

International Rabbinic Fellowship

Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Shemini

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi David Jaffe, Dean, Gann Academy

The first half of Parashat Shemini is filled with drama. The Kohanim finally complete the dedication of the Mishkan after eight days of procedures capped by the appearance of Hashem's glory in the Mishkan and fire descending from heaven. This is immediately followed by the shocking death of Nadav and Avihu. The parasha continues on in a seemingly unrelated way with the mundane details of kosher animals. What is the connection between kosher food, the dedication of the Mishkan and the death of Nadav and Avihu?

We can understand the connection through the lens of one of the grand themes of the Torah – Can God dwell amidst the people?

Underlying the parasha's description of the dedication of the mishkan is a drama that goes back to middle of Sefer Shmot. Seforno (Shmot 19:6) tells us that Bnei Yisrael merited to have God dwell among them without any intermediaries due to accepting the Torah at Har Sinai. They lost this privilege with the Golden Calf. God instructs Moshe to build the Mishkan and institute the sacrifices as a tikkun to bring God back into the midst of the people. Our drama centers around Aharon, the Kohen Gadol and representative of Bnei Yisrael in the Mishkan. In our parasha Moshe needs to encourage a reluctant Aharon to bring his sin offering to the brand new alter, commanding him "Krav! – Go near to mizbeach!" (Vayikra 9:7). Ramban explains Aharon's reluctance. The alter, with its four corners appeared to the Kohen Gadol like an ox, reminding him of the golden calf that he made for Bnei Yisrael. Aharon felt humiliated by that act and was scared that Hashem hadn't forgiven him. How could he, of all people, be the one to dedicate the Mishkan? Thus Moshe reminds him that Hashem chose him for this purpose and he should have some holy boldness and bring the Korban. Aharon makes the sacrifice and Hashem's fire descends, proving to Aharon and the people that the act of the golden calf is forgiven and Hashem will once more dwell in their midst through the means of the Mishkan.

At the height of this communal epiphany Aharon's sons go rogue, offer a "strange fire" with incense and have their souls burned up in front of Bnei Yisrael. What is the meaning of this and why does the Torah follow this narrative with explanations of Kashrut? The Mishkan and the sacrifices were a communal, public tikkun for the communal, public desecration of golden calf. When the fire descended and burned up the public sacrifice God signaled to the people that they had done public teshuva. The story of Nadav and Avihu teaches us that communal acts of sanctity are not enough to merit creating a space for God's presence to dwell in a sustainable way. Each individual needs to sanctify him or herself as well for the people to merit the ongoing presence of God.

Moshe approaches Aharon after the death of Nadav and Avihu and says, "This is what Hashem meant when He said: 'Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people.'" (Vayikra 10:3) Where did Hashem say this? Talmud Bavli Zevachim 115b explains that when giving the instructions for building the Mishkan (Shmot 29:43) Hashem tells Moshe, " **נִקְדַּשׁ בְּכֹדֶי** – It [the mishkan] will be sanctified by My glory." The rabbis tell us this verse should be read as " **נִקְדַּשׁ בְּמִכּוּבְדֵי** – It [the mishkan] will be sanctified by *those who glorify me*" meaning by individual holy people. Moshe tells Aharon that he thought that God was referring to him and Aharon, but now he realizes that God meant Nadav and Avihu.

This presents a problem. If God will dwell in the midst of the Bnai Yisrael due to the merit of individual holy people, it can't be that God would want or need people to continually get burned up to merit this ongoing presence. While Nadav and Avihu were undoubtedly spiritually exalted individuals the rabbis point out serious character flaws that caused a **דגם**, a blemish on their kedushah and made their type of holiness unsustainable. Rabbi Eliezer claims that they were overly brazen, in contrast to their father, and felt they didn't need to consult with Aharon or Moshe before making their sacrifice. Rabbi Yishmael claims they had a problem with

alcohol and got drunk and offered their sacrifice. It is this relationship to character and consumption that explains why Kashrut laws are connected to Nadav and Avihu.

I heard from Rabbi Yonatan Kolatch, Mashgiach Ruchani at Yeshivat Darchei Noam that Moshe was much less upset about the golden calf than by the complaining of Bnei Yisrael in the desert for meat (Bemidbar, chapter 11). Avodah Zarah, as explained by the Rambam (Hilchot Avodah Zarah 1:1) is an intellectual mistake. Moshe was confident he could teach the people the correct way to worship God. The desire for meat, symbolic for all Ta'avot - physical and emotional desires, is much harder to rectify. Moshe almost gives up on the people when they complain about meat, saying the burden is too much for him. Our relationship with food is symbolic of all of our consumption and our middot-soul traits – in general. This is why the Torah introduces the laws of Kosher animals right after the incident of Nadav and Avihu.

Seforno (Vayikra 11:2) writes that after Moshe introduced the mishkan as the communal tikkun needed to merit God's presence, he realized that each individual would need to make a personal tikkun on their character to make God's presence sustainable for the long term amidst the community. The main tikkun would be with food (our parasha) and sexuality (parashat Tazria-Metzora), two basic physical drives that are key to all tikkun hamiddot – character development. Nadav and Avihu were incredible individuals with a high level of Kedushah, but their character flaws made them unfit vessels to sustain God's presence. The way to get God's presence to stay among us is for all of us to become holy. We achieve this holiness through the hard work of character development. At the end of this week's parasha we get the reason for the laws of Kashrut (Vayikra 11:43-44):

אל תשקצו את נפשתיכם בכל השרץ השרץ ולא תטמאו בהם
ונטמתם בהם
כי אני יהוה אלהיכם והתקדשתם והייתם קדשים כי קדוש אני
ולא תטמאו את נפשתיכם בכל השרץ הרמש על הארץ

You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through anything that swarms; you shall not make yourselves unclean therewith and thus become unclean. For I Hashem

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am your God; you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy..."

The Hebrew word for "become unclean" is "נטמתם" which Seforno relates to being מטומטם, dull or insensitive. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (Lekutei Moharan 1:60) teaches that the way we eat can sharpen our spiritual sensitivity or make us spiritually asleep. Thus, the way we consume food, and rectify our character in general, can dull us or increase our sensitivity to Kedushah. This is the tikkun symbolized by Kashrut. If we want God's presence among us in a long-term sustainable way we can't just rely on communal, public sanctity, whether in the synagogue or elsewhere. We all need to do the individual work needed to make ourselves into Kelim – vessels for holiness. The way we relate to food is a good place to start.

The following statement is often attributed to Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the modern Mussar movement, "I tried to change the world and failed. So I tried to change my city and failed. So I tried to change my family and failed. Then I focused on changing myself and succeeded in changing the world."

Shabbat Shalom!