COVENANT & CONVERSATION

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

בס"ד

שמיני תש״ף
Shemini 5780

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WOHL LEGACY

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Limits

The story of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's two eldest sons who died on the day the Sanctuary was dedicated, is one of the most tragic in the Torah. It is referred to on no less than four separate occasions. It turned a day that should have been a national celebration into one of deep grief. Aharon, bereaved, could not speak. A sense of mourning fell over the camp and the people. God had told Moshe that it was dangerous to have the Divine Presence within the camp (Ex. 33:3), but even Moshe could not have guessed that something as serious as this could happen. What did Nadav and Avihu do wrong?

An exceptionally broad range of interpretations have been given by the Sages. Some say that they aspired to lead the people and were impatiently waiting for Moshe and Aharon to die. Others say that their sin was that they never married, considering all women to be unworthy of them. Others attribute their sin to intoxication. Others again say that they did not seek guidance as to what they should do and what they were not permitted to do on this day. Yet another explanation is that they entered the Holy of Holies, which only the High Priest was permitted to do.

The simplest explanation, though, is the one given explicitly in the text. They offered "strange fire that was not commanded." Why should they have done such a thing? And why was it so serious an error?

The explanation that makes most sense psychologically is that they were carried away by the mood of the moment. They acted in a kind of ecstasy. They were caught up by the sheer excitement of the inauguration of the first collective house of worship in the history of Avraham's children. Their behaviour was spontaneous. They wanted to do something extra, uncommanded, to express their religious fervour.

What was wrong with that? Moshe had acted spontaneously when he broke the tablets after the sin of the Golden Calf. Centuries later, David would act spontaneously when he danced as the Ark was brought into Jerusalem. Neither of them was punished for their behaviour, (although Michal did reprimand her husband David after his dance). But what made Nadav and Avihu deserve so severe a punishment?

The difference was that Moshe was a Prophet. David was a King. But Nadav and Avihu were Priests. Prophets and Kings sometimes act spontaneously, because they both inhabit the world of time. To fulfil their functions, they need a sense of history. They develop an intuitive grasp of time. They understand the mood of the moment, and what it calls for. For them, today is not yesterday, and tomorrow will be different again. That leads them, from time to time, to act spontaneously because that is what the moment requires.

Moshe knew that only something as dramatic as shattering the tablets would bring the people to their senses and convey to them how grave was their sin. David knew that dancing alongside the Ark would express to the people a sense of the significance of what was happening, that Jerusalem was about to become not just the political capital but also the spiritual centre of the nation. These acts of precisely judged spontaneity were essential in shaping the destiny of the people.

But Priests have a different role altogether. They inhabit a world that is timeless, ahistorical, in which nothing significant changes. The daily, weekly and yearly sacrifices were always the same. Every element of the service of the Tabernacle was bounded by its own detailed rules, and nothing of significance was left to the discretion of the Priest.

The Priest was the guardian of order. It was his job to maintain boundaries, between sacred and secular, pure and impure, perfect and blemished, permitted and forbidden. His domain was that of *the holy*, the points at which the infinite and eternal enter the world of the finite and mortal. As God tells Aharon in our parsha: "You must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean; and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the Lord has imparted to them through Moshe." The key verbs for the Kohen were *lehavdil*, to distinguish, and *lehorot*, to teach. The Kohen made distinctions and taught the people to do likewise.

The priestly vocation was to remind the people that there are limits. There is an order to the universe and we must respect it. Spontaneity has no place in the life of the Priest or the service of the Sanctuary. That is what Nadav and Avihu failed to honour. It might have seemed like a minor transgression but it was in fact a negation of everything the Tabernacle and the Priesthood stood for.

"The priestly vocation was to remind the people that there are limits. There is an order to the universe and we must respect it."

There are limits. That is what the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is about. Why would God go to the trouble of creating two trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, from which human beings are forbidden to eat? Why tell the humans what the trees were and what their fruit could do? Why expose them to temptation? Who would not wish to have knowledge and eternal life if they could acquire them by merely eating a fruit? Why plant these trees in a garden where the humans could not but help see them? Why put Adam and Eve to a test they were unlikely to pass?

