

Parshas Shmini

A Foreign Offering

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Parshas Shmini relates the story of Nadav and Avihu’s sudden death as a result of their improper service in the sanctuary. In Rashi’s explanation of the verse, he brings various reasons for this calamity. This Sicha gives an in-depth understanding behind Rashi’s specific choice of commentary, and a lesson that can be applied to each of our lives.

In this week’s Torah portion the tragic death of Aharon’s sons is recorded:

Text 1

And Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed *ketores* (incense) upon it, and they brought before the Lord foreign fire, which He had not commanded them. And fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

Vayikra 10:2

Rashi chronicles the reason for their sudden death and explains as follows:

Text 2

And fire went forth: Rabbi Eliezer says: “Aharon’s sons died only because they rendered halachic decisions in the presence of Moshe, their teacher.” Rabbi Yishmael says: “[They died because] they had entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine.” The proof is that after their death, [Scripture] admonished the survivors that they may not enter the sanctuary after having drunk wine. This is analogous to a king who had

a faithful attendant, as recounted in Vayikra Rabbah (12:1).

Rashi ibid

According to Rashi, it was not the sin of bringing the foreign fire that killed them, but either the act of rendering a halachic decision in the presence of their teacher, or the fact that they were intoxicated when they brought this incense.

Rashi’s explanation as to the cause for their death is problematic though, for several reasons:

- A) The reason of their death is stated clearly in the verse—that “they brought before the Lord a foreign fire, which He had not commanded them...and they died before the Lord.” What difficulty is there with the verse, that causes Rashi to explain the reason for their death in a different manner than the verse indicates?
- B) Why does Rashi give an explanation for their death that does not at all seem to be hinted to in the verse?
- C) Rashi’s explanation revolves upon the words of the verse, “and fire went forth,” as can be seen in the words that Rashi cites. If Rashi is indeed explaining the reason for their death however, he

should have based his commentary on the words, “and they died,” as that is what he seems to be clarifying.

- D) There is a general rule that when Rashi brings two explanations on one verse, it is because neither of them can completely explain it adequately, as there is a difficulty with each interpretation. He prefaces with the first interpretation, being that it is closer to the simple explanation. What then, are the difficulties in each of these explanations, and why is the first closer to the simple meaning of the verse?
- E) As a rule, Rashi does not quote the individual who explains the verse by name. When he does, it is because through knowing the author of the explanation, it adds to the understanding of the verse. How is our understanding of the verse enhanced by the awareness that it was R. Eliezer and R. Yishmael who imparted the above explanations?
- F) Rashi’s commentary is extremely precise and much can be learned from what he does or does not quote. Rashi does not quote the *Medrash* in its entirety, but rather says, “This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant, as recounted in Vayikra Rabbah.” If his intent is only to provide a source (that the reader should research) he should have only said, “This is analogous to a king, etc., as recounted in Vayikra Rabba,” and not have mentioned the words “who had a faithful attendant.” Conversely, if his intent is to give over the *meaning* of the *Medrash*, he should have brought the rest of the quote as well. From this though, it is clear, that adding the words, “who had a faithful attendant,” is pertinent to his

explanation. What is clarified through this addition?

Making sense of it all

Since Rashi’s commentary is indeed centered upon the words, “and a fire went forth,” it is apparent that there is some trouble with *these* words, which necessitated Rashi’s clarification as to the reason for the death of Aharon’s two sons.

The difficulty can be understood as follows:

It is understood that the manner in which the sons of Aharon died were measure for measure for their actions. From the simple reading of the verse, it seems clear that they were *killed* by fire, because they had *brought* a foreign fire. Since they had brought a fire to the Lord that they were not commanded to offer, they too were killed by fire.

Rashi is bothered by the fact that the very same words of, “and fire went forth,” which are employed in this verse in supposedly a negative circumstance, were used only two verses prior, as an expression of G-d’s Divine Presence being revealed in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle)—an observably *positive* event. How then, can an expression that was used to express the positive be used as well to express the negative?

