

Parashat Sh'mini 5780

Shabbat Shalom.

This Shabbat's Torah portion, *Sh'mini*, contains a very unusual episode that has led to much commentary for thousands of years – no exaggeration. The title of the *Parasha*, *Sh'mini*, means “eighth” because it comes from the first verse of the portion which says that “On the eighth day (*bayom hash'mini...*) Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel...” to tell them which sacrifices to bring to the altar. The topic of animal and grain sacrifices tends to not feel very relevant to our lives today, but the story that comes shortly after the description of the sacrifices is quite striking. In typical fashion, the entire episode is told in a few verses – the Torah often tells important stories in a very concise manner. Before I get to the story to which I'm referring, I want to mention that at the end of Moses' description of the burnt offering, purification offering, and offering of well-being the text says that “Moses said: “This is what YHVH has commanded that you do, that the Presence of YHVH may appear to you.” The term that is translated as “Presence” is “*Kavod*” which literally means “honor” or “glory.” What this exactly means is never described, but it's clearly a very powerful experience. After Aaron (Moses' older brother who is the *Kohen Gadol* – the High Priest) offers the offerings he lifts his hands and blesses the people, the Presence of YHVH is experienced by the people and “fire came forth from the Presence of YHVH and consumed the burnt offering...”

Okay, now that the context is set, we're up to the story I was mentioning. Aaron had four sons, two of them Nadav and Avihu, the successors to their father, are the subjects of this story. Here are the two verses that convey the story: Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it and laid incense upon it and they offered before YHVH *esh zarah* (which could mean strange or alien fire) which he/He had not commanded them. And fire (*esh*) came forth from the Presence of YHVH and consumed them; thus they died before the Presence of YHVH.”

What does this story mean? Our sages were puzzled and clearly disturbed by this story trying to explain it. What does the expression *esh zarah* (strange/alien fire) refer to and isn't the consequence overly harsh. The sages (*khazal* – literally “our sages of blessed memory”) cannot tolerate the thought that the Eternal One not act justly. They must explain what's behind this story. Clearly with the depiction so concise and lacking in detail, a lot was conjectured based on the surrounding verses and context. What was this “strange fire?” Some commentators thought

they were *shikur* (inebriated) when they made the offerings because immediately afterwards the priests are commanded to never drink wine or intoxicants before making offerings. Some commentators conjectured that the “strange fire” was not a physical fire, but an internal burning of ambition or perhaps jealousy – that Nadav and Avihu were anxious to replace their father (Aaron) and their uncle (Moses). A Midrash describes a scene of them watching their uncle and father functioning in leadership roles before the people and wondering when will these old men die already so they can take over and become the leaders. Clearly the sages were very critical of this kind of desire for leadership.

We see basically all of the prophets of our tradition not wanting to be prophets, but feeling compelled to be. Moses is a great example – he keeps offering up excuses why he is not worthy to lead the people out of Egypt. I remember when I was in college and during vacation I spent time at the world center of Chabad at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn when the last Rebbe was there – I was told how it took a year to convince him to become the Rebbe, their spiritual leader. Again we see this trait of humility being a central quality for leadership and ultimately for authority.

How we see leadership and whom we invest with authority says a great deal about our values as a society. Do we value arrogance or humility; do we value someone who is hungry for attention or someone who possesses a quiet depth? Do we focus on the external qualities or the internal ones?

Returning to the question of what was the *esh zarah*, the strange/alien fire offered by Nadav and Avihu – there were commentators who saw it as referring to unwarranted deviation from the prescriptions of the tradition. In other words, Nadav and Avihu, rather than listening to the laws and customs handed down by their elders, decided to present offerings that were not in our tradition. Rabbi Samuel Rafael Hirsch, an important spokesperson for modern Orthodox Judaism applied this story as a critique of Reform and Conservative Judaism. In other words he saw both Reform and Conservative Judaism’s changes from orthodoxy as analogous to *esh zarah* (strange/alien fire).

When I was growing up in Sunnyside, Queens there were two synagogues – one orthodox, Young Israel of Sunnyside, where my family went, and Sunnyside Jewish Center which was Conservative, but led by an Orthodox rabbi. The only difference was that at the Jewish Center men and women sat together. Otherwise the service was the same – same prayer

book, etc. I had no contact with Reform Judaism and just accepted the dismissal of it that was prevalent in the synagogue I went to. It was exemplified in the following joke:

A man bought a new Porsche which was very expensive and he wanted to take out extra “insurance” on it. He went to his local Orthodox rabbi and said: I know this is a very unusual request, but I just bought a new Porsche and I was hoping you could make a *brakha* (blessing) over it. The rabbi was happy to comply and says: “No problem. Just tell me – what’s a Porsche?” The man tells him, the rabbi makes the *brakha*, and then he goes home relieved. In the middle of the night he gets uneasy and decides to go the Conservative rabbi and ask him for a *brakha* for his new Porsche. The Conservative rabbi also says “no problem,” he’ll gladly do it, but just tell me: “what’s a Porsche?” The man gets the *brakha* goes home happy, but once again in the middle of the night he wakes up in a sweat over his new Porsche and resolves to cover all his bases in the morning and go to the Reform rabbi in town. Once again the Reform rabbi is very willing to oblige, but he only had one question: “What’s a *brakha*?”

I virtually never tell this joke anymore because I’m afraid that Reform Jews will be offended by it. Once I had exposure to the other movements of Judaism I began to see that each has its strengths and much to offer. But that was not the attitude that was prevalent in the Orthodox synagogue I grew up going to.

So the story of Nadav and Avihu also touches on, for some, the issue of change and tradition. What change is legitimate and what change is not? How does a 4,000 year old tradition adapt to change? Both the Conservative and Reform denominations would claim (rightly) that Judaism has always evolved and that we are merely in the tradition of the sages themselves who fashioned a Judaism quite different from the Biblical Judaism they inherited, but which couldn’t survive intact with the destruction of the ancient Temple and the exile from the Land of Israel.

I think the key is what should we base our changes and our evolution on? The Conservative movement created a Committee on Laws and Standards that makes decisions about Jewish law (*Halakha*). It studies in great depth the past traditions and *halakhic* decisions, examines minority opinions in the Talmud and this committee of scholars writes a decision about whatever element of Jewish law they are determining with a majority opinion and a minority opinion preserved.

Near the end of this Shabbat’s parasha is a phrase that appears numerous times in the Torah: “You shall be holy for I (YHVH) am holy.” My point is that our tradition attempts to

make our lives ones dedicated to holiness, to the sacred. Our decisions about how to live and how to practice Judaism should be based on what makes our actions holy and moral. Our decisions ideally should be based on those kinds of standards rather than on mere “convenience” or whim. At the same time, there’s no question that Judaism has evolved and will continue to evolve as conditions of living evolve.

Shabbat Shalom.