

SHMINI 1981

In the Torah portion Shmini we learn about how Nadab and Avihu were struck down when they offered strange fire to G-d. Rabbi Naftali Berlin said that the reason they were struck down was because they concentrated too much. They tried to achieve higher consciousness and spirituality the wrong way. This Torah portion begins "and it was on the eighth day". There are seven days of creation and then there was the 8th day when the Tabernacle was dedicated. All of us live in the world. The material things alone do not satisfy us. We all feel that there is something more to life. We want to go beyond ourselves. On the radio and in the newspapers we hear continuously about strivings for a higher consciousness, about how if we do all sorts of things from health foods to looking at our navel we will get into contact with higher realms. Unfortunately, most of these fads are at best foolish and at worst destructive. In an earlier period the music of our day was comforting and soothing. During the depression and World War 2 people did not crave excitement and exhilarating experiences. They had enough hardship and excitement in life and they were looking for a little solace and comfort and beauty. Today many of our young people have had it so good that they miss an excitement, a raised consciousness, and so the music of today is raucous and many times absurd and ludicrous. Even the costumes the singers wear are ridiculous. People feel they must do unusual and even ludicrous things to come into contact with their higher consciousness. We live in a world which was created in the 7 days but we want something more. We want to go beyond ourselves. We want the 8th day. How do we achieve this special feeling? Nadab and Avihu thought they could achieve it by denying this world. They refused to marry, etc. Judaism says that you cannot achieve the spiritual by denying the physical. You must go through the physical in order to reach the spiritual. That's why immediately after the story of Nadab and Avihu we learn about the laws of kosher. It's through the mundane things of life, through elevating them that we get a spiritual experience. We are not going to get a spiritual experience by contemplating our navel, exercising, etc. We must have the right attitude

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and elevate all aspects of life to have a special experience.

The story about a woman who came to talk to a group of youngsters about Purim.

She said, "Do you know what Esther's Jewish name was?" Nobody knew. She

then said, "I will give you a hint. Many of your mothers belong to this organization that has this name". All of a sudden a little girl jumped up

and said, "I know. I know". The woman looked at her and said, "Tell me".

She said, "It's easy. She belongs to Weight Watchers".

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In the Torah portion, Shemini, we learn how Aaron was installed as the High Priest. We learn how for seven days Moshe had conducted the impressive ceremony. We learn how on the eighth day Aaron had taken over. He had prepared the sacrifices and then he had blessed the people and then he and Moshe had gone into the Tabernacle and they came out and blessed the people again. Immediately afterwards it said a fire came out from G-d and consumed the sacrifices. Although in the text a new chapter opens by telling us how Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's sons, had brought strange fire which they had not been commanded to the altar and how they were struck down. In the Hebrew this is all one paragraph. The chapters were invented by an English monk in the Middle Ages. The Rabbis explain that Nadav and Avihu had grown impatient. They had wanted to feel G-d's essence. They wanted to have a spiritual experience and they could not wait. Some of the Rabbis say that they got drunk and others say they were ambitious and said, "When will these old people die so we can take over?". Others say, especially Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Berlin, that they really wanted a spiritual experience. They were not interested in the material things of life. They were sincere in their quest for a mind-expanding experience. They thought they could get it by some shortcut. In the Haphtorah we have recounted a similar experience. We have recounted how after the Ark which contained the Ten Commandments, which had been captured by the Philistines, was taken to the land of the Philistines. Many plagues happened to the Philistines who held it so it was set back across the border. King David wanted to bring it up to Jerusalem, his new capitol. He placed it on a wagon and then with many people accompanying it and playing many instruments he began to bring it up to Jerusalem. One of David's trusted lieutenants put out his hand to steady the Ark when the oxen pulling the wagon containing the Ark stumbled. He immediately was struck down. This upset David very much. David, however, had done the wrong thing. The Ten Commandments were not to be transported on a wagon. In fact, there were staves that went through the Ark that were there permanently so that the Ark could be carried on a person's shoulders. Religion is not something which you can just occasionally stick out your hand to steady or help. If it is to be effective and not be a magical or artificial high it must be carried on a person's shoulders. It must be lived day by day. There are no shortcuts.

