

God is not an on-demand product (*Shemini*)

Once the *Mishkan* was erected, Moshe instructed Aharon about the offerings which he was obligated to bring as the *Kohen Gadol* – promising him that when he does so, ‘the glory of the Lord will appear’ (*Vayikra* 9:6).

After a lengthy description of Aharon’s various activities, we are then told that Aharon completed all the tasks which he had been instructed to do exactly ‘as Moshe had commanded him’ (ibid. 9:21), and that Aharon then blessed the people (ibid. 9:22). But by this stage, the glory of the Lord had not appeared.

The Torah then informs us that Moshe and Aharon enter the *Ohel Moed* (ibid. 9:23), but significantly, it does not tell us what they did there. Rashi, quoting the *Midrash*, provides us with an answer by explaining that Moshe and Aharon ‘prayed for mercy’. But why did they need to pray for mercy?

By this point, Aharon had done everything that Moshe had instructed him. Nevertheless, the glory of the Lord had not appeared. As a result, Aharon was worried that he may have done something wrong in the way in which he had carried out Moshe’s instructions. Alternatively, even though the *Mishkan* seemingly symbolized the atonement of the Jewish people for the sin of the *Egel HaZahav* (The Golden Calf), Aharon was concerned that perhaps God had not truly forgiven him for the central role that he played in its construction. Frustrated and disappointed, Aharon turns to his brother Moshe looking for wisdom, comfort, and guidance, and Moshe, wishing to support and reassure Aharon, offers to accompany him into the *Ohel Moshe* where, together, they prayed to God for mercy. We are then told that upon leaving the *Ohel Moed*, Moshe and Aharon blessed the people - at which point ‘the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people’ (ibid.).

Having learnt this story we must now ask: What is going on? And why did Aharon feel frustrated and disappointed? Though numerous commentaries have attempted to address these and other related questions, I believe that to reach an answer we must first consider how Aharon perceived the *Mishkan* and his service as the *Kohen Gadol*.

As noted, Aharon performs the service. The glory of God does not appear. And Aharon then feels that his service has been rejected or has been ineffective. On this basis, it seems that Aharon initially perceived the *Mishkan* as some kind of ‘sacred vending machine’ where he, as the *Kohen Gadol*, submitted certain ‘products’ (i.e. sacrifices), from which he expected that other ‘products’ be dispensed by God (i.e. atonement and the presence of the divine glory in the *Mishkan*).

However, not only is this an erroneous understanding of what the *Mishkan* is, but it is also an erroneous understanding of all other aspects of our divine service. Aharon

expected that his *avodah* in the *Mishkan* would stimulate an immediate divine response. But given this attitude, God deliberately delayed the appearance of His glory to teach Aharon an important lesson about spiritual patience, and how God's presence will appear as-and-when God is ready: **Neither divine atonement, nor the divine presence, are on-demand products, and even the perfect service in the *Mishkan* needs to be accompanied by prayers for mercy.**

Clearly, this lesson is truly timeless, and just like Aharon's initial approach, too many of us are spiritually impatient and we erroneously assume that divine inspiration is an on-demand product.

But beyond applying this lesson to ourselves, it also helps provide us with a meaningful context to understand the actions of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, who then offer their own incense which God had not commanded, and who are then punished for doing so (see *Vayikra* 10:1).

Over the centuries many commentaries have attempted to explain the specific sin of Nadav and Avihu. But in light of what we have explained above, I believe that they did not learn the lesson of their father. Aharon had been spiritually impatient, and he was then taught a lesson that God's presence will appear as-and-when God is ready.

However, Nadav and Avihu did not like that message. Instead, they believed that there was a work-around for how the *Mishkan* functioned and that by performing a service which God had not commanded of them, they could 'force' God to respond. God did respond, but as we know, the response came in the form of their death. Accordingly, while the incense-offering of Nadav and Avihu was the action that triggered their death, their ultimate failing was not learning the lesson that their father Aharon had just been taught (in fact, it is possible that part of Aharon's silent mourning included blaming himself for not having made this lesson clear enough to them).

When we learn the Torah we are meant to apply its lessons to our lives. Yet while this is so, too many of us today are spiritually impatient, and we erroneously assume that divine inspiration is an on-demand product. Moreover, there are those who think that the use of various '*segulot*' provide spiritual workarounds which can 'force' God to respond to whatever situation we may be facing - just like Nadav and Avihu thought that their incense could 'force' God to respond.

Given all this, what we learn from *Parshat Shmini* are the values of patience, humility, grace and mercy, and that rather than God being at our service, our task and calling is to be at God's service.

Shabbat Shalom!