

ALCOHOL AND THE FATE OF NADAB AND ABIHU: A BIBLICAL CAUTIONARY TALE AGAINST INEBRIATION

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The reason for the sudden death of Nadab and Abihu remains one of the Torah's most perplexing mysteries. The lack of specific details in Leviticus 10:1-3 and 16:1 is surprising, for not only were Nadab and Abihu the eldest of the priestly four sons of Aaron, the first High Priest, but according to tradition they were "next in importance after Moses and Aaron, ranking even higher than the seventy elders."¹ In other words, these were key figures in Israelite history. Why were they struck down? To determine exactly why is to understand the intentions of God, which is beyond man's capability. One can infer from a careful consideration of the Torah, however, that the underlying reason was the effect of alcohol consumption on human behavior.

WHAT THE TORAH SAYS

Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, 'This is what the Lord meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.'
And Aaron was silent (Lev. 10:1-3).

These Torah verses suggest many possible inferences. The brothers each laid incense on a burning pan, which they offered as "alien fire" that God had not commanded of them. As a consequence, *fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them* (Lev. 10:2). The brothers died instantly at God's command. Aaron was silent, whether owing to shock at his loss, implicit understanding of the reasons for his loss, or simply acceptance of God's actions. To

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determine the exact nature of the infraction of Nadab and Abihu requires more probing.

Milgrom suggests that "the Nadab and Abihu account may serve as a polemic against paganism – the offering of incense in private idolatrous cults."² This is certainly a reasonable conclusion because, Milgrom explains, "the authorities feared, correctly, that it was or could lead to a heathen practice and that try as they might," possibly improper incense offerings could not be easily eliminated.³ Were these two brothers killed because they used incense in particular in this offering? Was it because they offered "alien fire" that the Lord had not asked of them? A subsequent Torah verse states, *The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord* (Lev. 16:1). This verse reiterates what happened to Nadab and Abihu, but adds *when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord*. Could it be that the brothers came too close to the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies? While this could be their main offense, it remains speculative.

In his commentary on Leviticus, Baruch Schwartz states that "two of Aaron's sons commit a blatant act of sacrilege, overstepping the strictly prescribed bounds of acceptable worship (10:1). The Lord sanctifies His name by striking them down on the spot (10:2-3), and the surviving members of the priestly family are forbidden to mourn their demise (10:4-7),"⁴ at least not outwardly. Still, it remains unclear exactly what they did wrong.

According to Schwartz, the ancient rabbis and commentators of medieval times were "incredulous at the idea that God had struck down two young priests for a 'mere' ritual offence," which appeared to come from a sincere attempt to serve God, though perhaps with excessive enthusiasm.⁵ Yet in biblical thinking, Schwartz adds, "ritual crimes are dire."⁶ Schwartz asserts that the brothers sinned because they "went too far in their misguided superpiety" and, by doing so, "acted in utter disregard for the deity." To be specific, "God intended that the manifestation of His Presence would ignite the altar fire, marking His acceptance of His people's devotion," Schwartz suggests; "their intent was for the divine fire to ignite their own pans; that is, they were attempting to arrogate control of the deity to themselves."⁷ This argument is compelling, and reflects the idea that priests were held to a par-

ticularly strict standard due to their close involvement with the rituals of the Sanctuary.

Similarly, Milgrom observes that "Priests and Levites share the custody of the sanctuary, the priests guarding within (and at the entrance, Num. 3:38) and the Levites guarding without (Num. 3:23, 29, 35)." Milgrom further notes that "All priests and Levites are responsible if disqualified priests or Levites encroach upon the sancta; Kohathite Levites are responsible for encroachment by Israelites while they carry the sancta (Num. 3:31; 4:1-15); and all Levites whose cordons ring the encamped sanctuary (Num. 3:23, 29, 35) are responsible for any Israelite encroachment." Hence, Milgrom concludes, "The penalty priests and Levites pay for failure to prevent encroachment is that of Nadab and Abihu – death by divine agency (Num. 18:3)."⁸ There can be no question that there were certain dangers associated with functioning as a priest.

RITUAL INFRACTIONS

Given the lack of a clear reason for the death of Nadab and Abihu, ancient rabbis and medieval commentators came to suggest other reasons for the severe fate of these two, Milgrom notes, including "drunkenness, celibacy, arrogant impatience for Moses and Aaron to die, or neglect of their sacred obligations."⁹ However, the simple understanding of the text seems to indicate a ritual infraction.

