

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

MAY 20, 2023

This week's Insights is dedicated in commemoration of the yahrzeit of Todros ben Shlomo, Theodore (Teddy) Groll, a wonderful, loving father who is much loved and missed by all. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS BAMIDBAR

Ethics of Our Fathers

They proved their lineage according to their families and their fathers' houses (Bamidbar 1:18).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that every individual in Bnei Yisroel was required to bring proof of his lineage at this time, establishing the *shevet* to which he belonged. Yalkut Shimoni (*Bamidbar* 1-684) states further that the nations of the world actually asked Hashem to give them the Torah as well, but Hashem refused to grant their request because they were unable to establish their own genealogy. Why is the establishment of genealogy a prerequisite to receiving the Torah?

Torah emphasizes the importance of maintaining moral and ethical standards because the ultimate goal of the Torah is to properly develop and refine one's character. Unfortunately, in today's society, we are constantly inundated by influences that run counter to this ideal.

For example, contemporary culture not only values the notion of amassing great wealth, but, in particular, it idealizes the concept of amassing wealth without working for it. This shift in values is evidenced by the great success of Ponzi schemes, which have netted countless victims. The reason so many people are taken in by these con artists is not that people have become less intelligent; rather, it is that they have absorbed the message of society that work is not a prerequisite for making a living. The appeal of these schemes lies in their promise of massive profits without the need to invest any time or effort. Thanks

to the influences of modern society, people tend to wish so desperately for those promises to be true that they become willing victims of the purveyors of any such hope.

How can a person develop an inner moral compass that will help him resist the temptation to search for shortcuts or worse — cheating and stealing? For this purpose, it is crucial to have role models at home. Thus, Hashem told the nations of the world that since their genealogy was uncertain — they did not even know who their own fathers were — it was impossible for them to have grown up with proper role models. This made them unworthy of receiving the Torah.

This understanding should serve as the source of a tremendous insight into the significance of parental influence and teach us how we must deal with our own children. The key to raising good children is being an honest and moral person. External displays of *frumkeit* are merely the trimmings; the essence of a person is measured by his moral compass. Unfortunately, this is a fact that is lost even on members of the "religious" community. Many families have no issue breaking the spirit of the law as long as they aren't breaking the letter of the law.

An example of this is buying something that you intend to use but with the



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knowledge that after using it you will return it to the place of purchase for a full refund. Or amassing many tens of credit cards (sometimes hundreds) in order to receive all the incentives offered by each credit card issuer without ever intending to use the cards. In fact, in many ways this is more devastating to a child's moral development than growing up with parents who steal outright. Eventually, a child might learn that stealing is wrong, but he will almost certainly never learn that breaking the spirit of the law is wrong.

The only hope for developing a child's moral character is with strong parental guidance. This is why a strong family structure is crucial to the process. If a child grows up without the proper role models then he will not have an example to guide him through life. Even if some individual children can overcome this disability, an entire nation without a strong family lineage cannot overcome this as a society. That is the reason Hashem didn't want to give the Torah to those nations that were unable to establish a proper family lineage.

Misplaced Giving

Nadav and Avihu died before Hashem when they brought a strange fire before Hashem in the Sinai desert, and they did not have children (Bamidbar 3:4).

The Torah's comment that Nadav and Avihu had no children appears to be a curious non sequitur in the account of the sin that cost them their lives. According to Chazal, however, it is very much in place.

The Gemara derives from this *possuk* that had they indeed had children, Nadav and Avihu would not have died. As a result, the Gemara concludes that a person who does not attempt to fulfill the *mitzvah* of "be fruitful and multiply" is liable to the Heavenly death penalty (of course, this means that they were not married; had they been married and simply not blessed with children, then they certainly would not have been blamed for their lack of progeny).

This is very difficult to understand in light of the fact that the Torah explicitly identifies their sin as the act of bringing "a strange fire." How can the Gemara contend that they incurred the death penalty because they did not attempt to have children?

The answer to this question lies in understanding the nature of their sin. Why, in fact, did Nadav and Avihu bring a "strange fire" to the Mishkan? What is the source of the temptation to commit such a sin?

Imagine the following scenario: One Friday morning, a woman receives a phone call informing her that one of her

neighbors is ill. The unfortunate woman, she is told, has been bedridden and does not have food for Shabbos. Naturally, the altruistic neighbor decides to help out.


There are two theoretical ways for such a situation to be handled. One is for the woman to prepare Shabbos food for her neighbor in her own kitchen, package it, and deliver it to the recipient's door. The other is for the woman to be invited to her neighbor's home, where the recipient of her largesse will place her own kitchen and supplies at her disposal so that she can prepare the Shabbos meals. Is there any question as to which option the neighbor would prefer? Cooking in her own home and sending the food to her neighbor makes her a benefactor; cooking in her neighbor's home, in contrast, would mean that she is simply playing the role of a maid. Any ordinary human being would naturally wish to be perceived as a benefactor and not as a servant.

This explains the motivation for Nadav and Avihu's actions. Rather than bringing a fire of their own making, they were commanded to allow the *korbanos* to be consumed by a fire sent from above. But Nadav and Avihu knew that by doing so, they would be relating to Hashem merely as "servants" with assigned tasks to perform. Their true desire, however, was to play the role of "benefactors,"

which they felt they could do by offering a contribution of their own – a fire of their own creation. Rather than simply performing a service, doing so would mean that they would actually be bringing a gift. Unfortunately, they were misguided in their efforts, for Hashem's true intent was indeed for them to play the role of His servants, not to act as His benefactors.


Since Nadav and Avihu lacked children of their own, they did not have a way to express their need to act as benefactors within an appropriate and healthy context. Instead, they sought to fulfill that need in their relationship with Hashem, a context that was highly improper. The natural drive to be a giver was thus channeled in an unhealthy and sinful way.

Hence, when the Gemara teaches us that Nadav and Avihu would not have died had they had children, it reveals to us the underlying motivation of their sin. This is even reflected by their very names; the name Nadav itself means "benefactor," and the name Avihu is a contraction of the phrase *avi hu*, "he is my father," referring to the epitome of a giver. In this *possuk*, then, the Torah explains the root cause of their fatal error: the channeling of a natural human need into a wholly inappropriate context.



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