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David later had the Ark carried up to Jerusalem as it was supposed to be done. Then he sang and danced and the people felt the joy of their religion. Michel, his wife, was upset by David. She did not believe that there was any joy in religion or life. As a result, she was barren. Nodov and Avihu made the same mistake. They thought they could force a spiritual experience. They were like the people today who take drugs. Apparently, sniffing cocaine is widespread among so many people today. It is not going to bring them happiness. It is only going to bring them disaster. Happiness can only come by fulfilling self-set goals, knowing that you are accepted, and by bringing joy to others. Nodov and Avihu did not want to live life the way it should be lived. They did not want to get married. They did not want to commit ourselves. Their artificial stimulants only led to their death. We say that the only way you can really feel life's high and be happy is by living life the way you should day in and day out. That's why immediately after we learn about Nodov and Avihu we learn about the kosher laws. We learn how there are no shortcuts to religion and we must live it in all our daily actions if it is to be effective. Of course, there are frustrations in life but the happiness still comes. It is like the story of the man who went to Mark Twain and asked him to autograph some of his books which he had just bought. Mark Twain asked him why he had bought the books. He said, "I am giving them to my wife for her birthday". Mr. Twain said, "I bet she'll be surprised". The man said, "She sure will, she is expecting a mink coat". In life it is the little things we do together day in and day out that allow us to feel life's high, that give us spiritual experiences. I am reminded of the story of a couple who were asked on their 50th wedding anniversary if despite the 50 years they were still in love with each other. Not in spite of the 50 years, but because of them they loved each other more. We all wish the young couple today much happiness and joy and I would like to conclude with a composition a little girl handed in to me about Benjamin Franklin. She wrote, Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston. He went to Philadelphia. He met a nice girl and they made electricity. We hope this young couple will make electricity, too.

Can Love of G-d overwhelm everything ELSE

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In our day and age there is a lot of talk about a higher consciousness. People want to really feel with it. They want to leave the humdrum affairs of everyday life and have an exhilarating experience. This, of course, is the underlying advertising theme of many of the products that are sold today, especially cruises, vacations, and trips of all sorts. Most people, even if they will not admit it, usually end up just tired and, sometimes, airsick or seasick from the trips. They never really ever get that extraspecial exhilarating experience that was promised them in the advertisements. They do learn a lot and see a lot of things, but usually they are very, very glad to get home again where they can have real satisfying life experiences.

In the Torah portion, Shmini, we learn about the dedication of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. This should have been Aaron's happiest day. He was being inaugurated as the High Priest. However, on this day tragedy struck. Two of his sons, Nadab and Avihu, were struck down because they offered strange fire to G-d. Rabbi Naftali Berlin says that the reason they were struck down was not because they were bad people, but because they were looking for spiritual experiences in the wrong way. They thought that they could take a shortcut to get an exciting, exhilarating spiritual experience. They had brought strange fire before G-d which He had not commanded them. They did not want the responsibilities of the world. All they wanted was just to love G-d.

The Rabbis tell us that the reason it took eight days to dedicate the Tabernacle was because there were seven days of creation. The first seven days of the dedication of the Tabernacle were to demonstrate

that the Tabernacle first had to be part of this world with all its responsibilities, and only then could it reach the spiritual level of the eighth day. We all know that material things alone do not satisfy, but we cannot short circuit them when we want to go beyond ourselves and gain a spiritual experience.

On the radio and in the newspapers we hear continually about striving for a higher consciousness, about how, if we will do all sorts of things from eating health foods to looking at our naval, we will get into contact with higher realms. Unfortunately, most of these fads are, at best, foolish and, at worst, destructive. In our day music and, unfortunately, drugs are being used as vehicles to get these types of exciting, exhilarating experiences. In an earlier period popular music was comforting and soothing. During the Depression and World War Two people did not crave those exciting and exhilarating experiences. They had had enough of them in the hardships of poverty and war. They were looking for a little solace and comfort and beauty. Today much of our popular music is meant to create excitement, exhilaration, and a raised conscience. The music is raucous and, many times, ludicrous. Even the costumes the singers wear are ridiculous. These young people feel that they must do unusual and even ludicrous things to get into contact with a higher consciousness.

This was, of course, Nodov and Avihu's error. They thought that they could achieve this higher conscience by shunning and denying this world. They refused to marry. They had such a great passion for G-d that all they wanted to do was concentrate on getting closer

to G-d. Some Rabbis said that they even got drunk, like some of our youngsters do today when they take drugs, in order to reach a higher conscience. They thought that they could force a spiritual experience. The people who sniff cocaine today are doing the same thing. There are no shortcuts to a spiritual experience. The Tabernacle could not be dedicated until the eighth day.

We in Judaism do not believe that you can reach the spiritual by denying the material. The only way you can have a spiritual life is by going through the material. Nodov and Avihu brought strange fire to G-d. Fire in Hebrew is "Eish", a word which is composed of two letters, Aleph and Shin, which can stand for "Emes" and "Sholom", which mean "truth" and "peace". Nodov and Avihu felt that all that was important in life was truth and peace. They wanted the truth and peace of a mystical experience with G-d. We in Judaism reject the mystical experience which does not go through people. Communing with G-d while letting others suffer is not religion in Jewish eyes. Abraham even told G-d to wait, according to the Rabbis, when G-d had appeared to him in order that he could take care of the needs of three strangers.

