



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת שמיני תש"ע 5770 Parshas Shemini

THE FIERY RODS OF RETRIBUTION

The tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aharon Hakohein, is a most striking feature in this week's *parshah* – if not one of the most mysterious. Chazal offer numerous opinions as to the exact nature of the sin they perpetrated, which resulted in their untimely death, some of which will be enumerated below. The depth of this subject, in truth, is quite massive, and a full elucidation of the profound issues it raises is well beyond the purview of this venue. One thing that is clear is that these two brothers were extremely pious, and this particular transgression was the only one of which they were guilty (*Vayikra Rabbah 20:8*).

What we focus on here is the intriguing nature in which their sentence was carried out. The Torah relates how – at the culmination of the inaugural ceremonies for the Mishkan – “A fire descended from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem” (*Vayikra 10:2*). Chazal provide a vivid depiction of the workings of this Heavenly fire:

“Two strands of fire shot out of the Holy of Holies and then divided into four; two of the strands entered the nostrils of one (of the brothers), while the other two strands entered the nostrils of the other. Their souls were incinerated, while their bodies remained intact,” (*Sanhedrin 52a*).

SERPENTINE SUBSTITUTION

R'Yonasan Eyebshitz provides a fascinating explanation as to why this particular method of retribution was visited upon them. His comments are based on the

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opinion (mentioned in *Eruvin 63a*) that their sin had to do with the fact that they took the liberty to render a *halachic* decision in the presence of their mentor (to whom they should have deferred).

The prescribed punishment for this transgression (of ruling in the presence of one's *rebbe*) is that the perpetrator is bitten by a snake (*Eruvin, ibid.*). Administering this particular form of retribution became an issue in the desert, however, due to a somewhat “technical” factor: the desert snakes had all been rendered extinct.

Chazal tell us elsewhere (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah 3:5*) that – in response to the Jews' fear of the local serpent population – Hashem offered special protection and extirpated the slithering reptiles. This He accomplished by employing none other than these extraordinary celestial flaming rods. He dispatched two strands of fire – which separated into four parts – to exterminate the scaled creatures.

And so, when Nadav and Avihu became liable for death by snakebite, there were no available snakes to administer the sentence. Instead then, the agents that had been responsible for the snakes' removal – i.e., the fire-strands – assumed responsibility and carried out the punishment in place of the serpentine dispensers of justice (*Ya'aros D'vash, vol.2, sec. 17*).

FORBIDDEN FEAST FOR THE EYES

An alternative possibility for the selection of this particular form of capital punishment may be

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gleaned from another of the opinions concerning their transgression. According to some, the sin for which Nadav and Avihu incurred the death penalty actually occurred *prior* to the events of this *parshah*. The Medrash states that the brothers' sin consisted of the fact that they gazed at Hashem's Presence back at Har Sinai – וְזָנוּ עֵינֵיהֶם מִן הַשְּׁכִינָה. In order to avoid marring the great joy of the giving of the Torah, Hashem delayed their punishment until this later time (*Vayikra Rabbah* 20:10).

It would seem particularly appropriate, then, that their punishment came from the Holy of Holies. The same phraseology is used in connection with this hallowed place, as we see from the Mishnah in Middos (4:5):

וְלוֹלֵךְ הָיוּ פְתוּחִין בְּעֵלְיָה לְבֵית קֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדָשִׁים, שְׁבָהוּ הָיוּ מְשֻׁלְשָׁלִין אֶת הָאוֹמָנִים בְּתַבּוֹת, כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יִזְוֹנוּ עֵינֵיהֶן מִבֵּית קֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדָשִׁים.

“Openings were situated in the upper chamber (above the Sanctuary), leading to the Holy of Holies. Through these openings, the workers were lowered in enclosed boxes, in order that their eyes be shielded from taking in the sight of the Holy of Holies.”

The *Tiferes Yisrael (ibid.)* explains that repairing the walls of the Holy of Holies presented a particular challenge, as the maintenance crew was forbidden to view the very sanctum that they had to repair. Therefore, through a system of ropes and receptacles, they were lowered into the Holy of Holies in a three-sided chest, whose only open side faced the wall that needed repairs. In this way, the work would get done, while the panorama of the sanctum would be blocked from the workers' view by the remaining sides of the box.

In a well-known passage, the Ramban (*beginning of parshas Terumah*) provides a telling characterization of the Mishkan. The purpose of the Mishkan, the Ramban contends, was to provide a continuum for

the Revelation at Sinai. In other words, Hashem's Shechinah (Presence) was revealed and “dwelled” on Har Sinai. Following that event, this Manifestation of Hashem's Presence was to continue within the Mishkan. And the most intense encapsulation of the Shechinah takes place, of course, inside the Holy of Holies.

We see, then, that the punishment visited upon the sons of Aharon was particularly fitting. They feasted their eyes, inappropriately, on the pristine holiness of the Shechinah. In keeping with the principle of *middah k'negged middah* (measure for measure), this very Shechinah became the source of their ultimate retribution. The objects of their demise poured forth from the chamber that contained the greatest manifestation of the Presence upon which they had cast their unauthorized gaze.

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