

THE MOST PERFECT GIFT

by Rabbi David Algaze

“The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire pan, they put fire in them and placed incense upon it; and they brought before Hashem an alien fire that He had not commanded them. A fire came forth from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem.” (Vayikra 10:1-2)

On the most joyous day in the life of the nation and especially amidst the pride and happiness felt by Aaron at the inauguration of the Tabernacle, the two oldest sons of Aaron are struck dead. They were among the highest and most illustrious leaders of Israel and represented the promise of the brightest future for the influential teachers of the nation. What could have been their sin that so grievously deserved their immediate death?

The commentators offer various explanations for their actions. The Midrash Sifra says that they wanted to bring their own fire as a sign of their love of G-d in response to the Heavenly Fire that G-d had sent to the altar previously. Instead of waiting for Moses to communicate G-d's will, which was that the first incense be burnt with Heavenly fire, they rushed to bring their own fire. They assumed wrongly that this self-initiated act would be considered virtuous and a beautiful expression of their lofty sentiments towards G-d. The Torah, however, calls this fire, an “alien” fire, as if it did not belong and were improper. Why should a gift, offered with sincerity and good intentions, be regarded as so impure and inappropriate as to be called “alien” and merit the severe punishment of death?

The answer seems to be that any gift presented without following the precise instructions of G-d is wrong and offensive. But why should it be so? Let us imagine that we wish to give someone a gift. Would we feel happy if the recipient would instruct us exactly on what he wants, with exact details, dimensions and other specifications? Is it not the whole point of a present the expression of the feelings of the giver and thus his own unrestricted choice? Yet the Torah is giving us here a very important lesson. The most perfect gift we can give G-d is not the open and unbound expression of our own sentiments but rather the simple acceptance of His sovereignty and our obedience to Him. As the Natziv (R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, (1817-1893) puts it, “They entered filled with the enthusiasm of loving G-d, but the Torah teaches that although this feeling is precious to G-d, it is not so when it is expressed in a way that He did not order.” The Midrash calls their deed an act of “adding love to love.” The exaggeration of love feelings becomes a flaw rather than a virtue.

Judaism emphasizes submission to G-d above all and therefore a curbing of our ego and our own preferences. Our Torah demands from us not that we do the “right thing” in our eyes, but rather that we accept G-d's wisdom and accede to His will. Thus, the ritual in the Torah is precisely regulated. Nothing except that which has been ordered is appropriate. In the entire section of the ritual we find a recurrent expression that becomes like a mantra, “As G-d commanded Moses.” This expression is found at frequent intervals throughout the portions connected with the building of the Tabernacle, the order of the sacrifices, the priestly vestments and so on. G-d does not want Man to invent his own ritual, to give whatever present he deems appropriate. That voluntary, self created offering would reflect only feelings of love but it would not represent his submission to the Almighty. Only by following exactly the instructions of G-d and adhering punctiliously to every one of His requirements, we can say that we are truly *servi*ng G-d. For G-d wants above all that we give Him our obedience.

The Sfat Emet explains this phenomenon by quoting his grandfather, the Chidushe HaRim, (R. Yitzhak Meir of Ger, 1799-1866): “The essence of a mitzvah is the power of the “commandment.” This is more important than all other intentions....Whoever wishes to fulfill G-d's orders, even if he does not know anything, is regarded as if he performed the mitzvah at the highest spiritual level.” When Jeremiah reproves the nation for their insincerity and breach of moral codes, he says, “I did not command them..concerning sacrifices..rather, I commanded them saying, “Hear My voice...” (Jer. 7:22). Or as the prophet Samuel instructed us, “Obedience is preferable to the best sacrifice.” (I Samuel 15:22)

We would think that our own preferences in the selection of a present are better than acceding to the wishes of the recipient and yet the most perfect gift is not that which satisfies our taste but rather the one that meets most perfectly the wishes, tastes or needs of the receiver of these gifts. G-d teaches us what are the best gifts, or more precisely, the most perfect gift: it is that which He deems the most appropriate. The Talmud regards the person doing an act which he is commanded to do to be on a higher plane than a person doing the same act without having been commanded. That is counter-intuitive to most people, but understanding the function of obedience makes this statement more comprehensible. By accepting His instructions we learn to rein in our ego, to rise above our limited tastes and desires and to rise to a level of higher perceptions and nobler feelings.

On Sunday , April 6 at 8 PM , the members of the Bikur Cholim Committee will show a film at Young Israel of Forest Hills Bet Midrash “ Turn to me” . This is a documentary about Bikur Cholim with commentary by author Elie Wiesel, Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard and the Jewish community, Free entrance, Discussion will follow the film.