The verse states:

Text 3

And Moshe and Aharon went into the Tent of Meeting. Then they came out and blessed the people, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fats upon the altar, and all the people saw, sang praises, and fell upon their faces.

Vayikra 9:23-24

Rashi expounds on the above verse:

“Throughout¹ all seven days of the investitures, when Moshe erected the *Mishkan*, performed the service in it, and then dismantled it daily, the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) did not rest in it. The Israelites were humiliated, and they said to Moshe, ‘Moshe, our teacher, all the efforts we have taken were so that the *Shechina* should dwell among us, so that we would know that we have been forgiven for the sin of the [golden] calf!’ Therefore, Moshe answered them (verse 6), ‘This is the thing the Lord has commanded; do [it], and the glory of the Lord will appear to you. My brother Aharon is more worthy and important than I, insofar as through his offerings and his service the *Shechina* will dwell among you, and you will know that the Omnipresent has chosen him.’ When the fire consumed the burnt offering the Israelites recognized it as a revelation of the Divine Presence.”

Rashi himself explains, that the fire which came forth in this verse was expressive of the glory of the Lord. The same words seem to hold two opposite connotations. This seems problematic. How can the exact language that was used as the expression of G-d’s glory, be used only two verses later to express G-d’s vengeance?

First explanation

It is because of this difficulty that Rashi is compelled to explain that the fire which came forth at the time of the sons of Aharon death was indeed similar to a revelation of the Divine Presence.

Through the *ketores* that Nadav and Avihu offered, it brought about a revelation of G-dliness similar to the fire that came forth when Aharon brought the *ketores*.

The service in and of itself was indeed holy. However, because at the high level at which they

were holding there was a deficiency in the way they completed this offering of *ketores*, they perished.

This is why Rashi chooses to give a variant explanation, and state the reasoning that the sons of Aharon did not die from the actual service that they performed, but “only because they rendered halachic decisions (symbolized by the offering of fire) in the presence of Moshe, their teacher.” Rashi is explaining that though the actual offering was holy and brought about a revelation of G-dliness they nevertheless were punished because of their lack of deference to Moshe.

The verse states, “they brought a foreign fire, which He had not commanded them.” This seems to imply that the fire was “foreign.” According to the above though, there was indeed nothing foreign about the fire, as in and of itself it was indeed holy.

This, in truth, is not a question, as the verse itself tells us that the problem was that “He had not commanded them.” From this it is clear that the service (or fire) itself was not negative, but the transgression was only that they brought it without being commanded.

Though the verse calls it foreign, it is to mean that it was foreign to *them*. In the sense that on their level, it was an action that was considered reprehensible.

A minor infraction?

Yet, this is slightly problematic: why were Nadav and Avihu punished with such a harsh punishment for such a minor infraction?

To answer this, Rashi prefaces that the author of this interpretation was R. Eliezer.

There are many quotes from the Talmud that express the greatness of R. Eliezer, and he was

¹ Rashi, Vayikra 9:23.

amongst the most prominent sages of Israel. R. Yochanan ben Zakai (R. Eliezer's teacher) attested to R. Eliezer's greatness with the following declaration:

Text 4

You are able to say more words of Torah than were received at Sinai.

Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer, Ch. 2

Notwithstanding his awesome brilliance, R. Eliezer himself said the following:

Text 5

One who says something which he did not hear from the mouth of his teacher causes the Divine Presence to depart from Israel.

Talmud, Brachos 27b

No matter how great an individual is, he needs to receive his knowledge from his teachers and not issue rulings on his own.

From this it is understood all the more so, how grave it is when one not only says something that his teacher has not said—as Nadav and Avihu did when rendering their own halachic decisions—but also states it in front of his teacher's presence, as they did as well.

It is because of this that Aharon's sons were punished so harshly. Since, according to R. Eliezer, stating something that one has not heard from their teachers and all the more so doing this in their presence, is indeed a grievous offense.

