

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might" (Devarim 6:5) - so that our souls can ascend, like the smoke from the altar, to God.

We see in the Torah that the desire to sacrifice was fundamental to the human psyche. Cain and Abel sacrificed. Noah sacrificed. Abraham sacrificed. As the Psalmist wrote: "All my soul/breath will praise God." The soul that God breathed into us desperately wishes to return to God.

Reading the story of Nadav and Avihu this way, we can see that in fact there was neither sin nor punishment. This is why Moshe tells Aharon that God "showed himself holy through those close to him." (Vayikra 10:3) And this is why Aharon is silent: he knows that his sons ultimately got what they had wanted. Both they and the fire were doing their jobs.

The thing is, even though God wants our souls to burn with the desire to return, it is God who put our souls in physical bodies to begin with. Just like with the Akeidah, we want to give it all, but God stops us and says: "Hey not so fast! I put you here for a reason. I don't really want *actual* human sacrifice; I just want to know that you're willing. So when you have that urge, I want you to sacrifice a ram, or bull, or goat, or sheep, or pigeon, or grain - and then go back to your life. Only I, God, gets to decide when your time on Earth is over."

This may help explain the verse in 10:9-11 when Moshe tells Aharon: "Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die...for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean; and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the LORD has imparted to them through Moshe." Traditional commentators interpret this to mean that Nadav and Avihu had messed up the sacrifice because they were drunk. But I'd like to suggest that their impaired judgment was not about the technical details of sacrifice, but about the significance of their corporeal life. Nadav and Avihu got carried away and forgot that a priest not only brings sacrifices, but also teaches the people, and helps them distinguish between the sacred and profane. Filled with passion for God, Nadav and Avihu had forgotten about their responsibility to the living.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Shemini

Shabbat Parah

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

March 30, 2019 | 23 Adar II 5779

Annual | Leviticus 9:1-11:47 (Etz Hayim p. 630-642; Hertz p. 443-454)

Triennial | Leviticus 11:1-11:47 (Etz Hayim p. 636-642; Hertz p. 449-454)

Maftir | Numbers 19:1-22 (Etz Hayim p. 880-883; Hertz p. 652-655)

Haftarah | Ezekiel 36:16-38 (Etz Hayim p. 1286-1289 ; Hertz p. 999-1001)

D'var Torah: Intentions & Deeds

Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz, CY Director of North American Engagement

At the beginning of the parashah, we read about the eighth day of the dedication of the Mishkan. But on the festive day in which God's honor appeared before the people, Aharon's two older sons and fellow priests, Nadav and Avihu, die inside the sanctuary and Aharon receives the bitter news in silence.

The Torah lists only one reason for their deaths: "and they offered before God strange fire that God had not commanded them." So it would appear that they were punished for deviating from the Torah's specific list of sanctioned sacrifices. Devarim 13 tells us: "Be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add (*bal tosf*) to it nor take away from it." But even so, it is hard to understand why they were punished with death. The person who violates *bal tosf* is only punished with flogging.

To better understand what happened, we need to delve deeper into religious consciousness. What motivates a person to bring a sacrifice - any sacrifice - is the desire to give **oneself** to the Creator, and in so doing, to come as near to God as possible. The fire represents one's love of God, and the sacrifice represents one's corporeal existence. In the truly religious person, one's passion for God should burn with enough intensity to consume one's entire being - "and you shall love the

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

D'var Haftarah: With a Little Help from God

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This Shabbat, Shabbat Parah, marks the third of the four special Shabbatot before Pesach established in rabbinic times in preparation for the festival. In the special maftir Torah reading, we read of the rite of the Parah Adumah - the Red Heifer, whose ashes when mixed with water, were used for ritual purification of someone who came into contact with the dead, since it was necessary to be ritually pure to offer and eat the Pesach sacrifice. Ezekiel's haftarah message understands this ritual symbolically, noting that God will likewise purify the children of Israel from their sins after returning them from Babylonian exile.

The above assertion is the latest stage in the evolution of Ezekiel's theology of human responsibility. Before the exile of the nation of Judah to Babylonia, Ezekiel preached a message of personal responsibility for one's actions: "The soul that sins shall die but if a man is just and does what is lawful and right... he shall surely live, says the Lord God." (18:4-9) The exile changed his views on the matter. Previously, he would have expected the redemption to take place only when the people were judged worthy. In his middle position, he wholly expected that God would redeem Israel from exile despite their foibles, because their exile was an embarrassment to God. Nevertheless, the children of Israel would have to take responsibility for their actions: "I shall make you pass under the shepherd's staff, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. I will remove from you those who rebel and transgress against Me. I will take them out of the countries in which they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God." (20:36-38)

In this week's haftarah, Ezekiel does a radical reappraisal of his theology which is both comforting and disappointing. He expresses a realization that people cannot in and of themselves sufficiently repair themselves to be worthy of redemption. Yet, redemption must take place to preserve God's good name. For that to happen, God must take an active role in repairing people: "Therefore I am concerned for My holy name, which the House of Israel had caused to be profaned among the nations to which they have come... I will take you from the nations and gather you from all of the countries and I will bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean... And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh and I will put My spirit into you. Thus, I will cause you to follow My laws and faithfully observe My rules" (36:21-27)

What are the takeaways from this evolution in Ezekiel's prophetic thinking? The expectation that human beings should take responsibility for their actions is primary in his thought. The shortcoming in this thinking is that dependence on it does not mesh with reality. Ezekiel was forced to contend with this fact. His answer was that it became an imperative for God to step into the picture. The

bottom line for Ezekiel is that with God's help and inspiration, human beings can move toward creating better selves and a better world. And ultimately, they can bring glory to God as well.

Parashat Shemini Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

After 7 days of preparations, Aharon and his sons arrive at the Eighth (Shemini) Day - the final stage of becoming Kohanim. Following this, in chapter 11, we receive instructions about animals we may and may not eat. This is the 3rd Shabbat of special readings, this time we read about the red heifer in Bamidbar 19.

1) At the beginning of the 7 day preparation period, Moshe was the active player, while Aharon and his sons, and the community were passive. Now we have reached the 8th day. Aharon is told to take his sacrifices by himself, and the community is similarly instructed (9:1-4). What has changed and what is the significance of the change?

2) Moshe instructs Aharon to do his and the people's sacrifices. For the next 14 verses (9:8-22) Moshe is not heard nor seen, Aharon and his sons are performing all the sacrificial work. How do you think Moshe feels with this new situation? What might it teach the people? What might it teach Aharon and his sons?

3) After performing all the sacrifices, Aharon raises his hands to the people, and blesses them (9:22). Do you think that this was a spontaneous action? What is its significance for the people?

4) Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's 2 older sons, brought incense and fire and sacrificed it "before the LORD" without being instructed to do so (10:1-2). A fire comes out from "before the LORD" and consumes them, and they die "before the LORD." Why is it stressed that these events took place "before the LORD"?

5) The last chapter of this parashah (chapter 11) teaches about the pure and impure animals. This does only apply to the rules of eating animals (kosher), but also coming in contact with their dead bodies. Anyone who touches them will be impure until the evening. In the special Maftir read this week (Bamidbar 19) we are told that contact with a dead human body makes one impure for 7 days, and requires a special purifying ceremony. Why do you think that the rules are not the same for all dead beings? What might we conclude about purity?

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