

Parshiot Acharei Mot-Kedoshim 5781, 2021:

Rabbi David Etengoff

To Love and Serve the Almighty

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first of our two *parshiot* begins with the well-known verse that references the death of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu: "And the L-rd spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons, when they drew near before the L-rd, and they died." (*Sefer Vayikra* 16:1, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The Torah teaches us that Nadav and Avihu followed in their father's footsteps in their complete dedication to Hashem. As a result, they were vouchsafed a vision of His Divine Presence:

And to Moshe He [G-d] said, "Come up to the L-rd, you and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and prostrate yourselves from afar." ... And Moshe and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel ascended, and they perceived the G-d of Israel, and beneath His feet was like the forming of a sapphire brick and like the appearance of the heavens for clarity. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand, and they perceived G-d, and they ate and drank. (*Sefer Shemot* 24:1)

In light of the incredible spiritual heights that Nadav and Avihu achieved, the following two verses in Parashat Shemini are particularly difficult to comprehend:

And Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it, and they brought before the L-rd foreign fire (*aish zarah*) which He had not commanded them. And fire went forth from before the L-rd and consumed them, and they died before the L-rd. (*Sefer Vayikra* 10:1-2)

There are several essential elements in this brief, but overwhelmingly powerful, narrative:

1. Nadav and Avihu each took their own incense pans, put fire (coals) in them, and then placed incense on top of the coals.
2. This incense offering lacked G-d's command and received the appellation of *aish zarah*.
3. The punishment for bringing *aish zarah* was swift and irrevocable: "And fire went forth from before the L-rd and consumed them, and they died before the L-rd."

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin *zatzal* (known as "the Netziv," 1817-1893) notes in his Torah commentary, *Ha'amek Davar*, that Nadav and Avihu acted with a deep and abiding sense of *ahavat Hashem* (love of G-d) when they entered the *Ohel Moed* (Tent of Meeting) to offer their incense: "They entered [the *Ohel Moed*] with the fire of the love of Hashem burning deeply and profoundly within them." (*Sefer Vayikra* 10:1) If this is the case, why, asks the Netziv, did they have to pay for this manifestation of their love of G-d with their very deaths?

The Netziv's clear and direct answer to this question enables us to understand some of the more salient aspects of *ahavat Hashem*:

The Torah teaches us [through the deaths of Nadav and Avihu] that, although *ahavat Hashem* is precious in the eyes of G-d, it was not viewed as such when pursued in this manner, that is, without G-d having commanded [the offering of this incense].

To further underscore his approach, the Netziv contrasts the forbidden *aish zarah* of Nadav and Avihu with the preceding words of Moshe and actions of Aharon:

And Moshe said, "This is the thing the L-rd has commanded; do [it], and the glory of the L-rd will appear to you." And Moshe said to Aharon, "Approach the altar and perform your sin offering and your burnt offering, atoning for yourself and for the people, and perform the people's sacrifice, atoning for them, as the L-rd has commanded." So, Aharon approached the altar and slaughtered his sin offering calf. (*Sefer Vayikra* 9:6-8)

The Netziv explains this passage according to the interpretation of the *Sifra*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Vayikra*. He notes that Moshe was well-aware of the tendency among

certain G-d-intoxicated groups and individuals to demonstrate their love of Hashem in a prohibited manner. Such breaches of the law, while performed with the ostensible intent to serve Hashem, are, in reality, self-serving. Since these behaviors entail unauthorized actions, their origin must be found in the illicit urgings of the *yetzer hara*. Therefore, Moshe declared: “This is the thing the L-rd has commanded; do [it], and the glory of the L-rd will appear to you.”

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, implicitly agrees with the Netziv, suggesting that the key phrase in understanding the story of the tragic death of Nadav and Avihu is, indeed, “they brought before the L-rd foreign fire, which He had not commanded them.” He interprets these words in the following manner:

On the day of their installation, wearing their priestly vestments, they were overcome by ecstasy and by the need to express their emotions. The incense that they burned was identical to that which their father, Aharon, had offered. But there is one significant difference. Aharon was obeying G-d’s will, while Nadav and Avihu performed an action that G-d had not commanded. (This, and the following quotations are from *Darosh Darash Yosef*: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David editor, pages 223-226)

The Rav utilizes this explanation as the foundation of his analysis of the proper means to serve Hashem. In his view, the authentic Jewish way “requires us to fashion our lives according to God’s discipline, as illustrated by the word *ve-tzivanu* (and He has commanded us)... [Hence,] “the reason we perform the *mitzvah* is our absolute surrender to God’s will.” Unfortunately, rather than acting in this manner and demonstrating their obeisance to the Almighty, Nadav and Avihu chose their own misguided path to serve Him:

Therefore, the transgression of Nadav and Avihu, whom the Torah describes as sanctified, was that “they offered a strange fire concerning which they had not been commanded.” The divine command and our discipline in obeying that command are the only healthy

routes to religious inspiration. Any deviation, especially by *tzaddikim* is unacceptable and ultimately doomed to failure. (Underlining my own)

In sum, the Netziv and the Rav teach us that, while *ahavat Hashem* is a legitimate and powerful impetus for authentic spiritual expression, it must ever be governed by the *mitzvot*, as commanded by the Almighty. With Hashem's benevolent guidance and our fervent desire, may we demonstrate our *ahavat Hashem* through the fulfillment of His holy commandments, and may these bring us ever closer to Him. May this time come soon, and in our days. *V'chane yih ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.