

**Torah Table Talk**  
**Nadav and Avihu:**  
**Pious Martyrs or Unworthy Successors?**  
**Parshat Shemini**  
**Leviticus 9:1 – 11:47**

**Leviticus 10:1-3**

And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire in it, and put incense on it, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He commanded them not. 2. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. 3. Then Moses said to Aaron, This is what the Lord said: “I will be sanctified in them that come near to me, and before all the people I will be glorified.” And Aaron held his peace.

The death of Aaron’s two sons is one of the most troubling passages in the Torah. In a moment of triumph and celebration, as Aaron and his sons are initiated into the *Kehunah*, the priesthood, his two older sons are consumed by fire after offering a “strange fire before the Lord.” Moses reacts to this tragedy with a proclamation and Aaron, the grieving father, with silence. What were Nadav and Avihu guilty of that they deserved such a harsh punishment? What does it mean to say that they offered “a strange fire?”

There are many attempts to interpret this passage, some of which condemn the sons of Aaron and others which see them in a more positive light.

**Leviticus Rabbah 20:9**

R. Mani of She'ab, R. Joshua of Siknin, and R. Johanan in the name of R. Levi said: The sons of Aaron died for four things, in connection with each of which death is mentioned.

(1) Because they had drunk wine, and connection with this death is mentioned, as it says, “Drink no wine nor strong drink... that ye die not” (Lev. 10:9).

(2) Because [while officiating] they lacked the prescribed number of garments, and in connection with this death is mentioned, as it says, “And they shall be upon Aaron, and upon his sons... that they bear no iniquity and die” (Ex. 28:43). What did they lack? The robe, in connection with which death is mentioned, as it says, “And it shall be upon Aaron to minister... that he die not (Lev. 35).”

(3) Because they entered the Sanctuary without washing hands and feet; for it says, So they shall wash their hands and their feet, that they die not (Lev. 30:21), and it also says, “When they go into the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water, that they die not (Lev. 20).”

(4) Because they had no children, and in connection with this death is mentioned. Thus it is written, “And Nadav and Avihu died... and they had no children (Num.3:4).”

***Another point of view...***

Abba Hanin says it was because they had no wives, for it is written, “And he shall make atonement for himself, and for his house,” (Lev. XVI, 6), and ‘his house’ signifies his wife. R. Levi says that they were arrogant. Many women remained unmarried waiting for them. What did they say? ‘Our father’s brother is a king, our mother’s brother is a prince, our father is a High Priest, and we are both Deputy High Priests; what woman is worthy of us?’

1. Why do you think the sages offered so many reasons for the death of Nadav and Avihu? Do you find these reasons plausible or troubling?
2. Do you think the sages were overly harsh in their judgment of the sons of Aaron? How are we quick to judge others for small infractions and wrong doings?
3. How are the four explanations given here different from one another?

**Biur – Rabbi Moses Mendelsohn**

Nadav and Avihu were religious personalities of the highest order and far be it for them to maliciously transgress the word of the Lord. But out of a superabundance of joy they lost their heads and entered the Holy of Holies to burn incense which they had not been commanded by Moses but which they had made of their own accord...

1. How is this explanation for the death of Aaron’s sons different from the ones found in the Midrash above?
2. Can you think of examples in your life when good intentions sometimes had disastrous results?
3. How should we respond to tragedies in the lives of the people around us? How can we be helpful to others in times of loss and sorrow? Can this passage in the Torah give us some insight into our response to tragedy?

**Glossary**

**Biur** – A commentary by Rabbi Moses Mendelsohn, (1729 – 1786) an eighteenth century scholar and philosopher in Germany. Mendelsohn is known as the father of the Enlightenment.

***How to use Torah Table Talk***

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***