We reach G-d best, according to our tradition, when we join together with others to do good, when we use the physical, not deny it, to elevate ourselves and others. It is interesting to note that the Rabbis say that when Nodov and Avihu died only their souls were consumed. Their bodies remained untouched. This, too, emphasizes the fact that their death was caused because of a passion of their souls.

The passions of the soul are the worst kind of passions because they give usually kind and considerate people the capacity to do terrible things to themselves and to others. The Rabbis also say that Nodov and Avihu said among themselves, "When will these old people die so we can take over and do things right?" Their passion for G-d had even caused them to show disrespect and contempt for their own father and uncle.

We have always believed that a spiritual life comes from elevating the physical. It is true that the upper levels of a house are more beautiful than the foundations, but if the foundations are neglected or destroyed then the house will totter. This is the same lesson which Yisro taught his son-in-law, Moshe, when he saw him sitting while all the people were standing when he was judging them. Yisro did not like this one iota because Moshe, by so doing, was not showing respect to the people. No one could have loved the Jewish people more than Moshe but this act of disrespect could, in time, destroy the love that Moshe had for the Jewish people. When we go to so called higher levels like love we must never do away with the so called lower levels of respect of etiquette because our lack of respect will eventually destroy our love, and we will be left with nothing.

Nodov and Avihu did not understand this. They thought that because they loved G-d and wanted to love Him more than anything else they were free from the responsibilities of this world, from marrying and having a family, that they were free from showing respect to Moshe and Aaron, and that they were free from other normal forms

of behavior like sobriety. They justified what they were doing by claiming that they were overwhelmed by love of G-d. This in Judaism will not wash. We never say that higher forms like love supercede any other forms like respect or law or etiquette.

This is illustrated even in the blessings we say every day. It is true that we have a special blessing for fruits and for vegetables and for cakes. There is a hierarchy in blessings. However, if one did make the blessing for a vegetable on a fruit, he has still fulfilled the requirement for making a blessing. He may not have said the best blessing, but he has fulfilled the requirement. The higher blessing never supercedes the lower blessing. This is why, too, I believe that the laws of Kashruth are stated right after this incident of Nodov and Avihu. The Torah is telling us, "You want a spiritual life? Then elevate all aspects of your life. Make sure you do not give pain to animals. Make sure you do not do disgusting things and feel that by so doing you can reach Me."

Holiness means remembering that G-d took you out of Egypt. It means remembering the poor and the afflicted. You want a high? You can get it, but there are no shortcuts. Everyone knows that if you want to play beautiful music, you have to practice long and hard, and if you want a spiritual experience you must sanctify all aspects of your life. You must never say that since I love someone or something that is enough. You must show your love by your deeds, and you must live all aspects of your life whether eating or drinking, walking or talking, with holiness. Love never supercedes law or etiquette or respect. It just compliments it.

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In the Torah portion Shmini we have one of Judaism's basic principles: "You shall not make yourself detestable." This principle many people are not aware of. They do not realize that one of Judaism's basic principles is not to become disgusted with yourself. "You shall not make yourself unclean." In our day and age this principle has been under challenge or completely ignored. People today feel that if something is possible to do they should do it. They challenge themselves to do everything that they think they can do even if they have to steel themselves and take sensitivity training in order to do it. The Torah tells us that we are not to make ourselves disgusting. It is true that sometimes we have to do things that make us disgusting, but that is only if there is an overriding reason, for example, preparing the dead for burial or, in the case of medical students, cutting into a cadaver. These things are necessary. We must, because of the Mitzvah involved, steel ourselves and do the things that normally would be disgusting. However, this does not prevent us from becoming ritually unclean. The Rabbis tell us the highest form of ritual uncleanness is to come into contact with the dead. This does not have anything to do with morality. Ritual uncleanness has to do with a psychological state. When we handle the dead we become depressed. We become disgusted with ourselves. In our religion we are all supposed to have self-worth. If we do not believe we have any worth, then we cannot believe that anyone else has worth either. If you are disgusted with yourself you must, of necessity, feel that everyone else is disgusting, too. That's why we say "Veahafta L're Echa Kamocho" "You should love your neighbor as yourself." It is not enough just to say you should love your neighbor, but you should love your neighbor as yourself. If you do not have feelings of self-worth, if you do not love yourself, then you cannot love others. Of course, we do not mean excessive self-love. If you do not think you are important and worthwhile, then you cannot feel others are important or worthwhile. Especially teenagers have a tendency to want to try and do all sorts of things just because they are there, even though they know they will make themselves disgusting. They also set up all sorts of challenges for

themselves which are not real or necessary. I am reminded of a high school student who decided he was not going to do any homework to see if he could pass. He almost failed before he realized that he had to do homework. He accepted a false challenge. The students who play chicken, or the students who drink to get drunk even though they do not like liquor and throw up all over the place, or do different sexual practices which make everyone very disgusted which they feel they have to do to be accepted. Peer pressure is very great, especially among teenagers. We do not have to do everything just because it is possible, or because other people think we should. All the initiation rites that young people go through, and many of which are degrading and humiliating but they do it to belong, or the terrible, gruesome rites that people engage in in order to prove their love, like harming their children or even killing them. If a person really loved you he would not ask you to do disgusting things. I am reminded of a T.V. film strip which was taken in Syria on the day of independence, how Assad clapped and cheered when young girls bit off the head of snakes and drank their blood to show their bravery against Israel, or how they would slaughter dogs and cats and drink their blood. We do not have to accept challenges which make us feel disgusted. We do not have to succumb to group pressure and become drug or alcohol addicts. I constantly warn our teenagers. Sometimes it is the brightest and most sensitive who have the most trouble. They feel that every challenge is worthwhile and if anything is possible it should be done. This is wrong. I hope and pray that our youngsters will always realize this. This, of course, was the sin of Nadav and Avihu in this Torah portion. They loved G-d so much that they thought they could accept any challenge to serve Him. They brought strange fire. G-d does not want us to become disgusted with ourselves. That's why, also, we have the laws of kashruth in this portion. It is to teach us that we are not to make ourselves disgusting. We are not to eat everything just because it is possible to eat everything. We are not to eat insects and disgusting creatures, etc. It was actually believed in the Middle Ages that to be a godly person you had to be dirty and filled with lice. People in Europe were warned not to take baths because only Jews and babies took baths. Queen Isabella

was proud on her deathbed of never having taken a bath. Perhaps that is why perfume was invented. We should never make ourselves disgusting. It only makes us callous and hard and it makes it easier for us to do disgusting things to others. We should not let others talk us into things which will make us disgusting either. The story about the man who went to a Chinese restaurant and thought everything he was served came from a duck. He asked the waiter who brought him a dish what it was. The waiter told him it was the wings of duck. The next item he asked the waiter about was breast of duck. The next dish was feet of duck. Finally the waiter brought him a dish that the man recognized as chicken. The man asked, "What is this?" The waiter said, "Friend of duck." We should not let our friends influence us to do disgusting things, and we should never do disgusting things ourselves.

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In the Torah portion Shmini we learn how Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's two oldest sons, brought strange fire to G-d, how fire came out from G-d and consumed them. They died on the very day that their father, Aaron, was inaugurated as High Priest. This day, which should have been the happiest in Aaron's life, turned into a tragedy. In the Chumashim that we have today Aaron's inauguration and the story of Nadav and Avihu are in two separate chapters. The Torah has no chapters or verses. The Torah is divided only into paragraphs. In the story of Aaron's inauguration and the story of Nadav and Avihu they are all in the same paragraph. These two events are intimately connected. We learn how after Aaron had performed all the necessary sacrifices, that Aaron lifted his hands to the people and he blessed them, and then we learn how Moshe and Aaron came into the tent of meeting and how they went out and blessed the people. First of all, what's going on here? Why is Aaron going in and out of the tent of meeting, and Moshe and Aaron, why are they blessing the people? The rabbis tell us that Moshe and Aaron are really stalling. The eight days of the dedication ceremony has been completed, and Moshe has been assured by G-d that a fire will come down and ignite the sacrifices but nothing is happening here. Aaron blesses the people and still no fire comes. Then Moshe and Aaron enter into the Tabernacle and then they came out and blessed the people again. They were starting to get frantic. The fire from G-d did not appear. G-d's presence was not being felt. It was at this point that Nadav and Avihu brought their strange fire. They looked at Moshe and Aaron and they said, "When will these old men die so we can take over? They are completely discredited now. They deserve to have the leadership taken away from them. They have not been doing a good job anyway." In other words, Nadav and Avihu thought that Moshe and Aaron were not worthy and deserved that G-d's fire should not come down. New ways were needed. New approaches were needed. Moshe and Aaron deserved that G-d should not send fire down for them. In another part of the Torah when Nadav and Avihu's names are mentioned, we have recounted how they beheld a mystical vision in which they, so to speak, were standing above G-d looking down at the people. This is where the sapphire brickwork is mentioned. Their tendency was always to look down at people, to judge people harshly, to say if a person was sick,

