

Torah Study for Christians
Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, April 15, 2015

A selection from this week's Torah portion (*Shemini*): Leviticus, Chapter 10, verses 1 through 11

- א** וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִקְתָּוֹת וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשֶׁת וַיִּשְׂמוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֶתָף וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה--אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָםֶֿ 1 And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire in them, and laid incense thereon, and offered **strange fire** before the LORD, which He had not commanded them.
- ב** וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָםֶֿ וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָהֶֿ 2 And there came forth **fire** from before the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.
- ג** וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן הֲוֵא אֲשֶׁר-דָּבַר יְהוָה לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבֵי אֲקֻדְשֶׁת וְעַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָעַמִּים אֲכַבְדּוּ וַיִּדְמַת אַהֲרֹןֶֿ 3 Then Moses said unto Aaron: 'This is it that the LORD spoke, saying: Through them that are near unto Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.' **And Aaron held his peace.**
- ד** וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-מִישָׁאֵל וְאֶל אֶלְצָפָן בְּנֵי עֲזִיאֵלֶֿ דָּד אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם קְרִבוּ שָׂאוּ אֶת-אֲחֵיכֶם מֵאֵת פְּנֵי-הַקֹּדֶשֶׁת אֶל-מַחֲוֹזֵת לַמִּתְנַהֵף 4 And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them: 'Draw near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp.'
- ה** וַיִּקְרְבוּ וַיִּשְׂאֻם בְּכַתְנֵתָם אֶל-מַחֲוֹזֵת לַמִּתְנַהֵף--כַּאֲשֶׁרֶֿ דָּבַר מֹשֶׁהֶֿ 5 So they drew near, and carried them in their tunics out of the camp, as Moses had said.
- ו** וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְלֵאזָר וְלִיִּתְמָר בְּנָיו רְאִשֵׁיכֶם אֶל-תִּפְרְעוּ וּבְגְדֵיכֶם לֹא-תִפְרְמוּ וְלֹא תִמְתּוּ וְעַל כָּל-הָעֵדָהֶֿ תִּקְצַף וְאֲחֵיכֶם כָּל-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל--יִבְכוּ אֶת-הַשְּׂרִפָּהֶֿ אֲשֶׁר שָׂרַף יְהוָהֶֿ 6 And Moses said to Aaron, and to Eleazar and to Ithamar, his sons: 'Let not the hair of your heads go loose, neither rend your clothes, that you die not, and that He be not wroth with all the congregation; but let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the LORD has kindled.
- ז** וּמִפֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא תֵצְאוּ פֶן-תָּמְתוּ--כִּי-שֶׁמֶן מִשְׁחַת יְהוָהֶֿ עָלֵיכֶם וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כְּדָבַר מֹשֶׁהֶֿ {פ} 7 And you shall not go out from the door of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die; for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you.' And they did according to the word of Moses.
- ח** וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָהֶֿ אֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹרֶֿ 8 And the LORD spoke unto Aaron, saying:
- ט** יֵין וְשִׁכָר אֶל-תִּשְׂתֵּה אִתָּהּ וּבְנֶיךָ אִתָּךְ בְּבֹאֲכֶם אֶל-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד--וְלֹא תִמְתּוּ: חֻקַּת עוֹלָםֶֿ לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶםֶֿ 9 'Drink neither wine nor strong drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the Tent of Meeting, that you die not; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations.

י וְלִהְבֵּדִילֶת בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּבֵין הַחֹלֶת וּבֵין הַטְּמֵאֹת וּבֵין הַטְּהוֹרִץ **10** And that you may put difference between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean;

יא וְלִהְוֹרֹתָ אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--אֵת כָּל-הַחֻקִּים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֲלֵי־הָמָּת בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה **11** and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses.'

QUESTIONS:

1. In this, one of the most troubling passages of Torah, we might strive to perceive what sin means in the context of serving G-d. What was the “sin” of Nadav and Avihu, the two oldest sons of Aaron, the High Priest? What could a “strange fire” mean? Perhaps it is as defined in the next phrase – “which He had not commanded them.” Do you see something more here than simply bringing an unbidden sacrifice? Note: “Strange fire” in Hebrew is *aish zarah*; idol worship is *avodah zarah*. How might their sacrifice have been idolatrous? Most of the rabbinic commentaries place the blame on the sons, saying that they were greedy for prestige, too prideful, or not sufficiently deferential to the teachings of their father and uncle, etc.
2. Strictness of performance of ritual – that is, getting it *exactly* right –certainly appears to be one focus here; clearly, the priests were not allowed to bring just any sacrifice any time that they wanted. There is another important point here as well. We see in verse 1 that they brought the fire themselves, but what was different about the fire on the altar? G-d sends it down! So, by bringing a manmade fire (i.e., one that was not started by G-d), they literally brought an *aish zarah* - אש זרה - a strange fire, making the whole sacrificial process look less miraculous, less G-d focused. This could not be allowed if the whole system were to stand. Also, timing was a problem: their sacrifice was not commanded to them by G-d through Moses for that specific time.
3. Does the text even mention “sin” per se? Could they have died because of a more innocent reason, such as not being careful enough around so awesome a power? That is, do we see any certain intentionality by G-d to kill them? Could you make the argument that their deaths were akin to dying in a fire or an electrical accident? Why or why not?
4. Yet another explanation given is that they were overly zealous – in bringing a sacrifice on their own initiative, they were attempting to achieve an even greater closeness to G-d, but this, too, can clearly be dangerous. Their very names might point to the credibility of this explanation: Nadav means “willing” – the Hebrew word for volunteer comes from the same root; and the name Avihu means “He is my father,” with the “he” probably referring to his Heavenly Father rather than to Aaron, his earthly father. Also, according to Midrash (Biblical legend), the fire that killed them consumed their souls rather than their bodies – the story told is that not a single hair on their heads was singed.
5. What could the quotation in verse 3 mean – that G-d is sanctified by those who are near to Him and will be glorified before all of the people? Note that the message did not come directly to Aaron but was rather relayed by Moses – why? Why did this silence Aaron? If this was an intentional punishment by G-d, what had Aaron done to deserve losing his two oldest sons? Some speculate that this was a belated punishment for having created the Golden Calf back in Exodus 32.
6. What other reason for their deaths might we draw from verses 8 through 11? Could their sin simply be that of drunkenness during holy service, or perhaps even the consequences of SUI (sacrificing under the influence)? Alternatively, could they have become drunk on the pride of

being the sons of the High Priest? We might consider how difficult it is to be a PK (preacher's kid), and magnify that substantially, since they were the sons of the only true "clergy" of their people. We might want to also consider that they, too, were anointed priests, and had just participated in the grand opening ceremonies of the Mishkan, the tabernacle.

7. What do we learn from verse 6 about standard mourning practice in the Torah as opposed to what the priests can do during mourning? What is the same and what is different? Why are the practices different for Aaron and his two remaining sons? That is, why could the rest of the Israelites mourn the two sons, but Aaron and his two remaining sons could not?
8. Are there ultimately any larger "lessons" that we can draw from this text?