

Humility as a Key to Holiness

Rabbi Yaakov Bieler
Parashat Tetzave

The stated purpose of the Tabernacle.

Among the many details concerning the construction of the Tabernacle, its vessels and furnishings and the clothing of the priests worn while carrying out the Divine service, we find singular verses that define the overall purpose of the Tabernacle. In Parashat Teruma (Shemot 25:8) the Tora states, “And make for Me a Mikdash, and I will Dwell in their midst.” In a similar vein, at the end of Parashat Tetzave, it is written (29:43-46) “And I will Make Myself Known there to the Children of Israel, and it will be sanctified by My Glory. And I will Sanctify the Tent of Meeting and the Altar; and Aharon and his sons I will Sanctify in order to serve Me as My Priests. And I will Dwell in the midst of the Children of Israel and I will Be for them God. And they will know that I am the Lord their God Who Took them out of the land of Egypt in order to place My Presence among them, I am the Lord their God.” The last verse of Shemot informs us how the Divine Plan was turned into a reality when the Tora writes, (40:38) “...the Cloud of HaShem was on the Tabernacle during the day, and fire would be on it during the night, in the sight of the House of Israel throughout all of their journeys.”

When ritual and liturgical reminders of God’s Presence would seem most necessary.

During the epoch devoid of overt miracles, characterized as the state of “Hester Panim” (the hiding of the Face)—see Devarim 31:18—it is readily understandable that Jews would look to create as many artifacts and reminders as possible in order to keep God’s Presence in the forefront of their awareness. RaMBaN has stated in his commentary on Shemot 13:16 that many of the Mitzvot that the Jews are commanded to observe are designed to serve as constant reminders not only of the Existence of HaShem and therefore His Oversight of all that we think, say and do, but also of the Creation as well as the great miracles that were performed on their behalf during the Exodus and their forty years of wandering in the desert prior to their arrival in Canaan. RaMBaN explains that since clear-cut supernatural events did not take place regularly even prior to the Divine Withdrawal referenced above in Devarim 31, God Deemed it important for Jews to remind themselves via Mitzva performance and references in our liturgy, of what HaShem has Done and what He hopefully will Continue to Do, if not now, then in the near future.

Why at the point of Jewish history recorded in Shemot, such a need is more difficult to understand.

But one would think that immediately following the Exodus,¹ when the Jews had just recently been eye-witnesses to the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the

¹There is a dispute regarding the timing of the Commandment to build the Tabernacle, focusing upon whether or not we are to assume that the Tora’s Parashiot follow precisely the chronological order of events as they transpired in the desert. Some maintain that the Tabernacle is a direct response to the sin of the Golden Calf, God Recognizing that some sort of tangible representation of His Presence would be necessary in order to curtail the tendency on the part of the people, be they the “Eiruv Rav” (the mixed multitude), or even the Jews themselves, to fabricate some sort of focal point for their devotions. But others, faithfully following the order of the verses that place Parashiot Teruma and Tetzave BEFORE the

sweetening of bitter waters, the introduction of Manna as a daily staple, the producing of water from a boulder and the victory over Amalek, creating reminders of the immanent Presence of God would not be necessary. Can one become so “used” to supernatural clouds, pillars of fire, the raining down of manna—particularly the contrast between the double portions on “Erev Shabbat” and “Erev Yom Tov” as opposed to the rest of the week, and the rotting of leftovers when attempts are made to save them from one day to the next—, etc., to the point that a structure is needed so that the people will “remember” HaShem? If one might maintain that a Mikdash—“Gadol” (lit. great, i.e., the Tabernacle/Temple) or “Me’at” (lit. small, i.e., the synagogue and/or Beit Midrash)—is called for when “Nisim Geluyim” (overt miracles) are a thing of the past, is this true when prophecy and miraculous interventions are part of daily experience? Why is man’s cognitive awareness of and belief in the Divine Presence so tenuous and fleeting, that it can only be maintained when there is a structure that is unambiguously associated with a this-worldly manifestation of the Divine Presence?

Indications that the presence of the Tabernacle did not serve to sufficiently heighten the people’s awareness of God’s Presence in their midst.

