



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Nadab & Abihu

As Leviticus 9 opens, it is the eighth and final day of the consecration of the Tabernacle. This is the day that Aaron begins to officiate as high priest. He and his sons take up their priestly duties in what begins as a solemn and exhilarating occasion.

But something appears to go terribly wrong, ending in the deaths of two of Aaron's sons. Let's explore the story in conversation with the Jewish sages.

Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the LORD alien fire, which had not been enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the LORD and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD meant by saying: "Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people." And Aaron was silent. (Lev. 10:1-3)

What happened to warrant the deaths of these two newly-ordained Israelite priests? Is it some kind of divine accident? Or did they get what they deserved? And if the two did commit a wrong, did the punishment fit the crime? If you feel uneasy about this story, know that your concerns are shared by the Jewish sages who have reflected on this text over many centuries.¹ Alarmed by the fate of two

respected Israelites (who were among the leaders to accompany Moses when he ascended Mt Sinai—see Exodus 24:1,9-11), and convinced that God is never unjust, the sages seek to explain the text in diverse ways.

Some propose that Nadab and Abihu were in fact guilty of sin: drunkenness (see Lev. 10:8-9), arrogance, irreverence. Too proud to ask the advice of the 'old man' Moses or even their father the high priest, they brought the disaster upon themselves. Some say that similar transgressions had already occurred when they were up on Mt Sinai with Moses. There they had infringed the boundaries set by God, but God had given them a reprieve.

Others approach the problem very differently. They defend the virtue of Aaron's sons. They note that each time their deaths are mentioned in scripture it is in relation to "alien fire." Thus their sin was nothing more than a religious ritual performed incorrectly, with pure motives but excessive enthusiasm. According to this view the severity of the punishment reflects the heights of the spiritual status of Aaron's sons! God's awesome display of power is a response to Nadab and Abihu at a level which most people do not attain. [Think of a class of gifted students of whom more is expected than the average student.] Does this help to make sense of the Lord's words (quoted by Moses in 10:3): "*Through those*

near to Me I show Myself holy..."

Yet another view, from a contemporary source:² Perhaps what we see in Nadab and Abihu is a superficial attempt to imitate the greatness of their father and uncle whom they saw negotiating the Lord's fiery presence on Mt Sinai and here at the consecration of the Tabernacle. The ceremony and celestial fireworks are all very exciting. But what they fail to appreciate is that the greatness of Moses and Aaron is hard won—authentic humility born in the crucible of adversity. Contrast this with the action of Nadab and Abihu who are in pursuit of a 'photo-op'! The fires that were a blessing now become fires of catastrophe. Aaron's 'silence' (10:3) is the pain of a parent, looking on sadly as his children make poor choices which contradict parental example.

With reference to the text, ponder and discuss these diverse views. Which do you favour, and why? What questions and insights do you bring to this Torah discussion? And how do you interpret Aaron's silence?

Sources: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (London/NY: Soncino, 1983); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1992); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006) Scripture: NJPS

1. The midrashic opinions that follow are discussed by Plaut and Munk with particular reference to Leviticus Rabbah and Sifra.
2. I am grateful to Rabbi Dr Pesach Schindler for sharing his interpretation with our readers.