Bamidbar

Relationships, Risk, Shavuos, and G-d

One of the great paradoxes of life is that in order to have a good, strong, vibrant relationship, we have to feel in our innermost heart that, if need be, we can live without this relationship. If we do not feel this way, then we will never be able to establish a good, strong, vibrant relationship. In other words, in order to have a strong relationship, we have to know that we can survive successfully without this relationship. Individuals who are afraid that they could never make it without this relationship are so consumed with fear that they will do all sorts of things which, in effect, end the relationship even though, formally, it may still exist. (This applies also to an employee. If an employee feels that he cannot make it without this particular job, then he will be so consumed with fear that he will be willing to do things which will make him an inefficient and disruptive employee and which will also cause him to lose all his self-respect and dignity.) If a person is so dependent upon a relationship that he is willing to do anything to maintain it, then he becomes a slave to the other person in the relationship, and there is no relationship anymore. The relationship has already been broken. Relationships must be co-dependent. A master/slave relationship is no relationship. An additional paradox is that not only will the slave in the relationship feel terribly put upon and be actually abused, but the master in the relationship will soon grow tired of this mirror image of him or herself and will look elsewhere for diversions. Teenagers and immature adults who many times do not understand what relationships are all about will actually commit suicide when they feel that they can no longer maintain their relationships. This indeed is a terrible tragedy.

In the *Torah* portion *Bamidbar* and in the *Torah* portion *Pinchas* we learn about the genealogy of Aaron. We learn not only that Aaron had two older sons, Nodov and Avihu, who died childless, but also we learn how they died. Why should the *Torah* teach us over and over again that Nodov and Avihu died because they brought strange fire before G-d, especially since this episode is thoroughly described in the *Torah* portion *Shmini?* Why does the *Torah* emphasize this episode again in the *Torah* portion *Bamidbar* and in the *Torah* portion *Pinchas* when all that is being described

there is the genealogy of Aaron?

Perhaps we can understand why the *Torah* stresses this episode of Nodov and Avihu's bringing strange fire to G-d because this episode is pivotal in the understanding of what Judaism requires of us if we are to have a strong, vibrant relationship with G-d and with our spouses. According to our tradition, the paradigm of the relationship between man and G-d is the relationship between a husband and a wife. That's what the rabbis tell us *Shavuos* is all about. It is about the marriage of Israel to G-d at Mount Sinai, with the *Torah* being the Ketubah. At Mount Sinai the Jewish people decided that G-d was to be their G-d, and G-d declared that the Jewish people would be His chosen people. In order to understand, though, what this relationship entails, the rabbis teach us that we have to understand what happened on the day that Aaron was inaugurated as high priest when Nodov and Avihu brought their strange fire.

We learn how, after a full week of dedicatory ceremonies which were presided over by Moshe, Aaron was to be inaugurated as high priest and preside over the climactic ceremonies of the eighth day. Aaron was to prepare the sacrifices and a fire was supposed to come down from G-d and ignite the sacrifices. Aaron prepared the sacrifices and placed them on the altar. Everything was ready for the fire to come down and ignite them, but nothing happened. Aaron grew very worried. He felt, according to Rashi, that the fire did not come down from heaven because he was not worthy. After all, he had assisted the people in constructing the golden calf. Perhaps Moshe had been mistaken, Aaron thought, about G-d having told him to appoint Aaron as high priest. Moshe told him not to worry, and he had Aaron lift up his hands and bless the people. Then he and Moshe went into the Tabernacle together for a while and then they came out and still nothing happened. Aaron and Moshe blessed the people again. Nodov and Avihu saw this and they became very worried. They were afraid not only that their father would be embarrassed but that the people would not believe in G-d anymore. The fire was not coming from heaven. They, therefore, determined that they would bring the fire. They would make sure that the people would not be disappointed and that their father would not be embarrassed. They, instead, were struck down. We cannot falsify our relationship with G-d.

