YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat SHEMINI**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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**Dedicated in memory of Sidney Gontownik z"l**

**brother of Jerry Gontownik, on the occasion of**

**Sidney's fifteenth yahrzeit, on the 24th of Nissan.**

**May his memory be for a blessing. - The Gontownik Family**

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**What Was the Sin of Nadav and Avihu?**

Summarized by Nadav Schultz

Translated by David Strauss

The Torah’s sparse account of Aharon’s sons Nadav and Avihu left *Chazal* plenty of room to discuss the nature of their sin, and at least fourteen different explanations have been offered. We will try to classify these explanations, through a broad overview, into three main groups.

The first set of explanations assumes the sin of Nadav and Avihu stemmed from improper entry, without the proper seriousness, into the sanctuary. Among the explanations in this group are the views that they entered while intoxicated or unkempt, or without the requisite priestly garments.

The second group assumes the sin of the sons of Aharon lay in their desire to replace the previous generation of leadership – Moshe and Aharon. An example of this idea is found in a *midrash* that says they sinned by "ruling on a halakhic issue in the presence of their teacher."[[1]](#footnote-1) Another opinion in this group explains:

Moshe and Aharon were walking ahead, and Nadav and Avihu were walking behind them, and all of Israel were after them, and [Nadav and Avihu] said: "When will these two old men die, so that we shall wield authority over the community in their stead?" (*Vayikra Rabba*, *Acharei Mot* 10)

The third group of explanations for the sin may be familiar from Rashi’s commentary on the book of *Devarim*:

"To destroy him" – this denotes the extermination of ones' children, as it is stated: "And I destroyed his fruit [offspring] from above" (*Amos* 2:9). "And I prayed also for Aharon" – and my prayer availed to atone half, so that only two of his sons died, and two remained alive. (Rashi, *Devarim* 9:20)

According to this understanding, the sin of Nadav and Avihu is linked to an earlier sin, for which their father was the one who held primary responsibility – the sin of the golden calf.

I will propose another explanation, which is based on the third approach mentioned above but weaves together all three groups.

The day of the dedication of the *Mishkan*,described in our *parasha*, is strongly linked to the sin of the golden calf. The *parasha* opens with a command directed toward Aharon:

And he said to Aharon: Take for yourself a calf of the herd for a sin-offering, and a ram for a burnt-offering, both without blemish, and offer them before the Lord. (*Vayikra* 9:2)

Aharon is commanded to offer a calf as a sin-offering, a sacrifice which is not found anywhere else in the Torah. The Midrash, echoed by Rashi, noted the puzzling nature of this offering:

"Take for yourself a calf" – this informs us that the Holy One, blessed be He, atoned for him by way of this calf for the calf that he had fashioned. (Rashi, *Vayikra* 9:2)

Thus, the eighth day was not only the day of the dedication of the *Mishkan*, but was also a day of atonement for Aharon and the nation for the sin of the golden calf. A few verses later, the Torah describes the ensuing events as follows:

And Aharon lifted up his hands toward the people, and **blessed** them; and he came down from offering the sin-offering and the burnt-offering and the peace-offerings. And Moshe and Aharon went into the Tent of Meeting, and they came out and **blessed** the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. (*Vayikra* 9:22-23)

Aharon concluded the sacrifice of the offerings and blessed the people – presumably with the Priestly Blessing. But then Moshe and Aharon entered the Tent of Meeting, after which they blessed the people together – and only after this second blessing did the *Shekhina* appear to the people. Rashi cites a *midrash* that addresses the double blessing of Aharon, and why he needed to enter the Tent of Meeting with Moshe:

"And they came out and blessed the people" – They said [the words at the end of *Tehillim* 90, the psalm called a "prayer of Moshe"]: "May the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us" (*Tehillim* 90:17) – i.e., may it be God's will that the *Shekhina* rest upon the work of your hands – because during all seven days of the dedication, when Moshe was setting up the *Mishkan* and ministering in it and dismantling it daily, the *Shekhina* did not rest in it, and the Israelites felt ashamed, saying to Moshe: "O, our teacher Moshe! All our efforts were only [so] that the *Shekhina* would dwell among us and we would know that the sin of the golden calf was atoned for us!" (Rashi, ad loc.)

The nation was in a state of high tension: had atonement been achieved for the sin of the golden calf, or not? For seven days, Moshe ministered in the *Mishkan*, and at the end of each day, the *Mishkan* was dismantled without the *Shekhina* having rested upon it. The pressure in the nation was mounting, and the fear arose that God had not forgiven them for the sin of the golden calf. But then Moshe and Aharon entered the Tent of Meeting and came out to bless the people, at which point the glory of the Lord appeared to the people and a fire came from heaven to consume the offering. The people’s fear subsided, as they now knew that God had forgiven them for the sin of the calf.