And if we have to assume that even the people of the Exodus become inured to overt miracles, they apparently can similarly become desensitized with respect to God’s Closeness as represented by the Mishkan. When we look ahead to Sefer BaMidbar, we see in light of the sins involving the quail (11:1 ff.), the spies (13:1 ff.), Korach (16:1 ff.), and even Moshe and Aharon’s improper hitting of the rock to extract water (20:1 ff.), that the presence of the Mishkan did not do all that much to ameliorate behavior devoid of a sense of God’s Presence and Concern.²

Getting the people’s attention via a different, more traumatic, means.

Recognizing man’s fickleness and predilection for overlooking his spiritual responsibilities despite God’s Providing him with multiple reminders in varied forms and contexts that s/he should maintain high levels of spirituality and “Yirat Shamayim” (fear of Heaven), may have contributed to a darker theme that the Rabbis associate with the Mishkan in particular and Judaism as a lifestyle in general. The phrase at the end of 29:43, “VeNikdash BiChevodi”, which I translated above as “and it will be sanctified by My Glory”, is homiletically rendered by Zevachim 115b, quoted by RaShI on Chumash, “BeMechubadai” (by those who honor Me), i.e., the holiness of the Tabernacle will be definitively established by means of a significant incident affecting as yet unidentified individuals who are closely associated with Me.

This piece of information was conveyed by the Holy One, Blessed be He, to Moshe, but he did not know to whom this was referring, until the deaths of the sons of Aharon. Moshe (then) said to Aharon, (VaYikra 10:3 “And Moshe said to Aharon, ‘This is what Hashem Spoke, Saying ‘BeKrovai’ [by means of those close to Me] I will be Sanctified and before the entire nation I will be Honored...’”) “Aharon, my brother, your sons died for no other reason than to sanctify the Name of the Holy One, Blessed be He.”

incident of the Calf in Parashat Ki Tisa, claim that the Mishkan was always intended to be constructed, Golden Calf or not. It is this latter position that is, in my opinion, the more curious of the two.

²Had there not been a Mishkan, would we assume that the people would have acted that much more improperly!?

Hypotheses regarding what brought about the deaths of two of Aharon's sons.

The precise cause of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu during the dedication of the Tabernacle in VaYikra 10 is subject to much speculation. While the Biblical text in 10:11 explicitly mentions Aharon's sons improperly lighting an "Eish Zara" (an alien fire) as the catalyst for a Divine Fire leaping from the altar and incinerating them (10:12), Rabbinic literature³ is rife with hypotheses regarding various fundamental errors in judgment and/or negative attitudes on their parts which in turn led them to create the illegal flame.

Torat Kohanim (Midrash Halacha on VaYikra):

- a. They failed to first ask their father Aharon whether what they intended to do was permitted.
- b. They omitted consulting with their teacher Moshe.
- c. They did not consult or discuss the merits and debits of the plan with one another.
- d. What they did was not technically incorrect in terms of itself. However, because HaShem had as yet not Commanded that this specific action be carried out, the fire was considered illegal.

VaYikra Rabba, Chapt. 20

- e. They went into the Holy of Holies without permission.
- f. The sacrifice (as opposed to the source of the fire) that they offered had not as yet been commanded to be offered.
- g. They were not wearing the appropriate garments required for performing the sacrifice that they carried out.
- h. They had not properly washed their hands and feet prior to entering the Mishkan.

Eiruvim 63a

- i. By carrying out this action, in effect they taught a Halacha in the presence of Moshe their teacher, thereby acting disrespectfully before him.

Midrash HaGadol

- j. When they saw that as a result of actions undertaken by Moshe and Aharon, a fire came down from Heaven, they wished to try to cause the same thing to take place.

Esther Rabba 5:1

- k. In light of the instruction immediately following this incident (VaYikra 10:9) "Wine and beer they (the Kohanim) should not drink", it can be concluded that Nadav and Avihu were intoxicated at the time that they brought the alien fire.

Sanhedrin 52a

³The possibilities mentioned below are cited in Tora Shleima, R. Menachem Kasher, Vol. 28 on Parashat Shmini, p. 2 ff.

- I. When Moshe and Aharon were walking, Nadav and Avihu walked behind them. Nadav said to Avihu, “When will these elders finally die and you and I can then take over and guide the generation?”

Identifying a common theme within the possibilities suggested by the Rabbis.

While each of these explanations focuses upon a specific issue regarding interrelationships between people, the treatment of the Mishkan, and the nature of God’s Commandments, were one to attempt to identify a common element underlying these hypotheses, it would appear to be a lack of respect for authority and holiness. Whether the authority of parents (a, j, l), teachers (b, i, l), peers (c), HaShem (d, f) and/or the holiness of the Tabernacle (e, g, h), Nadav and Avihu were severely lacking in the sensibility of respect for those older or Divine as well as things holy to the point where they committed a fatal error. The following source presents a Divine Rationale for why Aharon sons’ action could not be forgiven by HaShem:

Midrash HaGadol⁴

Isi ben Yehuda says: The only reason why Nadav and Avihu died was in order to sanctify the Name of the Holy One, Blessed be He. This was intended to not mislead the people of the world, and allow them to think that the Divine Presence was to be Found within the Tabernacle only when the thick cloud was descended upon it, a conclusion that would be reached if Nadav and Avihu could enter the Holy of Holies without permission and suffer no consequence as a result.

A parable: To what is this similar? A king who builds a palace, decorates it, and sets up a throne at its center. A servant in the palace enters the throne room, places a crown atop his head and sits on the throne. The king said, “If I am forgiving to this individual, all of my servants will do the same as he has done. In the end, my honor will be compromised.” Immediately he instructed his executioner who proceeded to decapitate the offender. And if this is what happens to those who are close to the king, much more terrible consequences are in store for those who are removed from him...

An earlier incident that may reflect a similar less-than-positive attitude.

If VaYikra 10 would be thought to describe the very first time that Nadav and Avihu make an error with respect to the Divine Service and fail to demonstrate proper respect for authority, then the capital punishment they receive could be questioned as unduly harsh (unless we invoke the principle that the righteous are held accountable to such a high standard that even a hairbreadth’s deviation on a single occasion can prove irreversible).⁵ The Rabbinic commentators appear to prefer to posit that the bringing of an alien fire on the parts of Nadav and Avihu in VaYikra was a continuation of an earlier indication already evident in Sefer Shemot. At the end of Shemot 24, an extremely direct Divine Revelation experienced not only by Moshe, but also by a number of the Jewish dignitaries and leaders, is described. (24:10) “And they saw the God of Israel, and beneath His Feet was a sapphire brickwork, and as clear as the heavens in its clarity.” Yet the response of most of those privileged to view this event appears to be amazingly inappropriate. (24:11) “And against ‘Atzilei’ (men of status) of the Children of Israel,

⁴Tora Shleima p. 8.

⁵E.g., BaMidbar Rabba 20:24.

He did not Extend His Hand (Hashem did not punish these individuals, [implying that in fact they were deserving of punishment]), and they saw God and they ATE and they DRANK.” RaShI identifies the “Atzilim” as including Nadav and Avihu, who therefore already had “one”, or perhaps even “two strikes” against them, when they went into the Mishkan with their alien fire.

What sort of mindset might have been shared by Nadav and Avihu that contributed to their negative actions?

How might we understand why people like Nadav and Avihu, based upon their behavior in Shemot 24 and VaYikra 10, would not be caught up in the fear and awe of God that according to Shemot 20:15 ff. seemed to affect most of the rest of the Jewish people who had experienced the Revelation at Sinai? A final Midrashic hypothesis regarding their deaths in VaYikra 10 could be viewed as shedding light on the psychological state of mind that manifested itself on that fateful day in the Mishkan. On BaMidbar 3:4 “And Nadav and Avihu died before HaShem while they were offering up an alien fire before HaShem in the Sinai desert, and they had NO CHILDREN...”, VaYikra Rabba 20 asserts, “...They had no children...Aba Chanin says because they had no wives...” Pesikta D’Rav Kahana 26:9 provides an explanation for their disinterest in marriage and family:

R. Levi said: They were “Shachatzim” (arrogant individuals). Many single women were sitting depressed, waiting for them to show any interest. And what did they say to them? “My father’s brother is a king; my mother’s brother is the head of his tribe; our father is the High Priest; we are both Assistant High Priests. What woman would be worthy of us?”

