

Parshat Shemini: Humility and Obedience As a Leadership Skill

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Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2020

Parashat Shemini is made up of two seemingly unrelated parts. The first is a narrative that relates the terrible fate of the High Priest's family right after Aaron and his sons completed their awe inspiring and long consecration ceremony in the *Ohel Moed*. The second informs us about the various rules of *kashrut*, the dietary regulations that Hashem commended the Israelites to follow. An odd combination. These two sections seem strikingly different, almost disparate. What is the underlying principle that links the two in an organic or meaningful way?

Chapter 10 relates the terrible and puzzling story of Aaron and his two sons, Nadav and Avihu. Terrible because the two sons die, puzzling because we can only guess the reason of their death. After all, nothing prepares us for such a dark turn of events. Itamar, Eleazar, Nadav and Avihu do exactly what they are supposed to do: on the completion of their consecration ceremony they help their father Aaron to carry out the various sacrifices of *hattat*, *olah* and *shlamim*, at the end of which the community will experience "the Presence of the Lord", an extraordinary, if not entirely direct encounter with Hashem. How shocking it is then to read in the next three sentences that two of these four sons, Nadav and Avihu, are killed by Hashem right after this communal encounter with the Divine. The explanation is laconic, what we learn is that the sons improvised an "alien" sacrifice to which Hashem answered by consuming them by fire. The verse states (Lev. 10:2):

"And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them, thus they died at the instance of the Lord" וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְקֹוֹק וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְקֹוֹק:

This wording is repeated verbatim in a previous sentence, in chapter 9:24, where Hashem reveals his presence to the Israelites by consuming the remnants of the *olah* sacrifice on the Altar:

"Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering.." וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְקֹוֹק וַתֹּאכַל עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת-הָעֹלָה וְאֶת-הַחֲלָבִים

In both cases Nadav and Avihu participated in the sacrifice. Yet only in the first case was their service accepted and beneficial for the community. When they offered an unrequested sacrifice they themselves became the sacrifice and took the place of their own improvised sacrifice. Their error seems to be this improvisation or lack of discipline that might have been thought to be incompatible with priestly virtues.

If they were undisciplined, the figure of Aaron serves as their polar opposite. It would be hard to imagine anyone more disciplined, more restrained than Aaron: do we hear him crying, shouting, cursing in pain and bitterness in the face of such a terrible blow? Does he lose faith in Hashem or in his priestly duties? No. He keeps obeying Moses's instructions and does not even engage in mourning rituals that could help relieve his sorrow. He silently listens to Hashem's protective advice about abstaining from alcohol and to His instruction to teach the Israelites about all His laws. Reading through *Shemini* I could not help thinking of the story of the *Akeidah*. Compared to it, Aaron's fate seems to be much harder than that of Abraham, and not merely because Aaron's sons die while Abraham's does not. Aaron loses his sons without any warning, at a time when his sole focus is the service of Hashem and has all reasons to think that his sincere and hard work is

appreciated. After all, the Presence of the Lord appears when he and Moses come out of the *Ohel Moed* and bless the people!

Yet Aaron is not bitter and is not angry with Hashem. He overcomes his personal tragedy by dedicating himself to his priestly duties, specified by Hashem, including the teaching of purity and impurity laws to the Israelites.

That last concern articulated in chapter 10 verses 10-11 might be the formal link between the two, seemingly so different parts of the *parashah*.

“For you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane and between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the Lord has imparted to them through Moses.”

 וְלִהְבְדִּיל בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּבֵין הַחֹל וּבֵין הַטָּמֵא וּבֵין הַטָּהוֹר:

 וְלִהוֹרֹת אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת כָּל-הַחֻקִּים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְקֹוֹק

 אֲלֵיהֶם בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה:

The detailed laws of kashrut follow the description of Aaron’s tragedy, and teaching these laws to the people becomes Aaron’s new task, given by Hashem. Can this juxtaposition of personal history and legal texts be read as a suggestion that Aaron’s personal tragedy might be overcome by his service to and engagement with his community?

Religious authority figures should emulate Aaron, in the practice of humility, discipline and intellectual engagement



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