This is similar to what happened when King David tried to bring the Ark of the Covenant from the Philistine border up to Jerusalem. The Ark had been captured by the Philistines after they had destroyed Shiloh and had been taken to Philistia. There the Philistines were afflicted with plagues which they attributed correctly to the fact that they had the Jewish Ark of the Covenant in their midst, so they cast it outside their borders where it rested until David decided to bring it up to Jerusalem. King David had the Ark loaded on a wagon and began to bring it up to Jerusalem. Ooza, one of the men bringing up the Ark, saw that the wagon was starting to totter because one of the oxen drawing the wagon had stumbled. He reached out with his hand to steady the wagon and was struck down. David was angry because of this, and he left the Ark there and did not bring it up to Jerusalem until three months later, but this time David brought up the Ark according to how the *Torah* commanded that it should be brought up, not by putting it in a wagon but by having it carried on the shoulders of men.

Nodov and Avihu were struck down, the rabbis tell us, because they tried to falsify the relationship between G-d and Israel. They had tried to turn belief in G-d into some sort of a magic show. All relationships must be based on the truth. You cannot cover up for a spouse. You cannot cover up even for G-d. Those religious groups who think that they have all the answers for all the injustices and calamities in the world misrepresent religion and do great harm to man's relationship with G-d. We do not know why good people suffer. We also do not say that G-d is helpless and cannot prevent good people from suffering, as Harold Kushner did in his book, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. If G-d is so helpless, who needs Him? We cannot explain why there was a Holocaust. We do not know. We cannot explain why an all-powerful G-d had to create pain, suffering, and death. We have to be honest even if that means risking our relationship with G-d. Nodov and Avihu did not understand that. They wanted the Jewish people to maintain their relationship with G-d at all costs, even if it took trickery and deceit, strange fire, even if it took shortcuts, which according to some rabbis meant drunkenness and denial of reality.

The rabbis ask, why did G-d have to create atheism? They answer because we even have to risk our relationship with G-d for the sake of truth and morality. It is not a sin in Judaism to be an atheist; it is only a sin

to worship idols. Nowhere are we commanded not to be an atheist. G-d created atheism to teach us that it is possible to live in this world without a relationship with G-d. It is not preferable and it is not easy but it is possible. In order to have a firm belief in G-d, we have to be willing to risk our relationship with Him by knowing that G-d demands the truth, and we can never gloss over the truth, and also by knowing that G-d demands that we never do immoral things, even if we think that the request comes from Him.

That's one of the lessons of the story of the Akedah. G-d does not want us to kill our children so that the community can be blessed or the rest of our family can be spared harm. Relationships must be based on truth and morality. The French talk a lot about love, but they also talk about love being a trap. They tell the story of a widow who had a child from her first husband. They tell how she fell in love a few years later with another man. The man said that he would have a relationship with her but only if she would throw her child out an eight story window. She wanted that relationship so much that she did. Of course, by so doing, she assured that she would never have a relationship with that man because she would never be able to look at him without being consumed with guilt and longing for her son. There are certain things we can never do to maintain a relationship. True, in any relationship there have to be compromises but not slavish dependence and not compromise by only one side, and there must never be any abuse or self-abasement or immorality.

The example of Nodov and Avihu was and is pivotal to understanding Judaism's view of what is required in our relationships between man and man, especially in marriage, and between man and G-d. So often the urge to sacrifice to maintain a relationship is so strong that people will do things that they should not do. This ultimately does not help because, although the relationship may formally remain, it is already dead. Nodov and Avihu, by bringing strange fire, in effect showed that their and any belief in G-d was a fake. They turned religion into some sort of a fairy tale, something which did not conform to reality at all. We must be willing to risk our relationships, even our relationship with G-d, if they are to endure. Nobody can ask us to give up the truth or to act immorally in order to maintain a relationship. If they do, then they have, in effect, asked that we

end our relationship with them.

Let us all hope and pray that none of us will every bring strange fire to G-d, to any of our relationships. Let us always realize that the seal of G-d is truth and that the glue that holds relationships together is also truth. Nobody should every abuse themselves or sacrifice their health or the health of their children in order to maintain a relationship. If G-d tells us that the only way we can have any type of relationship with Him is to risk the relationship by being true to truth and morality, how much more so must we risk our human relationships by always being true to truth, morality, and our own dignity and the dignity of our children. Let us all hope as we approach the holiday of *Shavuos*, the holiday which celebrates the marriage of G-d to Israel through the giving of the *Torah*, that we will all have such relationships so quickly in our day we will all be drawn closer to each other and to the Holy One, Blessed be He. Amen.