To teach them, and us, that even in Eden, Utopia, Paradise, there are limits. There are certain things we can do, and would like to do, that we must not do.

The classic example is the environment. As Jared Diamond has documented in his books, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, and *Collapse*, almost wherever human beings have set foot,

they have left a trail of destruction in their wake. They have farmed lands to exhaustion and hunted animals to extinction. They have done so because they have not had, embedded in their minds and habits, the notion of limits. Hence the concept, key to environmental ethics, of sustainability, meaning limiting your exploitation of the Earth's resources to the point where they can renew themselves. A failure to observe those limits causes human beings to be exiled from their own garden of Eden.

We have been aware of threats to the environment and the dangers of climate change for a long time, certainly since the 1970s. Yet the measures humanity has taken to establish limits to consumption, pollution, the destruction of habitats and the like have, for the most part, been too little, too late. A 2019 BBC survey of moral attitudes in Britain showed that despite the fact that a majority of people felt responsibility for the future of the planet, this had not translated into action. 71 percent of people thought that it is acceptable to drive when it would be just as easy to walk. 65 percent of people thought it acceptable to use disposable cutlery and plates.

In *The True and Only Heaven*, Christopher Lasch argued that the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment endowed us with the belief that there are no limits, that science and technology will solve every problem they create and the earth will continue indefinitely to yield its bounty. "Progressive optimism rests, at bottom, on a denial of the natural limits on human power and freedom, and it cannot survive for very long in a world in which an awareness of those limits has become inescapable." Forget limits and eventually we lose paradise. That is what the story of Adam and Eve warns.

In a remarkable passage in his 1976 book on inflation, *The Reigning Error,* William Rees-Mogg waxed eloquent about the role of Jewish law in securing Jewish survival. It did so by containing the energies of the people – Jews are, he said, "a people of an electric energy, both of personality and of mind." Nuclear energy, he says, is immensely powerful but at the same time needs to be contained. He then says this:

"Without limits, civilisations can be as thrilling and short-lived as fireworks. To survive they need to find a way of containing energy so that it lasts, undiminished."

> In the same way, the energy of the Jewish people has been enclosed in a different type of container, the law. That has acted as a bottle inside which the spiritual and intellectual energy could be held; only because it could be held has it been possible to make use of it. It has not merely exploded or been dispersed; it has been harnessed as a continuous power … Contained energy can be a driving force over an indefinite period; uncontrolled energy is merely a big and usually destructive bang. In human nature only disciplined energy is effective.

That was the role of the Kohen, and it is the continuing role of *halachah*. Both are expressions of limits: rules, laws and distinctions. Without limits, civilisations can be as thrilling and short-lived as fireworks. To survive they need to find a way of containing energy so that it lasts, undiminished. That was the Priest's role and what Nadav and Avihu betrayed

by introducing spontaneity where it does not belong. As Rees-Mogg said, "uncontrolled energy is merely a big and usually destructive bang."

I believe that we need to recover a sense of limits because, in our uncontrolled search for ever greater affluence, we are endangering the future of the planet and betraying our responsibility to generations not yet born. There are such things as fruit we should not eat and fire we should not bring.

Shabbat Shalom

COVENANT AND CONVERSATION
Family Edition

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

*The **Family Edition of Covenant & Conversation** is an accompanying resource available to download each week from **www.RabbiSacks.org/CCFamilyEdition** (or via the main Covenant & Conversation email). It helps parents and educators take Rabbi Sacks' ideas from this essay and make them more accessible to teenagers. Each week, we will include three key questions from the Family Edition to inspire discussion around your Shabbat table. For more educational content as well as discussion pointers when answering these questions, please see the Family Edition!*

1. **Why do you think there are so many different explanations for what Nadav and Avihu's sin was?**
2. **Why must we be cautious with religious spontaneity? How do religious rules and laws help?**
3. **How can we apply this message about the importance of limits to our own lives?**

Jonathan Sacks
The Office of Rabbi Sacks

www.rabbisacks.org @rabbisacks

The Office of Rabbi Sacks, PO Box 72007, London, NW6 6RW
+44 (0)20 7286 6391 • info@rabbisacks.org

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