



On the cause of the brothers' immolation, Rashi and his grandson, Rashbam, prove to be an interested *bar plugta*, a pair of intellectual combatants. While Rashi argues that it was because they tried to teach a halachic principle in the presence of their Rabbi, Moshe, רבן משה רבן, or because they were drunk when they entered the sanctuary (After all, Aharon is later told, in v. 9: "Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting").

Rashbam, on the other hand, claims they were simply *in the wrong place at the wrong time*:

**רשב"ם על ויקרא פרק ט פסוק כד**

(כד) ותצא אש מלפני ה' - מבית קודש הקדשים דרך מזבח הזהב להקטיר קטורת שהוא קודם להקטרת תמיד כדאמר במסכת יומא. ושם מצא בני אהרן אצל מזבח הזהב ושרפם ואח"כ יצא ובא לו על המזבח ותאכל את העולה ואת השלמים :

**רשב"ם על ויקרא פרק י פסוק א**

(א) ויקחו בני אהרן נדב ואביהוא - קודם שיצא האש מלפני ה' כבר לקחו איש מחתתו להקטיר קטורת לפנים על מזבח הזהב שהרי קטורת של שחר קודמת לאיברים ונתנו בהן אש זרה אשר לא צוה אותם משה ביום הזה שאע"פ שבשאר ימים כתיב ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח היום לא צוה ולא רצה משה שיביאו אש של הדיוט לפי שהיו מצפים לירידת אש גבוה ולא טוב היום להביא את זה כדי להתקדש שם שמים שידעו הכל כי אש באה מן השמים. כמו שאמר אליהו ואש לא תשימו לפי שהיה רוצה לקדש שם שמים בירידת האש מלמעלה :

This, indeed, is a very sensitive reading of the text. He draws a parallel between *the divine* fire that descended through the *Kodesh haKodashim*, holy of Holies, -- ותצא אש -- merging with the human fire, *esh zara*, *inadvertently causing their death* -- (9:24) ותאכל על המזבח -- (10:2). Nadav and Avihu had brought their own source of fire, *esh zara*, in firepans with the *ketoret* (incense offering), from outside the sanctuary. It was an *esh zara* – literally “strange fire” precisely because it did not belong, was not appropriate (in the same as an “*ish zar*” is a man, not a Cohen, who might presume to bring the incense offering in the tabernacle or temple precincts, cf. Num. 17:18 – clearly not sanctioned). Yet on all other days, the *ketoret shahar*, the morning incense offering, should be brought by the Cohanim. *Just not today* when the imperative would be to experience the full miracle of God’s revelation, the sanctification of the Mishkan with a descent of fire from Heaven. Perhaps this is what Rashi meant by “teaching a halachic principle in the presence of Moshe” – they presumed to offer the incense at a time when it was not mandated.

Rashbam brings in a fascinating proof-text from the story of Elijah at Har Carmel. The prophet wants to demonstrate, through a kind of competition, the truth of the one God by drawing fire down from Heaven to consume the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal are ordered to do the same – build an altar – but they must not bring their own fire source:

**מלכים א פרק יח**

כ(ה) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵיהוּ לְנָבִיאֵי הַבַּעַל בַּחֲרוּ לָכֶם הֶפֶר הָאֶחָד וַעֲשׂוּ רֵאשִׁנָּה כִּי אַתֶּם הַרְבִּיִּים וְקָרְאוּ בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְאֵשׁ לֹא תִשְׂלִמוּ:

25Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one bull and prepare it first, for you are the majority; invoke your god by name, but apply no fire.”

They invoke their god, Ba'al, dancing around the altar, and even engage in self-flagellation, to no avail. Eljiah then sets up his altar and sacrifice, digging a moat around it and filling it with water, to make the heavenly source of fire unequivocal. He calls out: “‘*Aneni HaShem, Aneni*—Answer me God, answer me”, so that the people might know. “Then fire from the LORD descended and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth; and it licked up the water that was in the trench. When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: “The Lord alone is God, The Lord alone is God!” [HaShem Hu HaElohim, HaShem Hu HaElohim].” (I Kg 19:37-38).