Regarding the behavior of Nadab and Abihu, Levine notes that the Midrash speculates that these two priests, by bringing a voluntary offering to celebrate the Tabernacle dedication, may have committed various ritual offences, such as penetrating too deeply into the innermost section of the sanctuary – which only the High Priest could do – and thereby getting too close to God; or bringing an offering they should not have brought; or because the "alien fire" they brought into the sanctuary consisted of unsanctified coals from an oven rather than the sacred coals from the sacrificial altar.¹⁰ Milgrom agrees with this view. He states: "The only possibility is that Nadab and Abihu took live coals from another source [rather than from the divine fire that consumed sacrifices on the altar]" because the term *esh zarah* ("alien fire") – as explained below – represented "unauthorized coals" rather than "flames."¹¹

Levine cites M. Haran's view that the offense of the two priests could simply have been bringing incense from beyond the sacred area – between the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and the altar – into the sacred space. The incense may not have been pure or it may not have adhered to the exact mixture prescribed in Exodus 30:34-38.¹² Levine further speculates that the two priests had violated a specific Torah law by entering the Tent for some improper purpose, because of a possible equivalence of *esh zarah* ("alien fire," Lev. 10:1) and *ketoret zarah* (an "alien incense" offering, Ex. 30:9). If these two terms are equivalent, Levine suggests, the death sentence might have come about because "it was forbidden to offer on the golden incense altar anything other than the daily incense offering."¹³ According to Exodus 30:7, the incense was offered twice daily on the inner altar; a compound of spices, it might have been improperly blended by Nadab and Abihu,¹⁴ but this again remains speculative.

There is one underlying question behind all these approaches. Why would these two presumably knowledgeable priests commit an offence, whatever it may actually have been, which deserved the punishment they received? In other words, the priests should have known better, so what could have led them to commit a serious infraction? One possible and compelling answer is lack of clear thinking due to alcohol ingestion, an act that impaired their judgment.

THE DANGER OF ALCOHOL

And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages, for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean; and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the Lord has imparted to them through Moses (Lev. 10:8-11).

These verses occur almost immediately after Nadab and Abihu's death. Why would God make such a stark pronouncement, that no wine or any other intoxicant be drunk by Aaron or his remaining sons on entering the Tent of Meeting, to avoid being killed? It seems that this warning needed clear articulation, because the law had already been violated by Nadab and Abihu.

Note also that the prohibition was communicated by God directly to Aaron, not through Moses, implying that it served as an explanation to Aaron for the death of his sons.

The need for sobriety is self-evident – priests are community leaders doing holy work. They must therefore retain a clear mind in order to perform their duties thoughtfully. If Nadab and Abihu had somehow been intoxicated, they would not have kept a clear head and might thus have committed an infraction that aroused God's anger. That infraction could have been any of those ritual offenses already mentioned. Why would these priests have done any of these things? Alcohol – a drug known to interfere with clear thinking – may indeed have been the cause, leading God to issue the warning against priestly intoxication (or drinking any alcohol at all) in Leviticus 10:8-10.

In *Leviticus Rabbah*, the Midrash alludes to alcohol in a series of references to Leviticus 10:1-3. For example: "Just as an adder separates life from death ... so wine caused a separation between Aaron and his sons in the matter of the death penalty."¹⁵ Wine is clearly understood here as the root cause of the death of Aaron's two sons. Leaving no room for doubt, "R. Shim'on expounded: The two sons of Aaron died only because they entered the Tent of Meeting when they were drunk."¹⁶

R. Pinhas in the name of R. Levi asserts that intoxication was indeed the main offense of Aaron's sons. "The matter may be compared to a king who had a reliable steward, but who observed the man standing in the doorway of a [wine] shop. He cut off his head without disclosing the reason and appointed another steward in his place. Now we do not know why he killed the first man, but from the instruction he gave to the second we can draw the proper conclusion, for he said: 'Do not enter that [wine] shop.' That tells us why he killed the first man. So here it is written, *And fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and devoured them; and they died before the Lord* (Lev. 10:2)."¹⁷

The Rabbis of the Midrash understood that alcohol was the underlying problem that led to Nadab and Abihu's demise, based on the proximity of the warning against intoxication to the account of their death. "Now we do not know the reason why they were put to death. But from what the Holy One, blessed be He, told Aaron, saying to him, *Drink no wine or strong drink [you or your sons with you, when you go into the Tent of Meeting, lest you die]*

(Lev. 10:8), we may draw the conclusion that they were put to death only on account of wine."¹⁸

However, in another section of *Leviticus Rabbah*, we find a different reason for the death of Aaron's sons, taught in the name of R. Eliezer: "[They] died only because they gave legal instruction in the presence of Moses, their master."¹⁹ In other words, it was a particular *action* that led to their fate. R. Eliezer states, "*I am not a prophet, nor the disciple of a prophet*" (Amos 7:14), but this is the tradition which I have received: Any [disciple] who teaches a law in his master's presence is liable to the death penalty."²⁰ Yet, one can still infer that alcohol made Nadab and Abihu act improperly – by giving instruction in the presence of Moses. The view of R. Eliezer, as well as the simple belief that it was a particular ritual offense that caused the death of Nadab and Abihu, in no way contradicts the premise that alcohol ingestion was the underlying problem. This is similar to Rambam's explanation that the sin of Moses at the Waters of Meribah was losing his temper, which gave rise to his own particular infraction.²¹