However, it is possible to imagine another way of dealing with the unbearable anxiety and tension, which perhaps was chosen by Nadav and Avihu. Instead of doing nothing and tensely waiting for the revelation of the *Shekhina* and atonement for the sin of the golden calf, the sons of Aharon decided to stand up and do something. On the face of it, there is nothing more appropriate than the action that they took. The whole point of the *Mishkan* is that human efforts should bring about the resting of the *Shekhina*, especially with regard to the continual fire on the altar – concerning which the law is that "Even though fire descends from heaven, it is [still] a *mitzva* to bring from ordinary [fire]."[[2]](#footnote-2) Why, then, were the sons of Aharon punished with death from Heaven; what did they do wrong?

Let us now return to Aharon and Moshe. When fire did not descend from heaven immediately following Aharon's blessing, they too reacted to the difficulty, but in a different way: they entered the Tent of Meeting and prayed to God, based on their understanding that the only thing that the sacrifice lacked at that point was prayer. Instead of taking physical action, they prayed and waited for God to do His will.

In the end, we see that Moshe and Aharon were correct; the proper course of action was not to attempt to "hurry" the revelation, but to wait with patient anticipation, despite the mounting tension.

Another Biblical example of the importance of waiting can be seen in David's war against the Pelishtim:

And the Pelishtim came up yet again, and spread themselves in the valley of Refa'im. And when David inquired of the Lord, He said: “You shall not go up. Make a circuit behind them, and come upon them over against the mulberry trees. And it shall be, when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the mulberry trees, then you shall take action, for then the Lord will have gone out before you to smite the camp of the Pelishtim. And David did so, as the Lord commanded him, and smote the Pelishtim from Geva until the approach to Gezer. (II *Shmuel* 5:22-25)

God makes a very difficult demand of David: he must wait with his troops for the opportune moment, which apparently depended on a heavenly sign, and only then attack the Pelishti camp. We can only try to imagine how frightening that wait must have been, with all their instincts screaming to attack the enemy so close at hand. But David withstood the test, and his success brought about a great salvation and the removal of the Pelishti threat from Jerusalem.

We can also point to an earlier case in the reverse – when Shaul was commanded to wait for Shmuel's arrival at Gilgal[[3]](#footnote-3) before engaging in battle with the Pelishtim, but he failed to do so. Shaul's inability to wait for God's word (through the prophet), in the face of tension and anticipation, was one of the leading factors in his being deposed from the kingship.

Of course, the sin of the golden calf is the prime example of the problem of hastiness and an inability to wait. There, the Torah describes:

And the people saw that Moshe delayed to come down from the mountain, and the people gathered together against Aharon, and said to him: Rise [and] make us a god who shall go before us; for as for this Moshe, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him. (*Shemot* 32:1)

Ultimately, the people could not wait, and so they demanded of Aharon that he fashion another god for them – the golden calf. This is the most serious sin in the history of the Jewish people.

And now we can understand the connection between the sin of the sons of Aharon and the sin of the golden calf, as both stemmed from the same root.

The ability to wait is not simply a good quality. There are times when a person is tested in his relationship to God: there are moments when a person is powerless to act. In those moments, he must look to his Creator, pray, and wait. The call might seem overwhelming; man's nature is to act in order to influence reality. But at certain moments, God lacks nothing except the very expectation and hope that He will save the person in trouble. At those moments, there is no room for any action, but only for the ability to wait patiently, despite the difficulty, until God acts.

This also connects to the first two sets of explanations of the sin of Nadav and Avihu. First, Nadav and Avihu's desire to inherit the leadership stemmed from their desire for more *active* leadership. However, God desired Moshe and Aharon, who knew not to be alarmed by the fact that the *Shekhina* did not descend, but rather to continue praying until God would relent.

The view that they did not enter the sanctuary with the necessary seriousness also fits in with this approach, for the necessity of waiting is bound up with the necessity of being able to prepare oneself. If a person is in a hurry to enter the sanctuary and is not interested in waiting, it is to be expected that he will not prepare himself properly. Consequently, it is to be expected that if he does enter the sanctuary, he will do so without the requisite seriousness.

A person must always strive to further Divine goals in the world. But there comes a time when one knows there is nothing more he can do. When that time comes, there is nothing to do but to raise one’s eyes to Heaven, offer a prayer, and await salvation. If he is so fortunate as to merit God's favor, then the verse in our *parasha* will be fulfilled for him too – "And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people."

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Shemini* 5779.]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. See, e.g., *Eiruvin* 63a, cited by Rashi on *Vayikra* 10:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Eiruvin* 63a, and thus ruled the Rambam (*Hilkhot Temidin u-Musafin* 2:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I *Shmuel* 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)