

Parshat Shemini: Shifting Roles and Setting Boundaries

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In the book of Genesis, God follows a pattern of forming a relationship with a single leader at a time, through whom God carries out His will. However in Exodus God shifts to a new model by forming a relationship with multiple figures, specifically Moses and Aaron, who work together to lead the Israelite nation. Moses' role as the נביא/prophet is clear, he is the mouthpiece of God. Aaron and his sons in turn are given the priesthood/כהונה. But what exactly is the point of this new role and how is it distinct from that of Moses?

I believe an answer can be found by examining the tragic event that takes place in this week's Parsha, Parshat Shmini, with the loss of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu. In the beginning of chapter 10 in Leviticus we are told:

*(1) Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they brought near the LORD an alien fire, which He had not bid them.
(2) And fire came forth from the LORD and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the LORD.*

יָקַח וּבְנֵי-אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא אִישׁ מִחַתָּתוֹ
וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֶת וַיִּקְרְבוּ
לִפְנֵי יְקוֹק אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם: וַתֵּצֵא
אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְקוֹק וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי
יְקוֹק:

One of the main questions that arises from this scene is what exactly did Nadab and Abihu do wrong? The first possibility that seems to jump out from this text is the alien fire/אֵשׁ זָרָה that Nadab and Abihu sacrifice to God, an unusual sacrifice, is one that God clearly did not ask for. Indeed, when this unfortunate event is later recounted in Numbers 3:4 we are told:

But Nadab and Abihu died by the will of the LORD, when they brought an alien fire before the LORD in the wilderness of Sinai...

וַיָּמָת נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא לִפְנֵי יְקוֹק בְּהִקְרָבָם
אֵשׁ זָרָה לִפְנֵי יְקוֹק בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי...

This verse could be seen as a proof-text that the sin that Nadab and Abihu committed was sacrificing an alien fire to God. However the first verse in Leviticus 16 offers an entirely different understanding of where Nadab and Abihu's mistake lay:

(1) The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the LORD.

וַיְדַבֵּר יְקוֹק אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי
בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי יְקוֹק וַיָּמָתוּ:

This verse completely leaves out the detail about the alien fire, and instead hones in on the word “בְּקִרְבָּתָם” to suggest that Nadab and Abihu's mistake was actually the attempt to draw too close to God. This word choice is fascinating as it offers a semantic blurring of the original account of Nadab and Abihu's death in Leviticus 10, when it says, “וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי יְקוֹק אֵשׁ זָרָה” as well as the retelling in Numbers 3 which states, “בְּהִקְרָבָם אֵשׁ זָרָה לִפְנֵי יְקוֹק.” While one might have logically understood the meaning of these various words to roughly translate as “to sacrifice,” the excerpt from Leviticus 16 pushes us to focus instead on the root of those words: “קרב” - drawing close. Indeed this understanding corresponds well with the entire notion of a sacrifice (קרבן) as a physical way for man to draw spiritually close to God.

Yet why would God punish Nadab and Abihu for trying to draw close to Him? I believe the answer comes a few verses after Nadab and Abihu's death in Leviticus 10, verses 8-11:

(8) And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying: (9) Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages, (10) for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean; (11) and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the LORD has imparted to them through Moses.

(ח) וַיְדַבֵּר יְקוֹק אֱלֹהִים לְאַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: (ט) יַיִן וְשִׁכָר אֲלֵתִישָׁת אֹתָהּ וּבְנֵיךָ אִתְּךָ בְּבֹאֲכֶם אֲלֵאֱהָל מוֹעֵד וְלֹא תִמְתְּנוּ חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם: (י) לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּבֵין הַחֹל וּבֵין הַטְּמֵא וּבֵין הַטְּהוֹר: (יא) וּלְהוֹרֹת אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת כָּל־הַחֻקִּים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְקוֹק אֱלֹהִים בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה

Given the proximity of this scene to the incident with Nadab and Abihu, this excerpt is often understood to imply that perhaps Nadab and Abihu had gotten drunk when they sacrificed the alien fire. Instead, I believe these verses come to highlight a central aspect of the priesthood: The responsibility of setting boundaries. While Moses's role as the prophet is to serve as God's mouthpiece, to be so close to God that he is able to converse with God "פנים אל פנים/face to face" as he did at Mount Sinai, here God makes clear that Aaron and his sons do not share that task. Rather the job of the priest is to create distinctions and preserve them. To stay down at the base of the mountain and keep the Israelites from drawing too close.

Ultimately God explains that Aaron must construct boundaries - between the sacred and the profane, the pure and impure, and even between God and man - and teach those boundaries to the Jewish people. In this way one could understand Nadab and Abihu's mistaken attempt to draw close to God as their failure to embrace those boundaries and comprehend the opportunity in their uniquely God given role. Rather than forge a new relationship with God as priest, Nadab and Abihu go too far astray by seeking to mimic Moses's relationship with God. In so doing, Nadab and Abihu show they are not capable of defining this new paradigm of leadership for the Israelites.

When transitioning into new roles in our own lives, we often come in with preconceived notions about how we are supposed to act in those roles. These ideas may have been formed by watching how others perform in similar roles. Whether it's the shift from single to partnered, employee to employer, child to adult, it is easy to fall into the same trap as Nadab and Abihu and stick to how we "should" behave, even if that path may feel unnatural or incongruous with our own intuition. It is important that when we make the transitions, we must do so with an open mind and open eyes, ready to adapt to what is demanded in our new role. In this way we can carve out new ways to inhabit these roles that are defined by our unique situations.



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