This Midrash contends that Nadav and Avihu were extremely full of themselves due to their genealogy and social position, and for this reason, were unable to feel deferential not only towards their father and teacher, but even towards HaShem Himself and all that was associated with Him. They could not imagine anything that they might do as being unacceptable or inappropriate. In contrast to Moshe, who when seeing the burning bush is overwhelmed by the holiness of the vision,⁶ and who does not eat or drink for forty days while on Sinai,⁷ Nadav and Avihu do not see the need to restrain themselves from any bodily indulgence, even while looking at the Divine, or personal whim during the dedication of the Tabernacle. The view that they were inebriated (k. above) when engaging in the Divine Service would appear to echo the earlier theme in Shemot most acutely. But if we interpret the earlier eating and drinking as indicative of a general lack of propriety, deference and respect, rather than a propensity for hedonism and self-indulgence, the other hypotheses fall into place as well. Nadav and Avihu thought of themselves as superior to their parents, teachers, and God, and therefore were uninterested in taking direction or even complying with instructions concerning how one is to prepare and what is to be worn during the “Avoda” (the Divine Service in the Temple).

A commentator’s perceptive understanding of the connection between the concept of the Tabernacle and the deaths of Aharon’s sons during its dedication.

A particularly evocative conceptual framework for the confluence of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu and the dedication of the Mishkan is offered by Tora Temima in several places

⁶Shemot 3:2-5.

⁷Shemot 24:18; 34:28; Devarim 9:9, 11, 18.

throughout his commentary.⁸ R. Epstein posits that since the main focus of the Tabernacle was to provide a venue whereby an individual could offer sacrifices in order to atone for past sins, a false impression could be gained regarding the extent to which HaShem Holds accountable those who are in violation of His Law. On the one hand, it is understandable that HaShem's Compassion causes Him to prefer that a sinner repent rather than suffer punishment for his/her wrongdoing. This is precisely what Beruria tells her husband R. Meir after he becomes angry at some individuals who were harassing him:

Berachot 10a

What do you think? Since it is written (Tehillim 104:35) "The 'CHATA'IM' (sins) should be obliterated from the earth and the evil doers should be no more. My soul will bless HaShem, Praise HaShem", does it say "CHOTIM" (sinners)? Furthermore, continue on to the end of the verse, "...evil doers should be no more"—as soon as the sins are obliterated, are the evil doers no more? But rather pray on their behalves, and then the evil doers will be no more. He prayed for them, and they repented.

Yet precisely because the Jewish people are given by God in the form of the Mishkan and its sacrificial cult a means for atonement for their sins, instead of appreciating their good fortune and God's Generosity, they might instead come to conclude that HaShem does not Hold people truly accountable for their actions. If all can be forgiven all the time, then standards become non-existent. If avoiding sin on a regular basis is difficult, and if everything is redeemable and changeable, why not act carelessly and spontaneously, knowing all along that should things turn out badly, one can always "make it up"? It appears that Nadav and Avihu, and by extension, others among the Children of Israel, were the types of people whom R. Chanina had in mind when he says, (Bava Kama 50a) "Whomever claims that God is a 'Vatran' (one who does not care about infractions) will be 'Mevater' (will not preserve) his/her own life, as it is said, (Devarim 32:4) 'The Rock, all of His Actions are Perfect, because all of his Ways are Justice.'" Consequently, to definitively and unequivocally negate such a potentially negative spiritual mindset, God Chooses to make examples of Aharon's two sons and thereby impress upon the entire nation that with respect to how the Mishkan and its sacrifices are to be approached, great care and precision must be exercised. Regrettably, in light of subsequent transgressions, it would appear that this lesson was also lost on the people, at least those who had been slaves at the time of the Exodus, and eventually died out during the desert wanderings.

Maintaining an awareness of God's Presence as well as His Expectations of each of us.

Being able to properly balance believing in and appreciating HaShem's Chesed (Compassion) with remaining reverential and deferential to Divine Holiness is one of the essential challenges of the Jewish religious experience. At least according to Tora Temima, the story of Nadav and Avihu becomes a cautionary tale that continues to be meaningful up to the present day, even in the absence of a Mikdash and the rite of sacrifices. Just as special care must be taken concerning any and all conduct taking place within the Mishkan, regardless of a person's importance or social standing, how we conduct ourselves in each of the "Mikdash Me'at"'s (the micro-Mikdash, i.e., synagogues and Batei Midrash) that we regularly attend, as well as when we do not find ourselves in such contexts, says a great deal about our faith and relationship with HaShem.

⁸E.g., Shemot 29:43 #34; VaYikra 10:3 #3.