When Nadav and Avihu bring in an external source of fire to the Sanctuary, they create an ambiguity about whether the *Shekhinah*, expressed through the mode of fire, would indeed descend— (think of the burning bush, the fire that passes through the pieces in *brit bein habetarim*, the fire at the peak of Har Sinai, the fire that sanctified Shlomo’s Temple (2 Chron. 8)). The people would question: was it human fire or God’s fire that came out from the inner sanctuary? When the two brothers are caught by the cross-fire, so to speak, that was channeled down from Heaven and through the Kodesh HaKodashim, the ambiguity is resolved.

And so Moshe then turns to Aharon and says:

ג(ג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר וְקוֹק לֹאמַר בְּקִרְבֵי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָּל הָעָם אֶכְבֹּד וְיִדָּם אַהֲרֹן:

3Then 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.

Rashi's reading of these so-called words of reassurance is quite chilling [based on BT Zevahim 115b]:

**רש"י על ויקרא פרק י פסוק ג**

(ג) הוא אשר דבר וגו' - (זבחים קטו) היכן דבר ונועדתי שמה לבני ישראל ונקדש בכבודי (שמות כט) אי"ת בכבודי אלא במכובדי א"ל משה לאהרן אהרן אחי יודע הייתי שיתקדש הבית במיודעיו של מקום והייתי סבור או בי או בך עכשיו רואה אני שהם גדולים ממני וממדך (ת"כ וי"ר):

**3This is what the Lord spoke** But when did He speak? [It was when He said], "And I will meet with the children of Israel, and it will be sanctified through My glory (בְּכְבוֹדִי) " (Exod. 29:43). Do not read בְּכְבוֹדִי, "through My glory," but בְּמְכוֹבְדֵי, "through My honorable ones." Moses said to Aaron, "Aaron, my brother! I knew that this House was to be sanctified through the beloved ones of the Omnipresent, but I thought it would be either through me or through you. Now I see that they [Nadab and Abihu] were greater than I or you!"-[*Vayikra Rabbah* 12:2]

This drash is based on the verses in Exodus, in Parashat *Terumah*, describing how God would affirm the sanctity of the Mishkan:

**ספר שמות פרק כט**

(מג) וְנִעַדְתִּי שְׁמָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנִקְדָּשׁ בְּכְבוֹדִי :

43 And there I will meet with the Israelites, and it shall be sanctified by My Presence. 44 I will sanctify the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and I will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve Me as priests. 45 I will abide among the Israelites [*ve'shakananti be'tokham*], and I will be their God.

The only way I can make any ethical sense or coherence of this idea – that the Mishkan was “sanctified” by a human sacrifice, בְּמְכוֹבְדֵי, – is through Rashbam's reading. It was a terrible accident, but one of those events, in all its horror, that in the end affirms the significance of God's presence in the world.

And then I wonder – did Nadav and Avihu really not know what their fate would be? Did they not anticipate the descent of divine fire from Heaven? Perhaps they deliberately placed themselves in the cross-fire *in order to play the role* of the human sacrifice in the sanctification of the Mishkan. The chemist/philosopher, Gaston Bachelard describes a phenomenon called the “Empedocles Complex”, in his imaginative little book *The Psychonalysis of Fire*. According to legend, the Greek philosopher, Empedocles, of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.E., wished to prove his immortal stature by throwing himself into the mouth of the volcano, at Mount Etna, but his grandiose vision was undermined, somewhat, by the outrageous aftermath – his sandal was spewed out of the peak, along with lava and ash. Bachelard describes this human impulse as the desire to “unite the love and the

respect for fire, the instinct for living and the instinct for dying”.<sup>1</sup> Fire is one of those strange, amorphous substances, that “suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Nadav and Avihu were expressing the very real, religious impulse to become the burnt offering. In the words of chemist-philosopher, “Through its sacrifice in the heart of the flames, the mayfly gives us a lesson in eternity. This total death which leaves no trace is the guarantee that our whole person has departed for the beyond. To lose everything in order to gain everything. The lesson taught by the fire is clear: “After having gained all through skill, through love or through violence you must give up all, you must annihilate yourself” (D’Annunzio, *Contemplation de la Mort*).<sup>3</sup>

Nadav and Avihu’s behaviour is clearly not condoned by the rabbinic establishment, but the passage in the Talmud, the basis Rashi’s commentary on the Torah here, affirms that such a human impulse does exist. And in some absurd way, perhaps in the Kierkegaardian sense, there is an acknowledgment of this impulse in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. by Alan Ross, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.