

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXVI: Shemini (Lev. 9:1–11:47)

Essay 3. The deaths of Nadab and Abihu

This week's *parsha* describes the death of the two sons of Aaron: "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 L-rd alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the L-rd and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the L-rd." (Lev. 10:1-2).

מדרש על פסוק "אחרי מות שני בני אהרן ... וימתו". "לפני ה' . . . ובנים לא־היו להם": אלו היו להם בנים, היו קודמין לא־לעזר ואיתמר. כל הקודם בנחלה קודם בכבוד ובלבד שיהא נוהג פמנהג אבותיו עכ"ל. מקשים היכי ילוי מהכא שאם אין הבן נוהג פמנהג אבותיו דהיינו שאינו ממלא מקום אביו או שאינו ראוי, אינו יורש פבדוד.

There is a **Midrash** (Lev. Rabbah 20:11) **on the verse**, "The L-rd spoke to Moses **after the death of the two sons of Aaron**, when they drew near the L-rd **and they died**" (Lev. 16:1).

"[But Nadab and Abihu died **by the will of the L-rd**, when they offered alien fire before the L-rd in the wilderness of Sinai] **and they left no sons**; so it was Eleazar and Ithamar who served as priests in the lifetime of their father Aaron" (Num. 3:4). Rabbi Ya'akov bar Avin in the name of Rabbi Avin in the name of Rav Acha said, **had they had sons, they would have taken precedence to Eleazar and Ithamar**, as it was taught there [in Babylon], **whoever has precedence in inheritance takes precedence in honors, so long as he behaves in accordance with traditions of his forefathers.**

- Lev. Rabbah 20:11

People question how we learn from here, i.e., Num. 3:4, that if a son does not behave in accordance with the traditions of his forefathers, such that he does not replace his father or that he is not worthy, he does not inherit his honor.

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ונקדים מדרש אחר הובא שם בסמוך, ר' יוחנן בשם ר' לוי אמר לא מתו בני אהרן אלא על ידי שלא היו להם בנים, אבא חנן אמר על ידי שלא הנה להם נשים. והקשו המפרשים וכי מפני שלא היו להם בנים נתחייבו מיתה ומה הנה להו למיעבד. ולדידן נמי קשיא איך הנה מצי משה למימר, "הוא אשר דבר ה' לאמר בקרבי אקדש." ופירש רש"י, "שנהם גדולים ממני וממה, ונהלא בפרק קמא דברכות מסקינן דהיכא דלא הו ליה בנים כלל לא הו ייסורין של אהבה, דבשלמא לשאר הטעמים שהביא המדרש שם, או שלא נשאו נשים או שמחוסרין מעיל. תירץ הקרבן אהרן שהקב"ה "רגלי חסידיו ישמר" אלא שפפעם הזאת רצה שיהיו שוגגים באיזה איסור ולא שיקרם מהחטא כדי שיתקדש הבית על ידיהם והקב"ה לא עביד דינא בלא דינא ועי"ש. אכל לפי טעם זה, שלא היו להם בנים, קשה איך אמר "בקרבי אקדש".

We will advance another midrash brought there in Lev. Rabbah, in an adjoining section. “Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Rabbi Levi said, ‘The sons of Aaron only died because they had no children.’ Abba Chanan said, ‘Because they did not have wives’ ” (Lev. Rabbah 20:9). The commentators questioned if it was indeed because they had no children that they were obligated to die, and what they should have done, i.e., why they didn’t have children.¹ For us, it is also difficult to understand how Moses was able to say to Aaron, “This is what the L-rd meant when He said: ‘Through those near to Me, I show Myself holy’ ” (Lev. 10:2). Rashi explained, “that they were greater than me and than you,”² i.e., that their deaths should be viewed as a martyrdom that sanctified G-d and the Tabernacle. Also, isn’t it found in the first chapter of tractate Berachot that some suffering is not a result of sin, but is an “affliction of love.”³ But when one has no children at all, it is not considered an affliction of love, as with the remaining points brought in the midrash there,⁴ but rather having no children at all could be because they had never married women, or they were lacking from Heaven. The Korban Aharon⁵ resolved that the Holy One, Blessed be He, “guards the steps of the faithful,”⁶ but this time He desired that [Nadab and Abihu] would unwittingly [violate] some prohibition, without being protected from the sin, in order that the Sanctuary would be sanctified by their

¹ Lev. Rabbah 20:10 advances the view that they were too pompous, rejecting many matches that were suggested for them, on the grounds that they were sons of Aaron and nephews of Moses and Miriam, and that the women suggested as matches did not have such a lofty lineage.

