

Parashat Shemini

No Sacrifice Needed: Modern Day Nadav and Avihu

by Martin Rawlings-Fein on Saturday April 18, 2009

24 Nissan, 5769

Leviticus 9:1 - 11:47

In *Parashat Shemini* the *Mishkan* (tabernacle) is dedicated, Aaron is installed as high priest, and Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu suffer an unfortunate fiery death. The "strange," "alien," or "unauthorized" fire Aaron's sons brought to the altar was an act blasphemous enough to cause G-d to lash out at the young men in anger, killing them instantly. I struggle with the similarities between this condemning, angry G-d and some of the members of my own family. Turning the Torah until it speaks to me as a father, son, and a transsexual bisexual man, I try to find answers in the text. Sometimes though, the answers I find provide no easy solution to the problem, and no matter what I try, that angry patriarchal tyrant still looks more like my uncle than G-d.

As a father I am haunted by the knowledge that the G-d I pray to in my 21st century life would end a human life in flames. Perhaps context will provide some clue to G-d's abhorrent behavior. When the Israelites' were slaves, for generations they had to follow Egyptian religious practices, including praying to idols and burning incense on altars. Were Nadav and Avihu just following what they had been doing since they were young or were they irreverently drunk (as some commentators suggest)? Both of these back stories fail to justify G-d's extreme reaction. G-d smote Nadav and Avihu because s/he didn't like their method of approach? Their fire was somehow not good enough? I still can't stomach this violent G-d.

How do we, as modern day Jews, reconcile the fact that G-d burned the sons of Aaron alive? As a parent who could never think of my child dying in that way, I struggle with G-d, the text, and the feeling that there are no easy answers.

In August of 2008 when the "No on 8 Campaign" was in full swing, a family member called to wish me a happy birthday. As we were shooting the breeze he said that he really wanted to have a serious conversation with me. I was bracing myself for the question about the \$30 I owed him from his daughter's school fundraiser. What happened next was unnerving. He said that he wanted me to move out of San Francisco because he was certain that G-d was going to smite the city. I thanked him for his concern and asked him why he thought this was going to happen – that I wasn't surprised by this new development says a lot about our relationship. I

engage him in theological debates all the time, this was no different. Yet, it was, because the answer was very difficult to hear.

His reasoning was that G-d was disappointed in those who had abandoned the covenant and that the cities had become wicked places where homosexuals and people with loose morals had congregated. He was concerned that these sinners were reinterpreting G-d's word and blaspheming against him. As he spoke, I realized that the blasphemers he was talking about were me and my chosen family. To him, we were all Nadav and Avihu bringing strange fire to G-d and therefore retribution was waiting in the wings. He was trying to get me to leave San Francisco but his words were tearing at my soul. I found a way to disengage from the conversation and began trembling after the call. I tried to laugh it off with my mother during her phone call later in the day; apparently he had called other family members and given them the same warning. I am, however, the only family member who would fit the description of the sinner that he thought G-d would take the time to smite.

When I first transitioned from female-to-male my family of origin smote me with their words and actions. They stopped inviting me to family events, took my pictures down off the walls, and created an expectation that my soul would not be "saved" if I continued my wicked ways. One family member went so far as to write me a letter stating that she loved me with all her heart but hated the man I had become because G-d had sanctioned her to hate the things he saw as abominable. My reaction was pretty swift; I created pockets of community and family from those whom did truly love and care for me. I didn't look back to my family of origin except to those who did not abandon me.

Now that I am grown and have a daughter of my own, we all see things in a new light. The family of origin that rejected me because of my method of approach to life has finally grown enough in their own spiritual space to see me as the man I am. I tend to see G-d, like my family of origin, as an ever changing force. We as Jews are often commanded to remember and to never forget what has happened. This grounds us in the past but does not negate our progressive yearnings. Through this lens I can look back at the slaying of Nadav and Avihu and see how G-d has transitioned with us through the struggle of who we are as a people.

Similarly, my family of origin can now call me on my birthday and plead with me to leave a city that they see as wicked. Because in addition to seeing my sexual preference, my gender identity and my religious choices, they also see me as a father, a son, and a man that they care about. Those they label wicked and abominable are, like me, just struggling to be seen as human beings rather than blasphemers' bringing strange fire to G-d. When those who only see the literal translation learn the deeper lessons of the text, then we will all truly be closer to G-d with no sacrifice needed.



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