

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 13, 2000 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

Dear Friends,

There is one instance in the Torah of silence so compelling that I feel we ought to study it along with our Talmudic texts. This is the case of Aaron's sons' dying before God because they brought an incense offering that was not commanded and Aaron's reaction to those deaths.

And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said unto Aaron: This is it that the Lord spoke, saying: Through them that are nigh unto Me I will be sanctified and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace. (Leviticus 10:1-3)

Nadav and Avihu's offering of incense which God did not command is punished in the strongest possible way in this story. Only offerings in the tabernacle/Temple are to be allowed. Milgrom suggests that this story is the Priestly corollary to the golden calf incident. Just as the children of Israel sinned after Sinai, so they sinned after hearing God's call from the tabernacle (Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1-16*. New York: Anchor Press, 1991, p. 631-632.). And just as that tale is told with dramatic flair to drive home the point of the story, so with this narrative, here. Thus, individual offerings of incense are not held by Leviticus to be genuine links to God and can, in fact, lead to death rather than life.

The mystical journey is a rewarding one, but it is one that can take dangerous turns. Nadav and Avihu discovered this in the most dramatic way and Heichalot literature describes the dangers of the journey explicitly as well. The way to God's throne is filled with rivers of fire and lightning and terrible, powerful angels. Today, Aryeh Kaplan, in his book *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 83, warns about the dangers of trying advanced meditational techniques before one is really ready:

As in the case of other advanced techniques, this [meditation on nothingness] can be extremely dangerous. The reason why it should never be practiced alone is that one can get "swallowed up" in the nothingness of the meditation and not be able to return. Therefore, one should always have a partner or a spiritual master available to bring one back to objective reality.

In other words, don't look into that which is too far above you. Not that you shouldn't be reaching at all times to attain higher and higher levels, but that if you reach too high you will either be merely puzzled by what you find, misunderstand it, or get yourself into trouble by tapping into veins of energy and holiness which you don't know how to use properly. As always, the key is balancing curiosity and caution; innovation and established practice.

But what of Aaron's silence? And how could his brother ask him not to mourn the passing of two of his sons? Milgrom (p. 604) suggests that he was paralyzed or groaned silently.

Discussion Questions:

1. When can an event's impact be so great as to be greater than words? How does this point to the healing powers of speech about a traumatic event?
2. Spin the story further in your mind. When do you think Aaron finally cried out? As soon as he was out of Moses' sight, in his tent, never?
3. What is the impact of silenced grief?

