Shemini: The significance of ‘‘the strange fire’’

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The sidrah *Shemini* recounts the tragedy of the death of Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu. There we are told that it was on the eighth day of the installation ceremony of the priests into their new priestly status and office that they took their fire pans and put into them *eish zarah asher lo tzivah ottam*, “strange fire that God had not commanded them to take,” and offered it on the altar. A peremptory punishment was visited upon them both: “And fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed them and they died” (Lev. 10:1-2).

Sages and commentators have struggled to understand this episode, and to determine what precisely was the heinous offence that elicited such a terrible punishment to be visited upon those two young men, endowed with such promise and leadership potential. Particularly mystifying is the fact that they were engaged at that very time in a sacred rite at the very altar of the newly consecrated sanctuary. Presumably, they were interceding with God; their thoughts must have been pure, and their frame of mind spiritual. Admittedly, they added a ritual - *asher lo tzivah* - “that God had not commanded.” But, so what! What was so terrible about adding a ritual flourish that they deserved to forfeit their lives on account of that? After all, religious scholars and synagogal leaders have been doing just that down through the ages. Indeed, countless Temple rituals – such as prayer and the singing of psalms - were introduced that were “not commanded by God.”

We shall never know. We can only conjecture. And, one of the most interesting suggestions, with considerable relevance for contemporary spirituality, was offered by the famous 19th century scholar, the Netziv of Volozhin, author of *Ha'amek Davar*. For him, the *eish zarah,* "strange fire," that Nadav and Avihu used should not be understood literally, but rather as a figure of speech. It was a metaphorical, fire. Their intention was not to reject a divine fiat. Quite the contrary. They felt themselves to be literally on fire, blazing the trail of their *own* spirituality. They were supposed to be participating in an initiation ceremony of the entire priesthood, performing the same rites as their fellow priests and receiving the identical priestly aura. They had committed themselves to the same tradition that was intended to inspire and unify the whole people as a covenanted community. However, instead of sharing in and helping to augment the nation's collective fire and spiritual enthusiasm, they chose to experiment with ''foreign fire," that was an external, privately nurtured, spiritual experience - *asher lo tzivah ottam* – that was other than that which God had commanded."

Thus, from the Netziv's perspective, not only did they not participate in or promote their endemic Sinaitic tradition, but were actually undermining it by following their own independent spiritual paths. They generated a strange fire that reflected an exclusive form of spirituality rooted in their own powerful needs, emotions, and spiritual yearnings, perhaps their own perceptions of the nature of God and His relationship to man.

As such, this would seem to be an act of idolatry, for they were serving themselves, and not God. They were satisfying their own needs, not God's will. They were creating their own, privatized expression of the Israelite religion, not allowing God's Torah and the fulfilment of the Divine mitzvot to be the determinant of – to use a later term – halachah, the way to

‘‘walk’’ in the light of God. The result was a strange and alien fire which was not the fire that came from above to warm and illuminate man. It was an earthly, secular fire, generated by the passionate imaginings of the human heart and mind, and not the light *des*cending from the One who first commanded, *yehiy ohr*, “let there be light,” to illuminate man.

Some argue that the origin of these spiritual imaginings lay in the love of God, but, nevertheless, it was a fire that He had not commanded or initiated. Thus, unlike the burning bush which came from the Deity, theirs was an alien fire that would soon exhaust itself and be consumed.

Some speculate that this interpretation of the Netziv was inspired by his generation’s bitter struggle against the new, reforming tradition that developed and was attracting adherents in Europe at that time. Reform Judaism, as it was called, was, in their eyes, the “strange fire that God had not commanded.” It was seen as a man-made form of spiritual expression; a non-halachic form of ritual and an attempt to reinterpret and revise the age-old halachic system. The traditionalists argued that the reforms were rooted in the modern Jew’s secular orientation which was the product of the Emancipation and not at all connected to the original fire of what they regarded as the authentic heritage.

In our day, numerous varieties of New Age religious systems have been created, to the extent that for decades many textbooks on religions have included Marxism and Scientology in their list. Indeed, the latter is now recognised as a religion in UK law! Madonna’s Kabbalism is another example of an independent religious system, albeit that it is almost totally wrenched from its legitimate moorings within Judaism’s mystical and rabbinic

traditions, to represent a mish-mash of ideas, mystical concepts and formulae from a whole range of disjointed and irreconcilable sources. It is surely a 'strange fire,' if ever there was one!

There is no shortage of dangers that have a way of arising from within the traditional religious camp. Interestingly, this was long ago suggested in the warning contained a few chapters later, following on from the reference to the death of Aaron's two sons: 'And God said to Moses, after the death of Aaron's two sons when they effected proximity to God, and they died: "Tell Aaron your brother that he should not enter the Sanctuary at all times…" (Lev. 16:1-2). This verse has been understood as a caution against religious exhibitionism, and against feigning familiarity with God.

God has also to be allowed His space. As classical theology has it, He does not wish to share heaven with man. He wants man to celebrate life and to be active within earthly society. He wants him to enjoy the blessings of nature, of education, of culture and creative endeavour. He wants man to live in the real world where his moral mettle can really be put to the test, where he can be enticed and distracted – and gain reward for overcoming all those beguiling obstacles.

The Torah has to be wedded to life. It is life's natural element. It is not meant to be studied and experienced in a vacuum or in a hot house of pure spirituality, divorced from the world and its concerns.

A classical homily has it that it is only on Yom Kippur, one day in the year, that humanity is invited to enter a spiritual hot house. At all other times we are meant to synthesize our physicality and spirituality, the way-of-life our Torah and oral tradition map out for us. This may explain why the biblical laws of Yom Kippur are introduced by the passing reference to the death of the two sons of Aaron (Lev. 16:1ff). For their fire did not originate in the collective tradition. Their fire was totally absorbing, and totally private. Its effect would have divorced them from the world, living a life wherein every day was effectively a Yom Kippur. Such a perception has inspired monastic traditions of some other faiths. It was never the way of Judaism.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey