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TORAH STUDY

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Are we growing?

RABBI GAVRIEL GOETZ
Shemini, Leviticus 9:1-11:47

In this week's Torah portion, a very sad event takes place at a climax of happiness for the Jewish people. The second stage of the inauguration of the Tabernacle - the place where God's presence rests - had just begun when death struck the priestly family. The family, led by Aaron Hacoheh, had just brought the offerings for their inauguration.

When two of Aaron Hacoheh's sons decided on their own to do a service for God without God asking for the service, they were punished with death. Here is how the Torah describes their deaths: "The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it and placed incense upon it; and they brought before Hashem an alien fire that he had not commanded them. A fire came forth from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem" (Leviticus 10:1-2).

What did Nadab and Abihu do to deserve such a death, and why did God punish them on such a joyous occasion?

There are a number of explanations about why what Nadab and Abihu did was wrong; many of these answers assume they were punished for more than the sin of bringing unbidden incense.

The Talmud in Eruvin teaches us that in addition to bringing the incense, Nadab and Abihu answered a question that was brought up in front of Moses, their teacher; they answered the question without first asking permission. However, this explanation still requires understanding about why it is so wrong to answer before one's teacher.

A second answer is that when Nadab and Abihu entered the Holy of Holies to bring the incense, they were intoxicated, and one is prohibited from doing any service while being under the influence of alcohol. Again, what is so wrong?

A third answer is that besides bringing the incense, Nadab and Abihu had not married so they could be studious in their study of the Torah. This answer certainly demands explanation.

I heard a great explanation for all these answers from one of my teachers, an explanation that points to one common fault that Nadab and Abihu had.

We know that God commanded the Jewish people to be a holy nation. In order to do that, one has to constantly grow spiritually. This was a struggle for Nadab and Abihu; each of the answers points to the lack of a willingness to grow.

The first answer was because they had answered a question that was brought up in front of Moses, their teacher. Answering before one's teacher denies the special tradition that we have about passing Torah knowledge from teacher to student. This means that they didn't recognize Moses' greatness and they hadn't sought the higher level of understanding needed to recognize it.

The same fault of not wanting to appreciate the higher levels of growth holds true for the second answer - namely, not recognizing the problem of being drunk when entering the Holy of Holies.

The third answer is also in the same vein: Not being married is not recognizing the special holiness in marriage. Marriage is called kiddushin, which means holiness.

The Torah helps us recall the faults of great people so we can learn from them. May we all be able to constantly recognize opportunities for our own growth.

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