This explanation too, however, is not completely satisfactory. Due to this difficulty, Rashi brings

his second explanation of the verse, which does not have the same problem.

The above explanation is incomplete, since if rendering a halachic decision causes the Divine Presence to depart from the Jewish people, the opposite can be asked:

There seems to be two contradictory events that occurred through the same action. In bringing these sacrifices they rendered a halachic decision in front of their teacher and caused the Divine Presence to *leave*. How is it possible then, that that very action that caused the Divine Presence to depart, caused as well a *revelation* of the Divine Presence, which is expressed in the words "And fire went forth?"

Second explanation

It is for this reason that Rashi brings his second explanation: "[They died because] they had entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine."

From this explanation it is understood that there was nothing essentially undesirable about their offering on its own. Therefore, although they themselves were punished since on their level, they did something that was unbecoming, the sacrifice nevertheless brought about a revelation of G-dliness.

Furthermore, the prohibition of entering the sanctuary while intoxicated had not yet been given and was only commanded after the sons of Aharon had brought their sacrifice. Indeed, only a few verses *after* the tragedy of Aharon's sons, does the verse say:

Text 6

And the Lord spoke to Aharon, saying, “Do not drink wine that will lead to intoxication, neither you nor your sons with you, when you go into the Tent of Meeting, so that you shall not die. [This is] an eternal statute for your generations.”

Vayikra 10:8-9

Being that the prohibition of entering the sanctuary in an intoxicated state was a commandment that they were not yet instructed with, Aharon’s sons did not transgress any divine commandment when they brought *their* sacrifice.

It is therefore understood, that being that their offering of *ketores* did not transgress a direct G-dly instruction, this fire brought about the revelation of the Divine Presence.

This is the reason Rashi continues his explanation and says, “The proof is that *after* their death, [Scripture] admonished the survivors that they may not enter the sanctuary after having drunk wine.”

His intent in these words is to explain the advantage of this second interpretation over the first; for according to this, the sons of Aharon did not transgress at the time and did not sin in their actions. They did indeed bring upon a form of divine revelation through their service.

So while according to the first explanation of the verse it is not understood how their actions brought about a revelation of G-dliness, according to the second explanation it is clear.

The difficulty

There is though, an issue with the second explanation as well, which necessitates an additional explanation from Rashi:

Being that they were not yet commanded in regards to the wine, why were they punished so harshly for being drunk? If this prohibition was not yet commanded, why did they receive the death penalty for their actions?!

In response to this, Rashi adds: “This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant, as recounted in *Vayikra Rabbah*.”

The *Medrash* in its entirety reads as follows:

Text 7

This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant. When he found him standing at tavern entrances, he severed his head in silence and appointed another attendant in his place. We would not know why he put the first to death, but for his enjoining the second thus, “You must not enter the doorway of taverns,” from which we know that for such a reason he had put the first one to death. Thus [it is said], “And fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.” But we would not know why they [Nadav and Avihu] died, but for His commanding Aharon, “Do not drink wine that will lead to intoxication.” We know from this that they died precisely on account of the wine.

Vayikra Rabba 12:1

From the words of the *Medrash* it is understood, that the reason the first attendant was executed by the king was because he should have known better himself.

Although the first individual was not directly prohibited from entering taverns, being that he was a “faithful attendant” of the king, he should have understood on his own that this was not proper conduct, even without an explicit command.

Rashi, through citing the words, “who had a faithful attendant,” hints to the justification for the sons of Aharon being punished, even for something which they were not commanded. Being that they were faithful attendants of the Almighty, they themselves should have understood that their conduct was inappropriate.

The Torah attests to their stature in the verse following the incident of their death. Following the death of Nadav and Aviyhu, Moshe tells his brother Aharon²: “This is what the Lord spoke, [when He said], ‘I will be sanctified through those near to Me.’”

