

# Don't Cross That Line!

## A D'var Torah on *Parashat Sh'mini* (Lev. 9:1 – 11:47)

By Michele Walot

*“Vay’hi bayom ha-sh’mini kara Moshe l’Aharon ul’vanav ul’zik’nei Yisrael.”*  
*“On the eighth day, Moses summoned Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel.”*

***“Now Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Abihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it and laid incense on it; and they offered before Adonai alien fire, which He had not commanded them.”***<sup>1</sup>

*Parashat Sh'mini* opens with Moses consecrating Aaron and his sons as priests (Kohanim) on the eighth day of the ordination ceremonies. Next, Aaron offers up animal sacrifices for himself and the people of Israel. Aaron then comes out of the Tent of Meeting and blesses the people, whereupon the Presence of the Adonai is felt by all, and divine fire appears and consumes the offering on the altar.

In their zeal, and without consulting either Moses or Aaron, Aaron’s two eldest sons, Nadav and Abihu, decide on their own to make an offering to God of incense and fire.<sup>2</sup> They are immediately struck down by streams of fire through their nostrils and are cooked. Moses warns Aaron and his family not to show their grief, and Aaron remains silent through the horrific aftermath.

What must Aaron have been thinking and feeling after this momentous tragedy? Here it was the happiest day of his life: He was the newly ordained High Priest, God had shown him forgiveness for the Golden Calf fiasco, and his sons were following in the family “business.” But then — ZAP! Two of his sons are internally incinerated (with body and clothes left intact), and he must keep a stiff upper lip! What is going on?

Midrashim offer explanations of the circumstances — how Nadav and Abihu overstepped their authority — that merited such severe punishment.

- From Midrash *Leviticus Rabba* 20:8:

Bar Kappara in the name of Rabbi Jeremiah ben Eleazar said: Aaron’s sons died on account of four things:

- 1) For drawing near to the holy place in the innermost sanctuary
- 2) For offering the incense without being commanded to offer it
- 3) For the strange fire from the kitchen

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 10:1.

<sup>2</sup> According to Rabbi Yishmael, although the fire was from the altar, it was alien because Nadav and Abihu were not authorized to offer it. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, holds that the fire was *literally* alien because it did not come from the altar.

4) For not having taken counsel from each other, implying that each acted on his own initiative

● From Midrash *Leviticus Rabba* 20:9:

Rabbi Mani of She'ab, Rabbi Joshua of Siknin, and Rabbi Johanan said: the sons of Aaron died for these four reasons:

- 1) Because they had drunk wine before entering the Tent of Meeting (see Leviticus 10:9)
- 2) Because they lacked the prescribed number of garments (see Exodus 28:43), especially the robe that jingled when the priest walked, as described for Aaron in Exodus 28:35
- 3) Because they entered the sanctuary without washing their hands and feet (see Exodus 30:20-21)
- 4) Because they had no children and were not even married (see Numbers 3:4), supposedly because of arrogance that no woman was good enough

Imagine Aaron reeling from the catastrophic death of his sons who were considered very righteous men! What thoughts would have crossed Aaron's mind as he pondered a God who had very little tolerance for any deviation in worship outside of strict boundaries? Does living inside an electrified fence come to mind? Literally, one false move and you are dead. The Hebrew People were used to living in a world with capricious deities, but there had been an overriding leap in sophistication with a monotheistic system after Abraham. Individuals were supposed to matter more now, weren't they?

How do we come to understand what is right and moral? Nadav and Abihu probably were wrapped up in religious fervor after God's Presence had provided fire for the sacrifice Aaron had offered. It is unlikely that they deliberately tried to insult the deity who had performed so many astonishing miracles. The Israelites were still learning the specifics of worship technique with a brand new Mishkan. They were only recently out of slavery, where their abilities to make decisions were severely limited. And, after all, Nadav and Abihu had just been ordained that day. In that light, can we not explain away the behavior of Nadav and Abihu and pardon their infraction?

We teach our children to follow the commandments and to strive to repair a broken world through learning and tzedakah. What societal forces reassure us that we are on a righteous path? Tragic stories abound in our world with diseases, famine, natural disasters, and massacres, as present in our world as in these Biblical stories. If anything, our modern world can bring more death and destruction from weapons of mass destruction and the degradation of the environment. What tells us when we are about to cross the line between sacred and profane, or will we blunder into being zapped without a clue?

The Asian tsunami of December 2004 left hundreds of thousands dead in eleven countries. The death and destruction continued as diseases took hold, resulting from the contaminated water, soil and air during the gradual rebuilding of these devastated areas. The psychological devastation to all ages can continue for decades or even lifetimes from this experience. How can we help turn this catastrophe into an opportunity to extend and increase the international cooperation that we see as a response? Does the sheer magnitude of this calamity just numb us into complacency?

Aid from governments around the world poured in, as well as aid from individuals and organizations, but what happens in six months? What about the next famine or massacre? Should the response to an earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area differ from the response to a massacre in the Sudan?

There is a famous quote<sup>3</sup> about how the death of an individual is a tragedy but the death of millions is a statistic. Why should it matter who the dead are?

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Stalin's comment to Winston Churchill at Potsdam in 1945: "The death of one man is a tragedy. The death of millions is a statistic."