



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Shmini 5773

By Adina Gerver

April 6, 2013

This week's Dvar Tzedek was originally published in 2009.

Parashat Shmini juxtaposes two sacrifices, both offered to God by Israelites in the desert and both summoning Divine fire, but with tragically different consequences. The first series of sacrifices was offered by Aaron and his sons and was rewarded: “the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people” and “[f]ire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar.”¹ The second, incense offered by Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu, elicited God’s wrath and swift punishment: “fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died.”²

The contrast between these two parts of *Parashat Shmini*—one capped off by a holy revelation and a sacrifice-consuming fire and the other by sudden, fiery death—is striking. Why did Nadav and Avihu die? Were they not serving God by offering sacrifices, just as they and their father and brothers had previously?

Ibn Ezra, a medieval commentator, uses the phrase immediately following the description of the brothers’ sacrifice to explain the problem with their offering. Commenting on the words, “which [God] had not enjoined upon them,” he explains that their grave sin lay in doing something that God had not commanded them to do, in contrast to the earlier part of the *parashah*, in which the priests do “as Moses had commanded.”³ It was not so much *what* Nadav and Avihu brought as *why* they brought it—because of their own autonomous desire to worship God, not in response to God’s command.⁴

We can certainly understand this impulse. In our own modern, incense-less version of service, sometimes we respond to an explicit request for aid, while at other times we serve others spontaneously out of a desire to give or effect change in the world. Intuitively, we may feel that service offered out of our own heroic motivation should be more highly regarded than service offered in response to a call for help. After all, there is something a bit coercive about responding when someone asks—it can be difficult to say “no” in the face of suffering—while there is something unboundedly generous about offering help simply because one feels like it. Perhaps spontaneous human outpourings of help should be placed on a level above responses to solicitations. Perhaps, we might think as Nadav and Avihu did, that taking matters into our own hands and proactively offering of ourselves to God or to other people is the highest form of service.

Yet, we may also reason that the best kind of help is the kind that most closely aligns with people’s needs. We see in humanitarian crises, again and again, that help without a directive can do more harm than good. One powerful

¹ Leviticus 9:8-24.

² Leviticus 10:2.

³ Leviticus 10:1.

⁴ Ibn Ezra on Leviticus 10:1. Leviticus 9:21.

example of this was the spontaneous outpouring of individual donations after the tragic tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands and left many more displaced, diseased and destitute in southeast Asia in December 2004.⁵ Some of the unprecedented donations that flowed in after the disaster included things that were clearly of no use to the displaced and homeless in the hot, humid climate of southeast Asia, such as four-inch stilettos and wool blankets. Other contributions seemed useful to well-meaning donors, but were out of touch with progress already made on the ground. Knowing that clean drinking water was urgently needed in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, donors kept sending heavy bottled water long after water purification systems had been set up by aid agencies.⁶

The tragedy of Nadav and Avihu as refracted through Ibn Ezra's focus on commandedness versus volition can teach us something about our service to other people. It tells us, in a horrifyingly stark way, that we must not let generous motives get disconnected from the reality on the ground; that our modern "offerings" are best given thoughtfully in response to explicit needs. As alien as the story of Nadav and Avihu may seem to us, the impulses that it addresses are human ones, familiar to each of us: the urge to quickly offer the help that we want to offer, regardless of what is needed. The harsh punishment meted out to Aaron's sons is not one that I would condone, but the seriousness with which Nadav and Avihu's very human impulses were checked should give us pause. It should compel us to make the effort to find out, from the people we seek to help, exactly what they need before we rush to give.



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⁵ Over 275,000 killed, according to the *United States Geological Survey Press Release*, February 10, 2005. <http://www.usgs.gov/newsroom/article.asp?ID=672>. Over 1.5 million displaced peoples, according to the *World Health Organization Situation Report*, February 2005. http://www.who.int/hac/crises/international/asia_tsunami/sitrep/32/en/.

⁶ "Useless Tsunami Aid Includes Winter Coats," *Associated Press*, February 11, 2005. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6954302/>

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