

Saturday, March 22, 2014

Shifting sands and quagmires - the deaths of Nadav and Avihu

My drash this Shabbat at Temple Beth-El Mekor Chaim in Cranford, NJ ...

Shabbat shalom.

It was so nice, last week, looking at the Purim story.

The Jews are saved from destruction. Grief and mourning are turned into happiness and celebration.

And now here we are, just one week later in Parashat Shmini, looking at happiness and celebration turn into grief and mourning.

Nadav and Avihu, the oldest and second sons of Aaron, killed for whatseems to be a minor transgression.

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וָאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחַתָּתוֹ, וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ, וַיִּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ, קְטֹרֶת; וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה, אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה, אֹתָם

And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his firepan, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before God, which He had not commanded them.

וַיִּצְאָ אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה, וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם; וַיָּמָתוּ, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה.

And there came forth fire from before God, and devoured them, and they died before God.

We don't even really know why they die.

The only real clue we get in the parasha is the command given to Aaron immediately afterwards.

Moses tells Aaron not to enter the Temple intoxicated.

So maybe Nadav and Avihu died because they approached God in the wrong state of mind?

The Talmud says that they were punished for innovation and because they ignored the authority of Moses.

There's a good explanation by the Ba'al HaTurim, who says that אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה (they were not commanded) actually means לֹא צִוָּה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה (they were commanded not to). In other words, that they deliberately ignored what they were told not to do.

The deaths of Nadav and Avihu always fascinated me.

It always seemed to me that there was some kind of double standard here.

It's as if God is holding them up to a different rule than everyone else is expected to follow.

Even if they were guilty of being drunk, or of hubris - were they killed because they didn't follow the rules?

Because they decided to innovate rather than follow the community?

We don't usually punish people for these kind of things.

But we do apparently punish leaders for these kind of things.

And what you see here is a clear and precise punishment for leaders because of the positions that they held and their failure to uphold them. We're accustomed to this double standard in Jewish life.

Precisely because we're Jews, we say that we have a greater obligation, a greater commitment. We're not chosen because we're better; we're chosen because we have a special relationship with God.

It's not an easy standard - because it's frequently misunderstood.

It means that we have an obligation to repair, to serve and to behave better.

It's not a license to exploit, or serve ourselves, or get rich at the expense of others. It's a license to see how the world works and to partner with others where we can, to make things better.

It is the essence of our work at the Joint.

Sixty eight years ago, this month, Winston Churchill stood in Fulton, Missouri and gave his famous "Iron Curtain" speech. "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent," he said.

It's the classic text about the beginning of the Cold War; maybe one of the most important speeches of the twentieth century. Every student of politics has to read and study it. And if you get the chance to read it, you'll see why the imagery and language resonate even today.

But the Fulton speech also introduced into common language a phrase that Churchill had started to adopt: the "special relationship."

The "special relationship" was the exceptionally close political, diplomatic, cultural, economic, military and historical relations between the United Kingdom and the United States.

It was a unique bond that defined everything between the two sides and guided their leaders.

I was no fan, as a child growing up in England, of Margaret Thatcher.

But her dedication to that relationship guided how she saw her role as a leader.

When Thatcher met with (Soviet leader) Mikhail Gorbachev for the first time, he tried to drive a wedge between her and the US.

But "I am an ally of the United States," she said. "We believe the same things, we believe passionately in the same battle of ideas, we will defend them to the hilt. Never," she said to Gorbachev, "try to separate me from them."

Thatcher's legacy and achievements may be topics of legitimate debate.

But there's no question about her leadership abilities and her commitment to this belief: that the special relationship was based on shared ideals and values that were worth defending by its leaders.

And more importantly, that the relationship was bigger than the two sides alone. It "stood" for something. It meant something.

And it was the job of the leaders to uphold that relationship and its values.

Special relationships are special because they are held to a different, higher standard. Leaders uphold them because they symbolize a commitment, not an excuse. They represent an ideal to strive toward, not a territory to conquer. They represent an expectation of service, not a demand for privilege.

Churchill and Roosevelt, like those who came after them, built their achievements through decades of trust and dedication. Through service. Through a commitment to greater ideals. What was the point of their Special Relationship? Churchill said in his Fulton speech that the ideal of the British-American understanding was to uphold the idea of Peace and the United Nations.

There are other Special Relationships that we read about every day. In the news, in business, in our daily dealings. Relationships based on power, on greed, or personal gain.

At their core is the very essence of what struck down Nadav and Avihu. Nadav and Avihu had been appointed to serve the People. Their role was to serve a greater good with the public flame but they ignored that ideal. They betrayed the public trust. They failed the test of leadership.

These double standards are important because they are at the heart of what we learn in this week's Parasha.

Just because you strive for values and ideals in your work doesn't mean that your stance is morally superior. It means that you need to work harder. Leadership doesn't convey more privileges, more rights. It requires more duties, and more humility.

We need to hold our leaders – and ourselves – to a different kind of double standard: upholding the benefit of our people, and working for higher ideals.

All these are, at their core, lessons in leadership.

And these lessons are just as critical to us today – - perhaps even more so - than during the time of Nadav and Avihu. They are just as focused on issues of life and death, and leadership, and responsibility.

Standing at Fulton, Churchill saw what Nadav and Avihu did not see. He even used the concept of the Temple to explain his vision:

“We must make sure that [the common goal of global responsibility]... is fruitful, that it is a reality and not a sham, that it is a force for action, and not merely a frothing of words, that it is a true temple of peace in which the shields of many nations can someday be hung up, and not merely a cockpit in a Tower of Babel.

Before we cast away the solid assurances of national armaments for self-preservation we must be certain that our temple is built, not upon shifting sands or quagmires, but upon a rock.

Anyone can see with his eyes open that our path will be difficult and also long, but if we persevere together ... I cannot doubt that we shall achieve our common purpose in the end."

Shabbat shalom