

# Rabbinic Reflections on the Death of Nadab and Abihu

## Parashat Shemini

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*Our rabbis were in search of knowledge, wisdom, and truth. To their credit, they were prepared to let the chips fall where they may. They concluded that God is overwhelmingly just but not always. They concluded there is a system of reward and punishment in this world, but it does not operate as it should in every instance. Our world is flawed.*

Let's learn Torah together. The Torah portion for this Shabbat, *parashat shemini*, tells us about the sudden and mysterious death of Nadab and Abihu, two of Aaron's sons.

We read in Leviticus, chapter 10:1-3, "Now Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense upon it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which he had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, 'This is what the Lord meant when he said: through those near to me I show myself holy, and assert my authority before all the people.' And Aaron was silent"

Thousands of years ago, our sages read this very same passage and were very disturbed by it. They wanted to know: exactly what had Nadab and Abihu done wrong? And whatever Nadab and Abihu did, did it require such severe punishment? How could Aaron be silent at his son's death?

Our rabbinic sages wrote down their answers to these and other questions. We call their literary commentaries on the Torah, *midrash*. In some of the *midrashim* on this passage, our rabbis offered some surprising theological reflections.

What are some of the classic theological beliefs that come to us from antiquity?

- 1) The belief in reward and punishment;
- 2) The belief that God is always just and can do no wrong;
- 3) The belief that suffering is always a sign of sin.

Let's look at a few *midrashim* on the death of Nadab and Abihu. These *midrashim* come from a collection of *midrashim* called *Leviticus rabbah*.

In chapter 20:9, the *midrash* offers 5 different justifications of why Nadab and Abihu were punished by God. The explanations are:

- 1) They drank wine;
- 2) They did not wear the correct priestly garments;
- 3) They did not wash their hands and feet at the sanctuary entrance;
- 4) They had no children;
- 5) They had no wives.

Now all these explanations suggest that the rabbis felt comfortable with what happened to Nadab and Abihu, right? Actually, wrong.

What does it tell you when the rabbis offered not one but 5 explanations for the death of Nadab and Abihu? It tells us that the rabbis were not satisfied with any of their explanations. The rabbis were troubled by God's treatment of Nadab and Abihu and didn't know what to make of it.

Now the rabbis could not say this explicitly. They lived in an era when it was inconceivable to think that God could do anything wrong or unjust. Implicitly, however, this *midrash* is saying that the death of Nadab and Abihu is an instance when God was not fair, when God did not behave justly.

Our second text is *Leviticus rabbah* 20:1. This text gives us several examples of how the righteous and the wicked share the same fate. For example, we find that Noah, a good guy, and Pharaoh Neco, a bad guy, were both permanently injured by a lion. So too, Moses, a good guy, urged the people not to be afraid and to fight for the land of Israel, while the 12 scouts, bad guys, discouraged the people from doing so. Yet both never entered the land of Israel. Both had the same fate.

Now what is this *midrash* trying to teach?

Despite the conventional belief in reward and punishment, we find that the good and the wicked often share the same fate. Therefore, we should behave well, not for any sake of reward, but solely and simply because it is the right thing to do. We should not expect proper reward or punishment to occur all the time. Unfortunately, that is just not the way the world really works.

Finally, let's read *Leviticus rabbah* 20:4. This text makes a very bold statement. Who is being compared to a mourner? The midrash compares God to a mourner! God is a mourner at every death. Indeed, God is inconsolable after a death.

Now when we lose a loved one, some of us get angry at God or blame God. We may think of God as an adversary who takes away the people we love. This *midrash* offers a completely different perspective. It teaches us that when we lose a loved one, God mourns with us. God is as miserable as we are. In our times of sadness, this *midrash* teaches, God is always on our side, giving us the strength, the perspective, and the resiliency to cope with our loss.

In conclusion, our sages used the story of Nadab and Abihu as a springboard to reflect on the problem of theodicy, the problem of how there can be evil in a world created by a good God.

Surprisingly, what we discover is that our sages did not themselves always accept the conventional beliefs of their day. Our 21<sup>st</sup> century doubts about God's justice and the existence of reward and punishment are not new, not modern at all. Our ancestors were already thinking the same thoughts 1, 500 years ago. Our rabbis were in search of knowledge, wisdom, and truth. To their credit, they were prepared to let the chips fall where they may. They concluded that God is overwhelmingly just but not always. They concluded there is a system of reward and punishment in this world, but it does not operate as it should in every instance. Our world is flawed.

Through these *midrashim*, our rabbis teach us that the world we live in is confusing and far more complicated than we would like it to be, far more complicated than conventional religious beliefs can capture. Our rabbis teach that we must adopt more realistic expectations about the way the world is. At the same time, our sages continued to affirm both God's essential goodness and the goodness of life. Yes, there remain some dark places that God's light has not yet reached, but we live in a universe that is overwhelmingly governed by life-nurturing order and miraculous predictability. And God's light is on the move, God's light is on the march. Someday, God's light will reach everywhere and then all the world's flaws will disappear.