

Teachings of the Maharal

The Many Sins of Nadav and Avihu

D'varim 9:20 - And Hashem became very angry at Aharon to destroy him [l'hashmido], so I also prayed for Aharon at that time.

Rashi - Because he listened to you [the nation of Israel], Hashem was angry enough to destroy him, meaning to finish off his children, as it is written, "I destroyed [hishmadi] his fruit from above" [Amos 2:9]. So I prayed for him and effected atonement for half - two died and two were left.

Gur Arye - This midrash implies that Nadav and Avihu died for Aharon's sin, which conflicts with the scriptural account that they died for the strange fire [Vayikra 10:1]! Moreover, on Sinai they gazed at the Sh'china, a mortal sin, but Hashem spared them so as not to detract from the rejoicing of the Torah [Rashi, Sh'mot 24:10]. Consider there were three events - gazing at the Sh'china at Sinai, the golden calf, and the strange fire at the dedication of the Mishkan. For gazing at the Sh'china they were spared, since the time of anger had passed. For the calf they were subject to death without children on account of their father's sin, their brothers having been spared by Moshe's prayer, but they could have lived a long life without children.

They brought the strange fire in an attempt to atone for gazing at the Sh'china. Hashem had already forecast "and it will be sanctified in My honor" [Sh'mot 29:43], which means by My

honored ones [Rashi ad loc.]. Their first sin, gazing, brought about their second sin, strange fire, which brought about the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Mishkan be sanctified through the death of the pious ones, His honored ones, the two elder sons of Aharon.

How could it be the sons were punished for their father's sin, which contradicts "children shall not die for the sins of their fathers" [D'varim 24:16]? The Gemara answers that this applies if the children do not seize onto the sins of their fathers [Sanhedrin 27b]. Although they were righteous, they were partners in the sin of Israel. Though they themselves did not sin, they were judged along with a majority of their people as though they did [Kidushin 40b]. In this way, Hashem "visited the sins of the fathers on the children" [Sh'mot 20:5], for they owned part of the sin of the calf.

MDK - Maharal weaves three conflicting midrashim into a comprehensible story.

Column prepared by Dr. Moshe Kuhr