Rashi comments,

Text 8

Moshes said to Aharon, “Aharon, my brother! I knew that this House was to be sanctified through the beloved ones of the Omnipresent, but I thought it would be either through me or through you. Now I see that they [Nadav and Avihu] were greater than I or you!”

Rashi, Vayikra 10:3

It was because of the greatness of Aharon’s sons that they were punished. Because they were the “faithful attendants” of the Almighty, they should have known of His will even before He expressed it.

R. Yishmael

There still remains what to be understood in this explanation:

Although they were indeed great and should have known better, this still does not seem to explain the drastic level of punishment that they

received, if they indeed were not commanded in its regard. Notwithstanding their greatness, why were they punished so drastically if there was essentially no crime?!

Rashi therefore adds that the author of this thought was R. Yishmael. R. Yishmael indeed was intent on minimizing the offence of Aharon’s sons and judging them favorably.

The Talmud brings the following description of this sage:

Text 9

Yishmael the priest favors the priests.

Talmud, Chulin 49a

R. Yishmael was lenient on the judgment of the *kohanim* and he therefore did his utmost to minimize Nadav and Avihu’s sin.

He did so even in this case, where it is more difficult to make light of their transgression than to explain the verse in a way that intensifies their sin.

Although the more stringent transgression of rendering a halachic decision before their teacher is *better* understood according to the verse, he nevertheless did not wish to explain the verse in such a way. He therefore explains that they entered in a drunken state instead of explaining the former interpretation.

Still unsettled

After all of the above, there are still questions that remain on R. Yishmael’s explanation, which leave this second interpretation incomplete as well.

² Vayikra 10:3.

R. Yishmael essentially explained that there was nothing wrong with their act, but only with the state that they were in. This is problematic for the following reasons:

- 1) From the words of the verse, “and they brought before the Lord *foreign fire*, which He had not commanded them,” it seems that the sacrifice *itself* was foreign and not merely the state or manner in which they brought it (i.e. their drunkenness).
- 2) If their sin was *not* in the actual sacrifice that was brought with fire, why does the verse stress that they were punished through fire?

It is because of these problematic issues that Rashi is unsatisfied with this explanation and brings it in second order.

He thereby communicates, that although the first explanation as well is also somewhat troublesome, it is nevertheless closer to the simple meaning of the verse

In practical terms

There are halachic derivatives that can be learned from Rashi’s specific choice of explanation on this subject:

Rashi tells us that “Aharon’s sons died only because they rendered halachic decisions in the presence of Moshe, their teacher.” Seemingly, Rashi could have said that “Aharon’s sons died only because they rendered halachic decisions in the presence their teacher,” and left out that it was Moshe. Why is this point pertinent?

Furthermore, they seem to have done a far greater infraction. For, not only did they render a halachic decision in front of Moshe, who was their teacher, but this ruling was also uttered before Aharon, their teacher *and* father, who was present as well.

In addition, offering *ketores* in Aharon’s stead was a direct offense against his dignity, as he was the one designated for this role.

This assigned position of Aharon can be seen from the verse that describes the events of that inauguration day. It begins with stating that “Moshe and Aharon went into the Tent of Meeting.” Rashi elucidates with the following commentary:

Text 10

Why did Moshe enter with Aharon? To teach him about the procedure of [burning] the incense.

Rashi, Vayikra 9:23

Therefore, Rashi’s explanation of “they rendered halachic decisions in the presence of Moshe, their teacher” seems increasingly problematic. Not only does the inclusion of the word “Moshe” seem extra, but by leaving out the mention of his name, it seems to minimize the offense done to Aharon.

We can understand Rashi’s specific phraseology through the following *halacha*:

We see concerning the laws of leaning during the Pesach *seder*, that there are specific measures of respect that a student must show when in the presence of his teacher, which do not apply in the presence of his father. This is because it is understood that the parent forgoes his honor for the sake of his child.

