

Vayikra 9:23 – 10:2

He - Moshe and Aharon –
went in to Ohel Moed
They came out
They blessed the populace
It was revealed - the Glory of Hashem –
to the entire populace
It came out – a fire – from before Hashem
It consumed on the altar
The *olah* and the fats
The whole populace saw
Vayaronu
They fell on their faces
They took –
the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu –
each man his pan –
They put fire in them
They placed incense on top of it
They brought near before Hashem
a fire – alien -
Who had not commanded them
It came out – a fire - from before Hashem
It consumed them
They died before Hashem

ויקרא ט:כג – י:א-ב

וַיֵּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן
אֶל אֱלֹהֵי לְמוֹעֵד
וַיֵּצְאוּ
וַיְבָרֶךְ כּוֹ אֶת הָעָם
וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד ה'
אֶל כָּל הָעָם:
וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ לִפְנֵי ה'
וַתֹּאכַל עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ
אֶת הָעֹלָה וְאֶת הַחֲלָבִים
וַיֵּרָא אֶל כָּל הָעָם
וַיִּרְאוּ
וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם:
וַיִּקְחוּ
בְנֵי אֱהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא
אִישׁ מִחַתָּתוֹ
וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ
וַיִּשְׂמוּ עָלֶיהָ קֶטֶר
קֹדֶשׁ בּוֹ לִפְנֵי ה'
אֵשׁ זָרָה
אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם:
וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה'
וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם
וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי ה':

We conventionally but inaccurately translate the Hebrew עבודה זרה as “idolatry” – the literal translation is “worship that is alien”. My suspicion is that this a euphemism of the same sort that eventually causes עבודה זרה to be replaced in most Rabbinic text by עבודת כוכבים, which literally means “worship of stars” – it provides a convenient way of telling Christians that the category does not apply to them. We make the test of acceptability an abstract theological principle – is one worshipping the correct G-d?

rather than the concrete question – is one worshipping G-d correctly? My contention is that the term עבודה זרה derives directly from the אש זרה of Nadav and Avihu, where it seems that the sole criterion is whether He commanded the worship or not.

Another accidental obstacle to a correct understanding of this episode is the chapter break (which is not of Jewish origin). But it is critical to understand that Nadav and Avihu did not merely introduce a fire into the Tabernacle hastily, rather than waiting for Divine command or miraculous fire – rather they introduced their own fire into the Tabernacle *immediately after* miraculous Divine fire had descended onto the altar and consumed sacrifices as the climax to a Divinely scripted week of sacrificial ritual. In response, Divine fire comes forth again and consumes them.

Why would Nadav and Avihu have done this? Following the strain in our tradition that seeks to valorize rather than villainize them¹, and in the footsteps of the Rav's theology, we can suggest that there are two proper responses to miracles:

- 1) Awe, leading to the recognition that G-d's actions are inimitable
- 2) Inspiration, leading to the burning desire to imitate His actions

There may be no clear algorithms for deciding which is appropriate, and Nadav and Avihu wrongly picked inspiration over awe.

But this is not yet sufficient. *Everyone* saw the Divine Fire emerge, but only Nadav and Avihu were moved to bring their own fire. Perhaps this was simply because they were the children of Aharon, and so felt uniquely empowered to bring sacrifices, but this is the *inauguration* of the Tabernacle and of the Aharonite priesthood. It therefore seems to me worth rigorously exploring the Torah's description of everyone else's reaction.

The verse says that when the fire came out from before Hashem, the entire populace did three things:

- 1) See/recognize
- 2) וירנו
- 3) Fall on their faces

וירנו literally seems to mean “made loud sounds”, and such sounds – in nature and in Tanakh – can convey a variety of emotions². How might we determine the emotional content here?

R. Chaim Paltiel, as available on the Bar Ilan disk, writes the following:

¹ A strain with much textual justification, such as בקרובי אקדש, although I tend to think that the textual case for villainization somewhat stronger

² See Isaiah 42:11, 1Kings 22:36

Onkelos translates וירנו as “and they praised”,
but he did not explicate what praises they said,

But we can say

“Learn the sealed from the explicit”
as regarding Eliyahu Scripture writes

It saw – the entire people

– וירנו –

They fell on their faces

They said:

“Hashem is *the* Divinity!

Hashem is *the* Divinity!

תרג' ושבח,

ולא פ'י מה שבחות אמרו,

וי"ל

למוד סתום מן המפורש

דגבי אליהו כתיב

וירא כל העם

וירנו

ויפלו על פניהם

ויאמרו

ה' הוא האלהים

ה' הוא האלהים.

The argument seems to be that the reaction of the people in 1Kings 18:39, where Eliyahu elicits the Divine fire, is identical to here – they see, וירנו, they fall on their faces – but Kings provides the content of their רנה, presumably offered *while* fallen. We can presume that the content here was similar.

One problem with this argument is that the verse from Kings is misquoted, and does not actually contain וירנו (I presume this is a later copyist's error rather than a memory error of RCP). So RCP must actually be arguing that the order is insignificant, since וירנו here is between seeing and falling, whereas in Kings it follows both. This seems to me a major objection to the theory.

R. Menachem Rekanati proposes that they sang the songs of the Levites³. This interestingly suggests that Nadav and Avihu were simply going one step beyond the populace – Israelites acted as Levites without objection, so why couldn't priests-in-waiting act as priests?