² That is, Rashi wonders where G-d said to Moses, “Through those near to Me, I show Myself holy.” Zevachim 115b finds a source in Ex. 29:43, “And there I will meet with the children of Israel; and it shall be sanctified by My glory,” with the Gemara saying, “Do not read [the word] as ‘by My glory,’ but rather ‘by My honored ones.’ ” I.e., G-d will be sanctified by those considered honored by G-d when He reveals himself in the Tabernacle. Rashi adds, based on Lev. Rabbah 12:2: “My brother, Aaron! I knew that this House was to be sanctified by those who are beloved of the Omnipresent G-d and I thought it would be either through me or through you; now I see that these [your sons who have died] are greater than me and than you!”

³ Berachot 5a: “Rava, and some say Rav Chisda, said: If a person sees that suffering has befallen him, he should examine his actions. If he examined and didn’t find, he may attribute [his suffering] to dereliction in [the study of] Torah. And if he did attribute [his suffering to dereliction in the study of Torah], and did not find [this to be so], he may be confident that these are afflictions of love, as it is stated: ‘For whom the L-rd loves, He rebukes, [as does a father the son in whom he delights].’ (Prov. 3:13).” Berachot 5b, and the Tosafot state that if one has children and they die, that is considered an affliction of love, but that if one never has children, that does not count as an affliction of love.

⁴ I.e., “midrash” here refers to the Aggadic element of the Talmud.

⁵ Aharon Ibn Hayyim (1545, Fez, Morocco–1632, Jerusalem), Biblical and Talmudic commentator. He lived in Venice for a while, publishing numerous works. The Korban Aharon (Venice 1609) is a commentary on the Sifra.

⁶ I Sam. 2:9. The Masoretic text shows the second word is written חסידו but pronounced חסידיו.

hands, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, did not judge man without justice, and see there. But according to this opinion, that they had no children at all, it is difficult how [Moses] said, "Through those near to Me, I show Myself holy."

וגיש לומר דאיתא במדרש על פסוק "וראה אם־דָּרְךָ־עֵצָב בִּי", אָמַר דָּוִד לִפְנֵי הַקֵּב"ה, רבש"ע אָם עֲתִיד אֲנִי לְהוֹלִיד בְּנִים וְלִהְיֶה מוֹטָב לִי "וְאֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ עֲרִירִי" עכ"ל. אָם כֵּן מִי שֶׁהוּא צָדִיק גָּמוֹר וְשֶׁהַמְקוֹם בְּחַר בּוֹ, אָם עֲתִיד הוּא לְהוֹלִיד בְּנִים מְכַעְסִים לְמְקוֹם, הַקֵּב"ה עוֹשֶׂה עִמּוֹ חֶסֶד גָּדוֹל לְכַבּוֹשׁ מֵעֵינָיו שְׂלֵא יִהְיוּ לוֹ בְּנִים, וְכִמוֹ שֶׁעֲשֶׂה לְנֹחַ. וְזֶהוּ שֶׁאָמַר מֹשֶׁה "הוּא אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר ה' " וְכוּ", הוֹאִיל שֶׁאָמַר לִי הַקֵּב"ה "בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדָּשׁ" וְכוּ' עֲכָשׁוּ אֲנִי רוֹאֶה שֶׁהֵם גְּדוֹלִים מִמְּנִי וּמִמֶּה, וּמֵה שְׂלֵא הִזָּה לָהֶם בְּנִים מְשׁוּם שֶׁצָּפָה הַקֵּב"ה שְׂלֵא יִהְיוּ בְּנֵיהֶם רְאוּיִים.

