

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Shmini

Together We Stand

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 20:8) discusses the tragedy of the death of Aharon's two sons, Nadav and Avihu who brought unauthorized firepans into the Holy of Holys and perished. There we find a perplexing comment, "their sin was that they did not ask advice one from another."

What Was Their Sin?

It is clear from other sources (see Rashi) that their sin revolved around them taking the law into their own hands and their decision to serve God according to their own personal agenda. They also failed to ask Moses and Aaron for their perspective. How then can the Midrash state that their sin was in not communicating between each other? More so, each one performed the same "holy act" and thus certainly would have endorsed the other ones actions as well?! What does the Midrash mean that they should have consulted one another?!

Personal Bias

What emerges is a powerful lesson. Sometimes in life we are so caught up in what we are doing that we cannot see our own faults. This is why it is so important to have a friend and mentor whom we can turn to for advice. More so, human nature is that if someone describes something to us, we are able to clearly and truthfully define it as wrong and against our ethical conscience. However, when it is then pointed out that we are doing this exact thing, we can often conjure up many justifications and explanations.

Respecting Others

Another insight found here expresses a different aspect of their sin. If they were both trying to serve God in this special way, why did they not do it together? The answer is that they lacked respect for one another; they had no appreciation for the other's input. Perhaps each would have indeed endorsed the other's act, but there was no unity among them to even allow them to ask! Each one didn't care what the other had to say.



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A Special Father

It is most interesting that this lesson is stressed by Aaron the High Priest's own children. Aaron's Yahrtzeit (death anniversary, 1 Av) is the only death date mentioned in all of the Torah. Why is this so? The month of Av signifies the mourning of the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, temple. The Mikdash was destroyed because of Sinat Chinam, unwarranted hate between the Jews. Aaron's trait was to passionately pursue peace (see Pirkey Avot). Hence, his death date, Av, serves as a powerful reminder of our job to instill peace between us. His sons were punished for not upholding the family trait.

Connection

Interestingly, a direct parallel is found by the holy Arizal (R' Issac Luria, b. 1534, great kabbalist) who died on 5 Av in the year 1572. Before his death, he warned his students that if they did not stop bickering, he would perish. They were lax in this warning and after a heated fight broke out among his disciple's wives and spread to the men as well, the Arizal announced that because of the lack of unity his fate had just been sealed. He perished immediately after. The Torah, and especially the deepest secrets of Torah, can only be acquired through shalom, peace and achdut, brotherhood.

Indeed, we are now in the Sefirat HaOmer mourning period. It was in this time period that Rabbi Akiva's students perished on account that they did not accord proper respect to each other. Rabbi Akiva was the leader of his generation in Torah and the teacher of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, author of the Zohar. Torah could only be transmitted through love and respect for one another.

It comes as no surprise that the Arizal himself states that one who reads the story of the death of Aaron's sons when it is read on Yom Kippur and is moved by it, will merit a year of life! One who internalizes the lesson of respect and care for our brethren has earned the privilege to be a link in our chain of Torah transmission.

Shabbat Shalom!

