the incense altar (which stood facing the curtain, on the outer side, in the center of the vestibule), via the entrance, to the sacrificial altar outside. The direction of movement is HORIZONTAL.

Further on, the Torah describes the act of Nadav and Avihu:

"The sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took his censer, and they placed fire in them and placed incense upon it, and offered before God a strange fire which He had not commanded them."

Nadav and Avihu take fire in order to sacrifice upon the incense altar. This fire is, of course, human fire. They do not wait for the Divine fire which is the purpose of this day and of the entire process. This may be an attempt to "hasten the end"; a refusal to wait patiently for the Divine revelation. In any event, the sin arises from the offering of the incense with its fire not in accordance with God's command. Instead of God revealing Himself, they perform a human act. What happens now?

"A fire emerged from before God and consumed them, and they died before God."

The Rashbam explains: "This is the meaning of, 'a fire emerged' in the first verse. The two verses are really one and the same. When the fire emerged and consumed the goodwill offerings upon the external (sacrificial) altar, (and) when the sons of Aharon took and offered strange fire upon the inner (incense) altar, then 'a fire emerged from before God' – first to the inner offering of incense, striking the sons of Aharon there such that they died, and thereafter it went out from there and came upon the external altar, 'and it consumed the burnt offerings,' 'and they died before God.' Immediately upon hearing it, Aharon wanted to put aside the (Divine) service and mourn for his sons."

Therefore Moshe tells him:

"Moshe said to Aharon: This is what God spoke about, saying: 'I shall be sanctified among those who are close to Me, and before the entire nation I shall be glorified' – and Aharon was silent."

Previously, in *Shemot*, we read, "It shall be sanctified by My glory"; now we read, "I shall be sanctified" instead of "It shall be sanctified," and "I shall be glorified" instead of "By My glory." In other words, "Before the entire nation I shall be glorified" means, "I shall be revealed to them by My fire, which is My glory" – as explained above.

The understanding that only one fire emerged – the fire that emerged towards the altar, striking and killing Nadav and Avihu along the way – changes the picture entirely. Nadav and Avihu entered in order to offer human fire, failing to understand that they were thereby affecting the main significance of the event. What happened to them was a natural result of revelation – which takes the form of fire. According to what we have said, and on the basis of the Rashbam's explanation, which sits well with the overall description of the course of events, as we have presented it, no special fire emerged in order to strike Nadav and Avihu. They were struck by the very fire that emerged to consume the burnt offerings and fats upon the altar. Their path must necessarily have crossed the path of the emerging fire – i.e., the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and the middle of it. It is logical that they would have been able to proceed because Moshe and Aharon were on the other side of the altar as they blessed the people, facing towards them.

THE DEATH OF NADAV AND AVIHU IS THEREFORE A HORRIFIC ACCIDENT, NOT A PUNISHMENT.

The accident is not accidental. There is an inherent connection between the cause of the accident and its result.

The cause: taking human fire without waiting for God's fire – hence, a misinterpretation of the occasion.

Result: God's fire, which they had not expected, consumes them. But in truth, the relationship between the act and its result is not altogether proportional. Since this was a "natural" event rather than a punishment, this presents no problem. A person who falls asleep at the steering wheel and, heaven forefend, is killed in an accident, does not get what he "deserves." But this is the natural result of his action.

THERE IS A GREAT DEGREE OF SIMILARITY BETWEEN WHAT HAPPENS HERE AND THE WARNINGS THAT PRECEDE THE REVELATION AT SINAI. There, too, God was revealed in fire. There, too, there were repeated warnings against undesirable approaches; "Take care not to ascend the mountain or to touch its extremity; no hand shall touch it, for it shall surely be stoned or struck...." What this means is not that God will punish whomever approaches, but rather that this represents danger, and anyone who approaches a place of danger may be hurt.

THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS SHOCKING ACCIDENT IS RELATED TO THE PRINCIPLE OF "AWE OF GOD," WHICH ALSO TAKES US BACK TO THE REVELATION AT SINAI. Closeness to God is joyous but also terrifying and awesome. It must be clear that a person who draws close to the Divine Presence, but is not ready for or worthy of it, will be harmed: "Speak to Aharon your brother, and let him not come at all times to the Kodesh, inside of the curtain, to be before the covering that is upon the Ark, that he die not, for I am revealed in a cloud upon the covering." The revelation of the Divine Presence in fire reinforces our consciousness of awe. Fire = strict justice = awe. In the *haftara* for *Parashat Shemini* (|| *Shemuel* 6) we read of the death of Uza, who grasped the Ark of the covenant when the oxen stumbled. King David questions the injustice that is even more apparent there than it is in our instance; after all, Nadav and Avihu committed some sort of sin. The answer, of course, lies not in the moral sphere, but rather in the metaphysical: a person who enters a fire is burnt, no matter how good his intentions. The closeness of God, face to face, is a supremely dangerous experience ("For I have seen God face to face and my life was spared"). Direct contact is deadly.

Moshe's "apology," and his acceptance of Aharon's mourning later on, arise from the perception of the event as an accident. Had there been a sin here worthy of such a punishment, Moshe would not display empathy – as he did not, in fact, in other situations when faced with a desecration of God's Name or rebellion, even on the part of family members. Here the situation is different: the victim of an accident is deserving of empathy. And therefore Aharon's inability to eat of the sin offering is accepted with love: "Moshe heard, and it was good in his eyes."

The command not to drink wine, which follows immediately after this story, arises from the same perception. The consumption of wine in and of itself is not prohibited; under certain conditions it is appropriate and praiseworthy. But a person who drinks wine is not careful, and he may endanger himself and be hurt. God's Sanctuary must be approached with zeal, on one hand, together with caution, on the other. Caution expresses awe. The death of Nadav and Avihu is an extreme expression of the consciousness of awe and of the revelation of justice – fire. Not punishment, but justice as a mode of revelation, with all that it entails.

Notes:

[1] The Ramban deals at length with the problems arising from [Shemot 39:2](#) and the beginning of *Sefer Vayikra*.

[2] The expression, "It shall be sanctified by My glory" may also be interpreted to refer to the Mishkan, but since it appears at the end of a verse that begins by talking about the altar, it would seem to be telling us that the revelation is not only in the Tent of Meeting, but also upon the altar.

[3] Several Rishonim explain the situation thus; see the Ibn Ezra and the Seforno.

[4] The order set out here reflects one of the exegetical approaches. The problem of the dates is a complicated one; it also involves the verses in *Sefer Bamidbar* that describe the dedication of the Mishkan and of the altar. We adopt the above view on the basis of our understanding of the course of events as described in the text; see also below.

[5] My friend and colleague, Rav Yonatan Grossman, interprets the situation differently – in almost the opposite way – based on the assumption that the command concerning the eighth day is omitted altogether, and ignoring the fact that Moshe is issuing an instruction here on his own initiative. He writes: "In light of this understanding, we may go back and answer the question that we posed at the outset. It would seem that the omission of the eighth day from the command in *Sefer Shemot* expresses the fact that there is no guarantee that this day will in fact come to pass! *Am Yisrael* may perform all that they have been commanded – they may exert themselves in building the Mishkan, they may sanctify the vessels and prepare the *kohanim* to serve – but the revelation of God and His entry into the Mishkan are still conditional, up until the moment that God decides to do this. Essentially, there can be no command concerning the eighth day before the Mishkan is built and before the seven days of consecration. Such a command would make the resting of the Divine Presence in the Mishkan the necessary, almost inevitable, result of a supernatural process that takes place during the seven days of consecration – and

this is not so. The resting of the Divine Presence is dependent upon God's own free will. Only if He finds His nation worthy will He choose to cause His Presence to rest in their midst. Admittedly, the purpose of the construction of the Mishkan and of the seven days of consecration are the eighth day with God's revelation in the Mishkan, but this day cannot be commanded. This day remains a hidden potential until God wills to enter and dwell in the Mishkan built for him by mortals.

As we understand it, an essential part of God's revelation is the element of unexpectedness. A person may prepare himself for revelation, he may aspire to it and prepare the ground for its realization – but the actual Divine revelation is still a conditional possibility. When it happens, it emerges suddenly and without warning, and man – despite all of his psychological readiness – can only be overwhelmed: "When all the nation saw, they shouted and fell upon their faces" (9:24)." (Archives of the Virtual Beit Midrash, Yeshivat Har Etzion).

[6] As to the choice of these specific sacrifices, I hope to address that subject elsewhere.

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