



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Shmini 5772 *Whom Do Our (Good) Deeds Serve?*

By Adina Roth
April 21, 2012

Parshat Shmini describes the sacrifices that concluded the ritual marking the installation of Aaron, the high-priest, and his sons. Aaron's delicate attention to the ritual facilitates a powerful spiritual epiphany for the entire people. We are told that God's glory and fire appears, 'And all the people saw and shouted with joy and fell on their faces.'¹

The text hints towards a tightly woven dynamic between the high-priest and the beneficiaries of the cultic practice—the '*am*.' In fact, the word *am*—people, appears eleven times in this section. While Aaron and his family perform the ritual, the text alludes to the idea that there is no rite without the people. The priests may reach towards the Divine, but the Divine is only contained in the face of the entire collective.

This idea may shed new light on the mystery of what caused one sacrifice to go horribly awry. Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, bring an 'alien fire'² to God. In an unforeseen twist, the fire that exalts the people a few verses back becomes lethal, consuming Nadav and Avihu. Epiphany becomes trauma.

Commentary on this incident has often focused on the "alien" nature of the fire, interpreting the case as a warning against stepping beyond the confined structure of the sacrificial ceremony. However, the interplay of the individual and the collective in the text points to an alternative understanding. Nadav and Avihu's actions are described in the third person plural—"they" took, put, placed and brought³—with the exception of the words "*ish machtato*—each man took his fire pan."⁴ This sudden focus on the singular, *ish*, contrasts with the notion of a plural *am* so prevalent in the previous section, suggesting that Nadav and Avihu do not seek an experience for the collective; rather, they are driven to seek God alone—each man for himself.

Moreover, the reference to each man's fire-pan conjures a sense of a container that is the perfect size for an individual. While the altar on which Aaron sacrificed was extended to include the large and powerful *am* as a receptacle for the Divine, the pans of Nadav and Avihu stood alone, not large enough to contain the tremendous revelation. While God's fire and revelation may be transformative when it is absorbed by a group, for two individuals, it is destructive.

This interpretation is reinforced by Moshe's response to the calamity. He cites God: "This is just what the Lord spoke, saying, 'Through those close to Me shall I be hallowed; And in all the people's presence shall I be honored.'"⁵ Moshe seems to be saying that in cultic practice there is a fundamental indivisibility between the priests and the greater people. God's presence may be brought down by the priests, but it needs to be contained by the larger community.

¹ Leviticus 9:24.

² Leviticus 10:1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Leviticus 10:3.

This is not to say that there is no space in Judaism—or in our own lives—for one’s individual journey. But perhaps the tale of Nadav and Avihu may invite us to consider the weight we have come to place on individual experience often to the exclusion of the collective. When we engage in social action, are we always sure to direct our efforts toward the needs of the community and the greater good or do we sometimes do it just for the rush of good feeling or other self-serving motivations?

In South Africa, where I live, there are homeless people on virtually every street corner. I find it hard to drive by without offering some coins or food. However, this act of *tzedakah* alone does little to change the system of rich versus poor. If I am honest, this act of giving is quite a superficial way to address poverty and is more about my own discomfort with being a person who has so much facing those who have so little. My false sense of doing good lulls me into the feeling I have taken action to address poverty. In dealing with poverty at this level, my conscience is alleviated and momentarily I don’t feel so uncomfortable with the current status quo. Ironically, my act of giving helps me avoid tackling the deeper systemic change that is required.

Whether it be in *tzedakah*, service or advocacy, if we move from a consciousness of *ish* to one of *am*, we are compelled to consider the wider systems very carefully before intervening. In this way, we ensure that our actions serve the needs of all involved. This does not diminish our impact; in fact, it has the potential to widen and deepen our capacity to really make a contribution.

Nadav and Avihu leave us with a sense that perhaps something is lost when our focus shifts from an interplay between the individual and the collective to a pure focus on ourselves. If our consciousness remains focused at the level of *ish*, our capacity to transform ourselves and the world around us becomes diminished. However, if, like Aaron, we can balance our dance between *ish* and *am*, we have a chance at helping to create a world where everyone has access to the joy beheld by the people in *Parshat Shmini*.



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The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to the Jewish community and to social justice. She was a creative and vigorous supporter of leadership development, public interest law, women and public policy and Jewish culture. Lisa died tragically at the age of 54. She was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

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