One can say that it's brought in the midrash (Yalkut Shimoni Bereisheet, remez 76) on the verse, "See if there is any offensive tendency in me" (Ps. 139:24), David said before the Holy One, Blessed be He, "Master of the Universe, if in the future I were destined to have children and they would anger me, it would be better that 'I would die childless' (Gen. 15:2)." If so, [regarding] one who is perfectly righteous and who has been chosen by the Omnipresent, if he is going to give birth to children who would anger the Omnipresent, then the Holy One, Blessed be He, does him a great kindness to restrain him from having children, as he did with Noah.⁷ This is why Moses said, "This is what the L-rd meant when He said: 'Through those near to Me, I show Myself holy.'" Moses intended, as Rashi explained: "Now that I see that they were greater than me and than you," and the reason that they had no children is because the Holy One, Blessed be He, saw that they would not be worthy children.

וְהַשְׂמָא יְלִיף הַמְדָּרְשׁ הַנ"ל, כִּל הַקָּדָם בְּנִחְלָה וְכוּ' וּבִלְבָד וְכוּ', שֶׁהָרִי הַפְּתוּב אוֹמַר "וְיָמַת נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא" וְכוּ' "וּבְנֵים לֹא־ הָיוּ לָהֶם" מְשׁוּם הַכִּי, "וְיִכְהֶן אֶלְעָזָר", הָא אָם הָיוּ לָהֶם בְּנִים לֹא הָיָה מִתְקַיֵּם "וְיִכְהֶן אֶלְעָזָר" וְכוּ'. לְפִי שֶׁהַבְּנִים הָיוּ נְכֻסִים בְּמְקוֹם אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם, וּמֵינָה גִילָף גַּמִּי שֶׁאֵינָם נְכֻסִים אֶלָּא דוֹקָא פְּשָׁהֶם רְאוּיִים, וְלֹא כְּשֶׁאֵינָם רְאוּיִים שֶׁאֵינָם נוֹהֲגִים מִנְהַג אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם, שֶׁהָרִי נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא שֶׁהָיוּ מִיּוֹדְעֵיו שֶׁל מְקוֹם לֹא הָיָה אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁיִּהְיוּ לָהֶם בְּנִים שֶׁאֵינָם מְהוֹגְגִים כְּנֹרְאָה לְעִיל, וְאֶדְרָבָא מְשׁוּם הַכִּי לֹא הָיוּ לָהֶם בְּנִים.

Now to learn from the midrash above (Lev. Rabbah 20:11), "whoever has precedence in inheritance takes precedence in honors, so long as he behaves in accordance with traditions of his forefathers." For the Scripture says, "But Nadab and Abihu died . . . and they left no sons," and because of this, "so it was Eleazar and Ithamar who served as priests in the lifetime of their father Aaron." For if they had had sons, they would not have fulfilled the traditions of their fathers, "so it was Eleazar and Ithamar who served as priests," for the sons were entering in place of their fathers. Let us also derive that they would only enter if they were worthy, and

⁷ Gen. 6:32 reads: "When Noah had lived 500 years, Noah begot Shem, Ham, and Japheth." Rashi comments: "R. Judan said: 'How is it that all the previous generations had children at the age of hundred years and this one (Noah) at the age of 500 years? The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "If they (Noah's children) be wicked, they will perish by the water of the Flood and it will grieve this righteous man; if they be righteous, I shall have to trouble him to construct several arks." He therefore restrained him from having children until he was 500 years old, in order that Japhet, the oldest of his sons should not reach the punishable age before the Flood.'"

not if they were unworthy in that they did not act in the traditions of their fathers. For Nadab and Abihu, who were intimates of the Omnipresent, it would be impossible to contemplate them having children who would not be deserving as seen above, but to the contrary, because of this, they had no children. I.e., it was not literally impossible for them to have undeserving sons, and indeed, according to this view, this is what would have been destined to occur. It would have been a great disgrace for two saintly sons of Aaron to have unworthy children, and therefore G-d prevented that from happening.

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