Toldot Yitzchak makes an important methodological contribution by collecting what he asserts are *the* 12 instances in which Divine fire appears.⁴ Six of them demonstrate that sacrifices have been found pleasing, and six of them take vengeance.

וטעם "וירא כל העם וירנו" - בשירת הלויים

⁴ תולדות יצחק ויקרא פרק ט פסוק כד

ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל על המזבח את העלה ואת החלבים וירא כל העם וירנו ויפלו על פניהם
"ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל על המזבח את העולה" –

ביום השמיני שנתחנך המשכן בקרבנות שבאו לכפר על מעשה העגל, ירדה אש מן השמים לקבל אותם,
והאש הזאת עמדה עד דורו של שלמה שבנה הבית, וכל ימי הבית היתה האש קיימת, ולא כבתה עד
שחרב,

וזוהו שאמר [לעיל ו] אש תמיד תוקד על המזבח לא תכבה,

Pleasing:

- 1) The initial fire here
- 2) Gideon
- 3) Manoach

וכן מצינו שנים עשר אשות שנפלו מן השמים בזמנים חלוקים,
ששה מהם היו לקבלת הקרבנות דרך רצון,
וששה דרך נקמה
הראשונה
היא האש הזאת,
השניה
לגדעון כשאמר למלאך [שופטים ו יז] ועשית לי אות שאתה מדבר עמי, וכתוב [שם יט] וגדעון בא ויעש גדי
עזים, ויגע בבשר ובמצות ותעל האש מן הצור [שם כב],
השלישית
האש שירדה בימי מנוח, כשנגלה המלאך לאשתו, דכתוב [שם יג יט] ויקח מנוח את גדי העזים ואת
המנחה ויעל על הצור לה' וכתוב [שם כ] ויהיה בעלות הלהב מעל המזבח השמימה, ותחלה קראו צור
ואחר שנתקבל הקרבן קראו מזבח,
הרביעית
לדוד שקנה המקום בגורן ארנן היבוסי,
וכתוב [דה"י - א כא כו] ויבן שם מזבח לה' ויעל עולות ושלמים ויקרא אל ה' ויענהו ה' באש מן
השמים על מזבח העולה,
החמישית
לשלמה כשנשלם בנין בית המקדש
דכתוב [דבה"י - ב ז א] וככלות שלמה להתפלל והאש ירדה מן השמים ותאכל (את) העולה (ואת)
(השלמים) [הזבחים] וכבוד ה' מלא את הבית,
השישית
לאליהו שאמר [מ"א יח לז] ענני ה' ענני וירד אש
שנאמר [שם לח] ותפול אש ה' ותאכל את העולה ואת העצים וגו'.
והששה שירדו דרך נקמה
אחת
אש לנדב ואביהוא
שנאמר [להלן י ב] ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל אותם,
השנית בתבערה
שנאמר [במדבר יא א] ויהיה העם כמתאוננים
וכתוב [שם] ותבער במ אש ה',
השלישית
במחלוקתו של קרח
דכתוב [שם טז לה] ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל את החמשים ומאתים איש, הרביעית בענין
איוב שנאמר [א טז] אש א-להים נפלה מן השמים,
החמישית והששית,
על ידי אליהו
שירדה אש מן השמים, ושרפה לשר חמשים וחמשיו [מ"ב א יח],
וגם פעם שנית לשר חמשים וחמשיו,
שנאמר [שם יב] ותרד אש מן השמים ותאכל אותו ואת חמשיו.

- 4) David (after buying the land for a Temple)
- 5) Shlomoh (when completing the Temple)
- 6) Eliyahu at Mount Carmel

Vengeance:

- 1) Nadav and Avihu
- 2) Tav'erah
- 3) Korach
- 4) Iyov's children
- 5,6) Eliyahu and Ahab's army

We can quibble with several citations – for example, Gideon and Manoach experience ascending, rather than descending, fire – but I suggest that his evidence is sufficient to demonstrate that the experience of Divine Fire always carries an element of risk.

With that context, perhaps we can return to Rabbi Paltiel's suggestion that our story should be read together with the wonderfully ambivalent story of the prophets' duel at Mount Carmel. It is, on the one hand, a great triumph for Eliyahu, in which the people finally decide for Hashem over Ba'al and massacre Baal's prophets. But it is also a stinging defeat, as the very next day Queen Izevel correctly asserts that no one will intervene on his behalf against her. In the long run, I contend that his precedent makes it impossible for extra-Temple sacrificing ever to be eliminated. And yet – in the very long run, perhaps the memory of that moment is what enables Judaism to vanquish the impulse for idolatry.

In other words – Eliyahu acted outside the law at Mount Carmel. He pleaded with G-d to send the fire, rather than having it come as a consequence of his following a Divine command. He risked worshipping G-d incorrectly to ensure that the Jews would worship the correct G-d. However, rather than bringing his own fire, he built the wait for the Divine fire into his own script. We can speculate that he prayed in full awareness that the answer to his prayers might consume him as well as his sacrifice.

Perhaps the sin of Nadav and Avihu was their failure to realize this, their inability to imagine that spiritually intoxicated and/or intoxicating worship of the true G-d might nonetheless be *avodah zarah*.