



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Shemini: In the Wake of Tragedy

On the day of the *Mishkan's* dedication, disaster struck. Yes, divine fire emerged and consumed the offerings on the altar, expressing God's joyous revelation to Israel. But at the same moment, that fire struck and killed two young priests, sons of Aharon.

Aharon was functioning as the High Priest and his remaining two sons were the only other priests. Moses instructed Aharon and his sons to continue the day's sacrificial service (10:6); after all, it was the day of the Tabernacle's dedication and they were the only priestly family. The service had to be completed.

But not exactly:

Then Moses inquired about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Elazar and Itamar, Aharon's remaining sons, and said, "Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area?...Aharon spoke to Moses, "See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would the Lord have approved?" And when Moses heard this, he approved. (10:16-19)

To explain, the priests had been instructed to eat the meat of the sin-offering. Instead, they burned it! Moses responds with anger; after all, they should have followed the rules. But Aharon replies that although he had offered the appropriate sacrifices, he had refrained from eating it, since "such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would the Lord have approved?"

Please discuss:

- Why was it important for Aharon and his sons to continue with the service of the Tabernacle? After such a disturbing incident might they not have taken a break?
- What is Moses's critique?

- Why does Moses get so angry? Shouldn't he be more sensitive?
- What was Aharon saying to Moses in his own defense?
- Why does Moses accept Aharon's argument in the end?

To explain Moses's position, see this powerful passage from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik:

Moses enjoined Aharon and his children from mourning for Nadav and Avihu. Aharon and his two surviving sons were enjoined from shedding a tear for them. Why? Because the priests constituted a community of the anointed who were consecrated exclusively to the service of the Lord. The inalienable right, to which every parent is entitled, of mourning the death of a child, was denied to Aharon and his sons. The commitment or consecration of a priest to God is ultimate, all-demanding, and all-inclusive...Aharon belonged to no one, not even to himself, but to God. Therefore he was not even free to give himself over to the grief precipitated by the loss of his two sons; he had no private world of his own. Even the heart of Aharon was divine property. (Catharsis)

Moses was anxious. Already, the ritual of the day had gone horribly wrong. Moses felt that protocol had to be kept to the letter; or else, who knows, maybe another tragedy would strike? In this situation, just as Aharon and his sons had to hold their mourning at bay, all the sacrifices had to continue according to plan. This is a severe demand of Aharon, but often, leaders subordinate their lives to the nation. They live not for themselves but for the collective. Aharon was such a person. He overlooked his personal grief because there was a job to be performed on the national stage.

- Do you understand Moses's concern?
- Do you identify with the religious requirement that Aharon complete the Temple service?
- Can you imagine a leader who has to act this way? A prime minister or a president? A communal leader? An army officer?

As for Aharon, Shadal explains his thinking (see similar in Rashbam and Netziv):

I and my four sons offered the sin-offering and burned-offering to atone for ourselves, nonetheless this [tragedy] happened and my two sons died. As such, we are not in good favor with God. If the eating of the sin-offering is to atone for the nation, how can we, who are admonished by God, atone for the collective?

Aharon agrees that in general the Tabernacle service must go on as planned, but he says there are exceptions. Aharon felt that certain elements of his service were possibly tainted by a personal sin. He felt inadequate representing his nation. His personal disaster led him to feel that he had been shunned by God and, as such, he felt unable to continue.

In a fascinating emotional turn, Moses accepted Aharon's argument.

Moses's greatness was that even he understood that...absolute adherence to the masterplan without any regard for changing circumstances is not the correct way to serve God: "And when Moses heard this, he approved!" (R. Amnon Bazak, *Nekudat Peticha*, pg.116-7)

- What made Moses change his mind?
- Have you ever encountered a tension between following *halakha* and changing of personal circumstances? Did you adopt Moses's position or Aharon's? In your mind, did you make the correct decision?

Shabbat Shalom!