



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Shmini 5771

By Jimmy Taber

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At times, I find that my fellow social justice activists are tired. Tired from the barrage of need they face daily. Tired from the uphill battle against intractable social problems. Tired from the wearing down of their expectations that sustainable change is possible. Eventually, their emotional capacity for social justice work becomes exhausted. Sometimes it seems that the more they commit to fighting for social justice, the more vulnerable they are to being consumed by an overwhelming feeling of helplessness.

We find a striking parallel to this phenomenon in the story of Nadav and Avihu in *Parshat Shmini*. Immediately following the inauguration of Aaron and his sons,¹ something strange and tragic occurs. In Leviticus 10:1-2 we read: “Now Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which God had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord.”²

It is clear from the language of the text that Nadav and Avihu transgressed the established boundaries of worship. Yet, their motivations are less evident. Why would two members of the priestly class ignore God’s clear instructions for ritual worship?

Eighteenth-century Moroccan Talmudist and kabbalist Chaim ben Moses ibn Attar understands Nadav and Avihu to be driven by a desire to pursue God that could not be contained by established boundaries. Writing in his well known commentary the *Ohr HaChaim*, ibn Attar points to the line in Leviticus 16 that reads: “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.”³ He writes: “They approached the supernal light out of their great love of the Holy, and thereby died. Thus they died by ‘Divine kiss’ such as experienced by the perfectly righteous; the difference is only that the righteous die when the Divine kiss approaches them, while [Nadav and Avihu] died by their approaching it.”⁴ Counter-intuitively, Nadav and Avihu’s deaths were a result of loving God too much.

Their story illustrates that the boundaries for worship established through God’s instructions to Moses are designed, in part, to prevent people from becoming consumed by their passion for the Divine. Significantly, Rashi understands Nadav and Avihu’s destruction to be of the soul and not the body. Commenting on the description of the deceased men being carried from the camp by their tunics,⁵ Rashi writes: “This tells us that their garments had not been destroyed by fire, but their souls alone—as if two strands of fire had entered their nostrils.”⁶ Nadav and Avihu’s clothing and bodies remained intact with no signs of burning; they had been struck by fire inwardly.

¹ Leviticus 9.

² Leviticus 10:1-2.

³ Leviticus 16:1.

⁴ *Ohr HaChaim* on Leviticus 16:1.

⁵ Leviticus 10:5.

⁶ Rashi on Leviticus 10:5.

The description of Nadav and Avihu's fate closely mirrors the experience of the burned-out activist. Like Nadav and Avihu in their overzealous worship, the pursuit of justice can bring us "too close" to relentless suffering and the disappointment of constant setbacks. And like the Divine fire, these encounters can consume our inner passion. Outwardly, the activist in us continues to exist, but our drive to pursue change is significantly diminished.

In order to prevent hopelessness and maintain a productive passion for social change, we must learn to establish boundaries between our activism and our inner selves. This may feel counterintuitive, since the archetypal activist is one who commits his or her entire being to a cause without limitation. But *Parshat Shmini* illustrates that even in the pursuit of our highest values, we must operate within a practical framework that enables us to function.

Our challenge, then, is to find out where our individual boundaries lie, and to learn to approach close enough to our cause to influence positive change, but not so close that we become consumed by it. We must grapple deeply with suffering and injustice, but maintain enough distance in our personal lives to give us the strength to carry on. We must recognize our own tolerance for frustration and ensure that we do not overinvest.

When we fail to respect this boundary, we, like Nadav and Avihu, run the risk of letting our pursuit of social justice consume our souls. By limiting the expression of our passion in the short term through a few protective measures, we extend it and deepen it long into the future.



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