

## [Kohelet Discussion](#)

### **Parsha Shemini**

**by Misty Davidson on 3/26/2022**

Parshat Shemini takes place after the completion of the mishkan. Moses has spent 7 days preparing for its consecration. Shemini means 8<sup>th</sup>. Since creation and the first shabbat happened in 7 days, the eighth day is above and beyond the ordinary. On the 8<sup>th</sup> day, we are given the Priestly Service. Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, also priests, offer a "strange fire" that was not commanded of them, and they are consumed by it and die. After this tragedy we are given the laws of kashrut and the laws of ritual purity involving the mikveh.

I've always had difficulty with the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Let's put this whole incident into historical perspective. The Israelites are still recovering from and atoning for the sin of the golden calf. They have constructed the mishkan and are learning how to recover their closeness with God. The consecration of the Holy of Holies is a moment of high drama. Everyone is assembled as Aaron begins the priestly service. The appropriate animals are sacrificed, and the blood is scattered about—all described in more detail than I would prefer. Suddenly the ecstasy of the moment turns to tragedy as Nadav and Avihu, in a moment of spiritual fervor, decide to go above and beyond what is required by offering their "strange fire." The results leave the Israelites shocked.

Is it really so bad to go above and beyond what is required? In my years teaching I had many performance evaluations. Of course, everyone was supposed to meet the expectations. If you didn't, that was a problem. But it was considered so much better to go above and beyond the expectations. There was even a box the administrator checked if you consistently went above and beyond what was required. I don't think that mentality is unique to teaching. And is it a bad thing to be caught up in the fervor of the moment? Would you want to hire someone or vote for someone who had no passion, no enthusiasm about what he was aspiring to do?

There have been many explanations as to why Nadav and Avihu had to die. One is that they disobeyed God. Ok, but did that deserve death? Who here hasn't done something wrong or broken a commandment, yet we're all still here? Another explanation is that Nadav and Avihu failed to understand the difference between the two types of leadership needed for the Israelites—the prophet and the priest. The prophet exists in a specific time and often behaves spontaneously as needed to deliver his message. As the times change, the prophet behaves accordingly. The priest's role touches on the eternal, and what he does never changes. Life is an interplay between that which never changes and that which constantly does, and Nadav and Avihu confused their roles in the two. Another explanation is that their egos were overblown. They had refused to marry because they didn't feel any woman in the camp was worthy of

them. Perhaps they thought themselves better than the others. The laws that applied to everyone else simply didn't apply to them.

There could be some truth to all of these. What I see is a metaphor that is truly relevant to today. I see this as a warning against fanaticism and extremism. When I was young my family belonged to a reform temple that espoused a sort of extremism. We were outside the norms of the mainstream reform movement of the time, and very much outside of the reform movement's norms today. The rabbi taught the confirmation class, my 9<sup>th</sup> grade class, and one of his lessons was on the definition of a religion. I'm paraphrasing—I don't remember his exact words, but I believe he defined religion as "a method, a means, and a way of defining, acquiring, and preserving the *summum bonum*—or the highest good." And what is the highest good? That's up to every individual to figure out for himself. You can accept or reject this definition. I took it as the truth in 9<sup>th</sup> grade because the rabbi said so, but as an adult, I find it overly broad. But for the moment it could be useful, because, if you take it as truth, and if there is no pre-defined, mutually agreed upon highest good, then all kinds of things can be defined as a religion—or at least as the highest good. Judaism, Islam, Christianity, altruism, capitalism, Nazism, communism, corporate greed, the insatiable thirst for power—this list goes on.

We are living in a time of extreme polarization and in a time of extremes in general, be they religious, political, what have you. The fanatic of any stripe has the entire truth. When he lets you know that he's right and you're wrong—period, he is engaging in the worst kind of idolatry. He is worshipping the god of himself, and he will lie, cheat, and even commit violence to make sure that he prevails, and you are obliterated. His ends justify his means. This is truly terrifying to me. Nadav and Avihu show us that extremism and fanaticism lead to death.

On that cheerful note, I'd like to pose some questions. The death suffered by Nadav and Avihu doesn't have to be literal and physical. What kind of death are we referring to? And how do we combat this? Does it have to be this way? The world goes crazy from time to time—or maybe it was always crazy, but we notice it more sometimes than others? How do we bring back the values the Torah teaches us, assuming that that is the highest good?