Text 11

A son who eats (at the *seder*) in his father’s presence must recline, even if his father is his primary teacher. (The reason is because) the father tacitly is forgiving of his honor for his

children. However, a student that is eating (his *sefer*) in the presence of his teacher, even if it is not his primary teacher, is prohibited to recline in his presence because of the fear and deference (that he must show towards) his teacher.

Shulchan Aruch ADHZ 472:11

As seen, a father pardons his own honor for his son, but a teacher does not necessarily do so for his student.

The same can be said regarding Aharon in understanding Rashi's reason for not mentioning Aharon in the verse.

Although the deference that was to be shown to Aharon (who was their father and teacher) was actually *greater* than the respect that was to be shown to Moshe (who was only their teacher), in regards to the outcome of the transgression, it is the other way around. Because a father forgives his son, the sin is not as great.

This is the reason why they were not punished for the slight against Aharon, as their father forgave them for their lack of respect.

It is for this reason that Rashi writes that "they rendered halachic decisions in the presence of *Moshe*, their teacher," and left out that this was done before Aharon as well.

A lesson

The sons of Aharon maintained a supremely high spiritual level. This was even to the point that Moshe said in their regard that they were greater than both himself and Aharon, as was brought above.

Notwithstanding their greatness, and that G-d himself called them "his close ones," they were nevertheless punished for their lack of humility towards their teacher.

This is what R. Eliezer says, that no matter how great an individual is, if he says something that he did not hear from his teacher, he causes the Divine Presence to depart from the Jewish people.

Humility towards one's teacher effects the revelation of G-dliness for the entirety of the Jewish people, and when one does not have respect for their teacher, they cause the Divine Presence to depart from Israel.

The lesson from this is clear:

A person should not say, "I am a great scholar, so why should I ask my teacher for halachic advice or direction in my service of G-d; I am able to advise myself!"

For, there was no one greater than the sons of Aharon, and yet, their entire sin was that they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of their teacher. As mentioned, the effects were great, and this did not only affect them, but caused the Divine Presence to depart from the Jewish people.

Drunk with knowledge

On the other hand however, each person is also required to learn Torah with their own understanding, to the point where their being is permeated with an understanding of Torah.

This can be derived from Rashi's statement: "[They died because] they had entered the *sanctuary* after having drunk wine."

Wine symbolizes understanding, as the teachings of *Chassidus* describe:

Text 12

This is the idea of wine that brings happiness...i.e., through understanding the greatness of G-d, he will be excited about G-dliness.

Likutei Torah, Sukos 79d

In Kabbalistic terms, one who drinks wine is expressive of an individual who is permeated with understanding.

The verse describes how Nadav and Avihu entered the *sanctuary* after drinking wine. The sin of Nadav and Avihu was not that they simply partook of wine and understanding, but that they entered the *sanctuary* in such a state.

For, the sanctuary symbolizes prayer:

Text 13

Yet have I been to them as a little sanctuary.³ R. Yitzchak said: This refers to the synagogue...

Talmud, Megila 29a

When a person prays, they are standing before G-d. In such a state, a person must have

complete humility. While personal understanding is a positive thing, when one connects to G-d, one must do so with humility.

However, although feeling oneself is not proper during prayer, in one's personal learning of the Torah, he needs to be "drunk" and completely full with the wine of Torah's wisdom. Only when he is drunk with his learning, can it be said that he is learning properly.

And in fact, when one employs humility during his prayer, this gives him the ability that during his following Torah study—which is infused with his own understanding and intellect—he will also have the proper humility at the same time.

Though these two qualities—personal understanding and humility—are seemingly two contradictory things, the merge of both is indeed attainable, as the Jewish people are connected to G-d and are His "faithful attendant." G-d gives us the ability to attain two opposite modes of service simultaneously.

May we indeed learn in such a way and herald in the time when the world will be full of G-dliness!

(Based on Likutei Sichos 12, Shmini 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com.)

³ Yechezkel 11:16.