

Maamarei Mordechai

הסבר לפי ממש פשוט

Parshas Shmini 5785

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Nadav and Avihu seemed to err. But how?

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶמְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיַּשִּׁימוּ עָלֶיהָ קֹטֶרֶת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם:

“And Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aharon, took each to a man his firepan, and they put them to fire, and they placed incense in them, and they brought close before Hashem the foreign fires, that Hashem did not command them.” (Vayikra 10:1).

What did Nadav and Avihu do incorrectly? Also, what else can we learn from this pasuk?

We already learned in Parsha Vayikra that only certain animals can be brought as a korban. Hashem was equally specific about what incense – ketores – can be brought and by whom. The Torah wrote, “You shall not offer upon it a foreign incense offering...” (Shmos 30:9). This pasuk comes immediately after the instruction to build the gold mizbeach for ketores and stating that its purpose: “On it, Aharon shall make smoke of fragrant incense.” (Ibid 30:7). This special mizbeach had one purpose, and that was to offer the incense. The ketores, like all korbanos, had to be approved by Hashem. Its service was meant to be in front of, and connected to, the Aron.

Having already instructed that no foreign ketores be brought on it, it is understandable the great punishment that Nadav and Avihu faced when doing just that on their first day of service. Why, then, did they bring the foreign ketores? What was their motivation if they were told not to? Further, the Torah instruction was also clear, that only Aharon could bring ketores. “And Aharon shall burn it (the incense) every morning...and in the afternoon.” (Ibid 30:7-8). The very instruction to build the mizbeach came with the caveat that only Aron shall offer on it and no foreign offerings should be placed upon it. Further, this mizbeach is so connected to the ketores it is called the “Altar of Incense.” (Ibid 30:37, 31:8). Therefore, why did they do it anyway?

There is important connection between the ketores and the Menorah. Hashem asked for gifts and asked Moshe to gather “oil for lighting, oil for anointing, and fragrant incense.” (Ibid 25:6). Further, Aron was instructed to offer incense every morning – after preparing the Menorah – and every evening – adjacent to the lighting of the Menorah. (Ibid 30:7-8). Again, while reiterating the supplies gathered, the Torah says, “And oil for lighting, and fragrant spices for the oil of anointing, and the fragrant incense.” (Ibid 35:8). And when Moshe set up the Mishkan it says he set up the Menorah (ibid 39:37) and then it says “and the gold mizbeach and the anointing oil, and the fragrant ketores.” (Ibid 39:38). There were also two avodas that only Aron conducted, even during the inauguration period. These were the ketores and lighting the Menorah.

It was time for the avoda to be done in earnest by Aharon. His sons were not left out. They brought him the blood of his and the communal korbanos. (Vayikra 9:9,12,18). They also passed the parts of the Olah offering to him. (Ibid 9:13). Aharon brought the korbanos according to instruction. (Ibid 9:16). After bringing the offerings as per instructions, he blessed the nation (ibid 9:22), he joined Moshe in another blessing on the people (ibid 9:23), and then the Holy Presence of Hashem appeared to all the people. Then a fire came from before Hashem and it consumed what was on the mizbeach – the Ola and the fats. (Ibid 9:24). Immediately after this – no breaks in the Torah – Nadav and Avihu brought their firepan offerings.

Also note, that Aharon was not called Aharon Hakohen in this parsha. He is called Aharon Hakohen when referring to him becoming the kohen (Shmos 31:10), during the instructions to anoint him (ibid 35:19), and when commanding him regarding korbanos (Vayikra 1:7, 2:2). This parsha simply calls him Aharon and calls Nadav and Avihu his sons. He is also not called the kohen during the entire inauguration. (Ibid 8). Aharon is referred to as the Kohen when he is acting as Kohen. The Torah gives him the title when telling Moshe how to anoint him and make his vestments. During the inauguration he was *becoming* the kohen so he was not yet the kohen. Even after he was anointed (ibid 8:12) and even when actually doing the service, he was still not called the kohen. This is because he was not doing the service as Aharon the Kohen but as Aharon. Aharon himself earned the rights to do the service. He was engaging in the service, as himself.

Moshe was instructed to dress Aharon and his sons. (Shmos 40:13). He did so. (Vayikra 8:7). He was told to anoint them (Shmos 40:15) and he did so (Vayikra 8:12). Then during the inauguration days Aharon lit the Menorah (Shmos 40:25) and he burned the ketores (ibid 40:27). Then the cloud of Glory rested on the Mishkan (Ibid 40:34) and Moshe could no longer enter (ibid 40:35). This took place. (Vayikra 9:23). When Moshe came out and blessed Bnei Yisroel, that was the last time he was to enter the Ohel Moed.

The Fire from Hashem came down on the copper – outside – mizbeach. Having the morning service complete, including Aharon offering ketores and preparing the lamps the Menorah, Nadav and Avihu were inspired to bring their own offerings. They could not bring ketores onto the inner mizbeach because that was Aharon's job and no foreign ketores was permitted on it. However, they brought a fire offering to Hashem. They first put fire in their pans and then they sprinkled ketores on top. They brought the fire pans close, into the Ohel Moed. The same Fire consuming the Olah went forth and consumed the ketores in the firepans. However, such holiness was too much to bear and they expired. (Vayikra 10:2). It was not that they sinned and were burned alive. They did not offer ketores on the inner mizbeach. Aharon's sons, however, trying to emulate him, brought firepan offerings, that happen to have ketores. They wanted their fires to be added to Hashem's Fire. Hashem accepted their offering and the Fire consumed their firepans. However, they were unable to experience that and live. It was the wrong time. They should have stayed outside with the blessing procession. Their fires were foreign, because Hashem's Fire was there. They were not commanded to bring this because the plan was for Hashem's Fire to consume all korbanos that day. Thus, they had proper intentions. Through kiddush Hashem and tragedy, they expired.