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Parashat Acharei Mot/Kedoshim

How is it that the two sons of Aharon Hacoheh – Nadav and Avihu – came to be consumed by heavenly fire on the very day of the dedication of the Mishkan?

The Zohar (Acharei Mot 60a) sheds light on this question:

“Rabbi Elazar stood up and spoke. He said, the Torah relates, ‘HaShem spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon when they had died coming close to HaShem.’ What is the point of this verse? The narrative of the Parasha begins with the next verse: ‘HaShem said to Moshe – Speak to your brother Aharon etc.’ The matter can be explained as follows. HaKadosh Baruch Hu gave the incense-offering to Aharon for his exclusive use. Aharon, the one who brought peace to the world below, was given the incense-offering, which brings peace to the world above. By bringing the incense offering while their father was alive, Nadav and Avihu encroached on Aharon’s privilege. Grieved by the deaths of Aharon’s two sons, Moshe wondered what mistake they had made. HaShem spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon – in response to Moshe’s perplexity. When they had died coming close to HaShem – it says “coming close” and not “bringing an offering;” by this choice of words HaShem told Moshe they had died because they brought the incense when the time was not yet right for them to do so. That is also the meaning of the verse (Vayikra

10:1): They offered before HaShem alien fire which he had not commanded them – they had not been commanded, but Aharon had been commanded.”

The Zohar is telling us that the desire of the sons of Aharon to draw close to HaShem was a positive one, but that they made the mistake of forcing the issue and overstepped the appropriate spiritual limits.

Shelah HaKadosh explains that the “alien fire” alludes to their physical bodies, which, being inherently material, were alien to the higher, spiritual realms into which they chose to ascend. However, we find in the case of Moshe Rabbeinu that even his physical body was transformed into something spiritual. [Devarim 34:6, which states that HaShem buried Moshe in the valley of Moab, is alluding to the fact that Moshe’s body rests in a lower place than his soul in the spiritual realm to which he ascended when he died. No man knows the place where he was buried even to this very day (Devarim 43:7) – because his body was transformed and transported to the spiritual realm.] Why then does Shelah HaKadosh say that the physical body is “alien” to the spiritual?

The answer to this question is that our spiritual task is to discover HaShem within the physical and infuse the world with sanctity, rather than discarding the physical and leaving the world behind. By working within the bounds of the world we ultimately come to transform and spiritualize even the physical. On account of their love of HaShem, Aharon’s two sons sought to draw close to Him while their physical bodies were still “alien” and not spiritually transformed.

Their desire to draw close to HaShem by renouncing the physical also led Aharon’s two sons to avoid marriage. Even though their calculation was mistaken, Aharon’s sons were given



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the honor of dedicating the heavenly alter by having their souls brought as offerings to HaShem by the angel Michael, as related in the Zohar.

Noam Elimelech sees Parashat Kedoshim as an outline of divine service and discovery of HaShem within the boundaries of the world. He writes: “ ‘When you offer a peace sacrifice to HaShem, you shall sacrifice it for your desire. You may eat it on the day you sacrifice it and on the next day, but anything left over until the third day must be burned in fire. ... If one eats it [past the allotted time] he will bear his guilt, for he has desecrated that which is holy to HaShem, and he will be cut off from his people.’ (Vayikra 19:5-8).’

Peace-sacrifices are so called because they bring harmony and reconciliation between their owners, the alter, and the Cohanim. The peace sacrifice represents the complete Tzadik, who harmonizes the Heavenly Host and draws down spiritual influx into the world. To attain that spiritual level, a person needs first to disengage from involvement in the physical and set the will of HaKadosh Baruch Hu as his only desire. The text can be glossed figuratively: When you offer a peace sacrifice to HaShem – if you seek to make peace between heaven and earth; you shall sacrifice it for your desire – it should be your own desire that is sacrificed, and you should desire nothing other than to do the will of the Creator. When you reach this exalted spiritual level you may eat it on the day you sacrifice it –and enjoy the earnings of the Mitzvot in this world, and on the next day – receive the principal reward in the next world. ... anything left over until the third day must be burned in fire – this alludes to the love of HaShem that burns within a person and incites him to rise up to join the Tzadikim in Gan Eden who attach themselves in love to HaShem and experience no physical pleasure. ...”

The path of exclusive and total dedication to Torah-study is not for everyone; as the Gemara put it (Bechorot 35b): “Many tried [the ascetic path] of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai but failed.”

The words of Shelah HaKadosh mean that a working person should imbue every physical action with spirituality. There is nothing wrong with amassing wealth, provided this is done not for greed but in order to use the money to serve HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

May it be His will that we attain the level of sanctifying the physical – amen.

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