

Consumed by God

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Parshat Shemini

Leviticus 10:1-3

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶתֶת יָדָיו וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשִּׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֹת וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם: וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה | לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדָּשׁ וְעַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָעָם אֶכְבֹּד וַיִּדָּם אַהֲרֹן:

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.

Traditional Interpretation: Nadav and Avihu screwed up

Chizkuni

This verse is addressed specifically to the High Priests whom G-d warns that they especially have to be on guard not to infringe on the rules laid down for them even in the slightest. Any deviation on their part would have to result in G-d becoming "sanctified" through His immediate, and for the priest in question fatal, punishment, as otherwise it would be seen as a desecration of the Lord's name.

Ramban

So behold, really Moses said in this verse was: *"This is what the LORD meant when He said to Himself, through those near to Me I show Myself holy so that my holiness will not be ruined and I will gain glory before all the people so that they will behave respectfully in my Tabernacle.*

Slightly Nicer Traditional Read: A Higher Standard for Leaders

Leviticus Rabbah

Moses here said to Aaron: "My brother, Aaron! I knew that this House was to be sanctified by those who are beloved of the Omnipresent God and I thought it would be either through me or through thee; now I see that these (thy sons who have died) are greater than me and than thee!"

Kli Yakar

Through those that are near me I shall be sanctified. Hashem keeps two extremes with the righteous: One is that He is more exact with the righteous than with their contemporaries, and the second is that He punishes them even for the slightest mistake.

Thereby, when the righteous are punished, all those of lesser stature will formulate a *kal vechomer* — if they were punished, then we, of lesser stature, how much more so! If Hashem would punish an average man or if He would punish a righteous man only for a big sin, people would not be able to learn this *kal vechomer*. Moshe concluded that Hashem's message could only reach everyone if Nadav and Avihu were greater than both Moshe and Aharon

Queer Interpretation: Nadav and Avihu had an intimate relationship with God

Philo

They were not seized by a savage, evil beast, but were taken up by a rush of fire unquenchable, since in sincerity, they cast aside sloth and delay, and consecrated their zeal, hot and fiery, flesh-consuming and swiftly moving to piety, a zeal which was alien to creation, but akin to God... [they were] like the complete and perfect burnt offerings resolved into ethereal rays of light. (excerpted from Torah Queeries)

Indigo Girls

I come to you with strange fire
I make an offering of love
The incense of my soil is burned
By the fire in my blood
I come with a softer answer
To the questions that lie in your path
I want to harbor you from the anger
Find a refuge from the wrath
This is a message
A message of love
Love that moves from the inside out
Love that never grows tired
I come to you with strange fire

Post Holocaust Lens: Questions of Theodicy

Strange Fire: Reading the Bible After the Holocaust by Tod Linafelt

The term for 'burnt offering' in the Hebrew is *olah* -- literally "that which goes up" (in smoke, in other words). The Hebrew *olah* becomes *holocaustos* in Greek or "wholly burnt." Nadav and Avihu thus become in Leviticus 10 -- to put it bluntly -- human burnt offerings, or holocausts. Questions lead to more questions in this story. The closer one reads, the more perplexing, the more strange things become. God's "holocaust" of Nadav and Avihu continues to provoke, disturb and unsettle the reader, not because one fails to understand it, but rather because one understands it all too well.