



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Shmini 5774

By Mia Simring

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Parashat Shmini begins as the week of inaugural worship in the *Mishkan*, the desert temple that enabled God to dwell among the Israelites, is coming to a close. But tragedy strikes when two young priestly acolytes, Nadav and Avihu, die at the altar. It is a brief and puzzling story: we are simply told that each brought his incense pan and offered incense on “strange fire,” even though God had not commanded it of them. And the next thing we know, they are consumed by God’s fire.¹

It is clear that something went terribly wrong. But what was it, exactly? Commentators have offered an array of possible reasons for Nadav and Avihu’s punishment, focusing on the strangeness of the fire or the fact that God had not commanded the offering. Rashi points to the instructions following the incident, which say the priests cannot enter the sanctuary drunk, to suggest that Nadav and Avihu had actually approached the presence of God while intoxicated.² The *midrash* suggests four different reasons that Nadav and Avihu were struck down: for entering the innermost sanctuary, for offering incense that was not asked of them, for using fire taken from the kitchen, and finally, for not consulting with each other.³

This last explanation, which is derived from the words, “*each man took his own incense pan*”⁴ is the most heartbreaking possibility—and perhaps the one that speaks best to us today. According to the *midrash*, if Nadav and Avihu had worked as a team, perhaps their approaching God could have ended differently. But they plunged forward without any consultation or dialogue, each trying alone to find a point of contact with the divine presence.

So too, today, it is important to think in collective terms. Many of us see social justice—the work of creating a more just and “Godly” world—as a way of approaching God and drawing God nearer to our world. With Nadav and Avihu in mind, it seems that we must engage in this venture in collaboration with others, rather than embarking independently on well-meaning, but ill-planned, social justice projects that benefit few but ourselves.

Many social change organizations around the world understand the importance of working collectively to increase peace and justice in their communities. For example, in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) women are regularly subjected to sexual violence, as rape is used as a weapon of war in the country’s armed conflict. AJWS’s grantee Solidarité des Femmes de Fizi pour le Bien-Etre Familial (SOFIBEF) has recognized that individual women cannot fight this violence alone, so SOFIBEF organizes women into solidarity groups and provides support to them in the form of legal counsel, advocacy training and preparation for employment.⁵

¹ Leviticus 10:1-2.

² Rashi on Leviticus 10:2.

³ Vayikra Rabbah 20:8.

⁴ Leviticus 10:1.

⁵ For more information on SOFIBEF and another AJWS grantee, the League for Congolese Solidarity, see: <http://passblue.com/2013/04/03/helping-congolese-women-one-community-at-a-time/>.

SOFIBEF also understands that women, even working together, cannot solve this problem without also engaging men. The powerful women in the leadership of this group have reached out to the male leaders of their communities to build a partnership that will break the ongoing cycle of violence against women. This partnership engages men by educating them about preventing domestic violence and encouraging them to perform tasks that were traditionally considered female roles but exposed women to the risk of violence, such as collecting wood.

SOFIBEF illustrates the importance of working in collaboration when trying to achieve social change. Within communities throughout DRC, groups of women and men depend on each other and move forward in consultation with the other.

Many of us outside of the DRC have felt hopeless when hearing of the rampant sexual violence that the war-torn country endures, and we have wondered whether there is a role for us to play in ending this violence. Here too, we can take collective action working in partnership with allies both here in the U.S. and in places like DRC to work to stop violence against women and girls.

One way we can do that is to support AJWS's *We Believe* campaign, through which American Jews and other supporters of human rights are working collectively to hold American lawmakers and leaders accountable to enact policies that protect women, girls and LGBT people from violence. The campaign's first target is supporting the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA), which was recently introduced in the House of Representatives. If it passes, IVAWA will ensure that U.S. funding will reach women and girls experiencing violence in places like DRC, and that a portion of this support will go directly to grassroots groups like SOFIBEF.

We Believe is about collaboration—American Jewish activists working with one another to change U.S. policies, and working with NGOs around the world in an effort to make lasting change. Nadav and Avihu didn't recognize the costs of working alone—or the benefits of working in consultation with one another. In trying to appropriate God's presence for themselves, they neglected the need to work collectively. As we work to strengthen God's presence in our world, we cannot afford to do the same.



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