In fact, other passages in *Leviticus Rabbah* also omit any reference to alcohol, focusing instead on the brothers' actions. For example, "Bar Kappara said in the name of R. Yirmiyah b. Eleazar: On account of four matters did the two sons of Aaron die: because of drawing near [to the holy place], because of the offering [they made], because of [bringing] strange fire, and because they did not take counsel with one another."²² This is followed by specifics: "Because of drawing near: i.e., entering the Holy of Holies; Because of the offering: i.e., a sacrifice which had not been commanded; Because of the strange fire: brought in from the kitchen; Because they did not take counsel with one another, as it is written, *Nadab and Avihu each took his censer* (Lev. 10:1), i.e., each on his own account, for they did not take counsel with one another."²³

Although these are valid points, the underlying reason for the lack of clear thought in Nadab and Abihu's actions appears to have been inebriation. Alcohol interfered with their ability to behave professionally in accordance with God's expectations.

CONCLUSION

Following the violent death of Nadab and Abihu, the *kohanim* (priests)

were forbidden to consume alcohol. This also appears to be the general conclusion of the Rabbis in *Leviticus Rabbah*. Alcohol was evidently to blame for the errors Nadab and Abihu committed, which aroused God's fury. As it is said in *Leviticus Rabbah*, "Because they were drunk, and in that regard the death penalty is specified in Scripture: *Wine and strong drink you shall not drink . . . lest you die* (Lev. 10:9)."²⁴

While Jews in Israel and the Diaspora have traditionally tended not to drink to excess,²⁵ in the case of Nadab and Abihu the Sages had good reason to believe that drinking alcohol was responsible for these two men's clear lack of an appropriate frame of mind – *kavvanah* – when performing the religious duties incumbent on them in their priestly role.

As a consequence of their behavior, God made an example of the two brothers, dealing with them harshly. Moreover, just as other biblical figures serve as instruments for the sanctification of God's name through their punishment, Milgrom suggests that "here, too, the deaths of God's intimate priests, Nadab and Abihu, perform the function of sanctifying God – providing awe and respect for His power to all who witness the incident or who will subsequently learn of it."²⁶ This further serves as a warning to the priests that they must be especially careful when undertaking their duties in the sanctuary.

NOTES

I am grateful to Rabbi Dr. Ruth Sandberg, Professor of Rabbinics at Gratz College, for her impressions of an earlier version of this paper.

1. Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991) p. 596.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 628.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 630. Milgrom also presents evidence that private incense offerings were widespread in ancient Israel.

4. Baruch J. Schwartz, commentary to Leviticus in A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York, NY: The Jewish Publication Society, 2005) p. 225.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Milgrom, p. 602.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Baruch Levine, *The JPS Commentary on Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 59.

- 11. Milgrom, p. 597.
- 12. Suggested by Dr. Ruth Sandberg (personal correspondence with the author).
- 13. Levine, p. 59.
- 14. Milgrom, p. 597.
- 15. Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Scripture: The Evidence of Leviticus Rabbah* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), Parashah Twelve, XII:I, 16.B, p. 282.
- 16. *Ibid.*, 17.A.
- 17. *Ibid.*, 17.B, C, D.
- 18. *Ibid.*, 17.E.
- 19. Neusner, op. cit., Parashah Twenty, XX:VI, 2.A, p. 383.
- 20. *Ibid.*, 2.D.
- 21. Maimonides, *Introduction to Avot*, chapter 4.
- 22. Neusner, op. cit., Parashah Twenty, XX:VIII, 1.A, p. 384.
- 23. *Ibid.*, 1.B., 1.C., 1.D., 1.E., 1.F.
- 24. Neusner, op. cit., Parashah Twenty, XX:IX, 1.B, p. 385.
- 25. Possibly due to evolutionary biological prevention as a result of the ADH2*2 genetic variation that has been found significantly high among members of the Jewish community. This may conceivably be traced to a cultural tendency toward reduced alcohol consumption that might even stem from such biblical prohibitions as those discussed. See: "Gene Discourages Alcoholism in Jews," <http://alcoholism.about.com/cs/genetics/a/blcah030307.htm>; "Jewish Students Less Likely to Binge," <http://alcoholism.about.com/library/blsu030306.htm>; "Study: Jews Drink Less, but are More Likely to Get Drunk," <http://www.jewishaz.com/jewish-news/990115/study.shtml>.
- 26. Milgrom, pp. 601-2.



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