

# Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Sh'mini

Immediately after the untimely death of Aharon's eldest sons Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's youngest sons Elezar and Itamar did not partake of the meat of the standard sin offering (which Rashi explains was that of Rosh Chodesh), as would have been normal practice:

Moshe inquired insistently about the male goat for the sin offering; it had been burned (instead of eaten)! He was angry with Elazar and Itamar, saying that... it was to atone for the sin... they should have eaten it within the precincts of the Mishkan.

Even though, as Rashi explains, they were ONENIM - people who were mourners prior to the burial of their dead, Aharon gave a reasoned response on their and his own behalf. He explained that although it was permitted for a Kohen Gadol to officiate as an onen, it was forbidden to consume kodashim meat status as an onen. Moshe listened carefully. Even though Aharon had not consulted Moshe the Lawgiver, Moshe himself accepted Aharon's response despite his reasoning being different to his own. The incident was closed. No offence had been

intended. No offence was taken.

Yet earlier that same day, G-d put Nadav and Avihu to death for a similar action of reasoning what the law was without consulting; for bringing a "strange fire that G-d did not command" (10:1). Rashi, quoting the Talmud (Eruvin 63a), explains their offence. It is forbidden for a disciple to give a practical ruling in the presence of his teacher according to Torah tradition. Here, they had brought the fire without consulting Moshe first.

The Ohr HaChayim suggests that in both scenarios, neither had offended by giving a ruling before their teacher in the literal sense. In neither case did someone ask them for instruction in Moshe's presence and in neither case did they give an explicit ruling for anyone other than themselves without consulting Moshe. Both Aharon with Elazar and Itamar, and Nadav and Avihu considered what the law was for themselves and stepped forward accordingly, on their own initiatives.

The Ohr HaChayim explains that Elazar and Itamar, together with their father Aharon, decided for themselves what course of action to take for themselves on the basis of what they already knew. Their action in burning rather than eating the korban

chatat flowed from their considerable knowledge and understanding of what course of action to take in such a situation. In contrast, Nadav and Avihu acted entirely on their own authority, without sufficient regard to the existing structure of suitable practice when handling kodashim. For that reason, they instantly "died before G-d".

In addition, it may be suggested that Nadav and Avihu died because they had a personal 'agenda' beyond merely desiring to act according the Law with kodashim. Aharon, Elazar, and Itamar had no desire to burn what essentially was their own property other than act according to the Law. There were no vested interests. Right or wrong, their behavior was within the framework of the Law as they understood it and as they reasoned. Not so with Nadav and Avihu. Their interests lay outside the Law as well. Thus they brought the fire to further their own ambitions. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 52a) brings a tradition, whereby Nadav remarked to Avihu that they themselves would lead the Israelites once the 'old men' Moshe and Aharon died. Whereupon G-d rejoined with "We will see who will bury whom"...

Perhaps a warning to people who would like to be religious leaders to ask themselves before embarking on

such a calling: who do they seek to serve? How far do they seek to serve their communities and their people, and how far could they be seeking to serve themselves? 🌿📖