

At the dedication of the Mishkan, Moshe conducted the service of the initial offerings.

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אֵישׁ מִקְתָּתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָּהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְוֹת
וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֲתֶם:

“And Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aharon, took their firepans, and placed in it fire, and placed on it ketores, and they brought this close before HaShem—a foreign fire—that He did not command them to bring.” (Vayikra 10:1).

As a result of this unsolicited offering and conduct, Nadav and Avihu were seemingly killed by a heavenly fire. What did they do wrong and why did they deserve to die for it?

Gemara Megillah 10b says *whenever the Torah uses the words ‘it came to pass’ ‘נִקְרַח’ that means that there was a tragedy that occurred that day. One example is our passuk. It says ‘It came to pass on the eighth day’ referring to the commencement of using the Mishkan. (Vayikra 9:1). While the day had much celebration there was also the tragedy of Nadav and Avihu’s deaths.*

Ibin Ezra learns *this episode also took place on the ‘eighth day’ the inauguration day. They took a fire not from HaShem and they acted without instruction to do so.*

Sforno says *their mistake was they thought that they were taught that after every tammid offering—where HaShem says He will manifest His presence there—there is ketores. (See Shemos 24:49). Here, HaShem manifested His presence, so they initiated the ketores. They were already warned, however, that when Aharon lights the morning lights and offers the ketores, no other foreign ketores should be brought on the mizbeach. (See Shemos 30:9).*

Chizkuni says *what is meant by אֵשׁ זָרָה לִפְנֵי ה' וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה', “they tendered before HaShem foreign fire.” Any ketores offering that is not presented in the name of a community is called: “alien.” The meaning, as opposed to the translation, is “that He had commanded them not to offer.” Proof of this is Shemos 30:9, “do not offer alien ketores upon it!”*

Daas Zekeinim says *we do not see that they put the ketores into the pan, but only on the fire. The Torah already said it was not to be done. Therefore, it should have said here ‘that was prohibited.’ There are times, however, like when Eliyahu was on Har Carmel, that unauthorized korbonos can be brought. It is not an absolute prohibition.*

Rashbam says *there already was a Law that “the sons of Aharon will place fire on the mizbeach.” (Vayikra 1:7). However, that was not for Inauguration Day. That day it was Hashem’s fire, no others.*

Haemek Hadavar says *it says ‘Aharon’s sons, Nadav and Avihu’ because they did not show respect for their father. Therefore, they were placed after him—not Nadav and Avihu, Aharon’s sons).*

Nadav and Avihu meant well. They were not trying to offer to a foreign god. They wanted to take initiative and to bring korbonos to HaShem, continue His service. Our passuk tells us where they went wrong.

And Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aharon. They were acting as individuals. They were not acting as Kohanim. If they were acting as Kohanim then the passuk would qualify them *Aharon’s sons—i.e. Kohanim—Nadav and Avihu.* They would act by the strict instructions given to them.

Took their censers, and placed fire in it. They actually placed fire in the pans *prior* to bringing it to the mizbeach. This is not authorized anywhere. The fire should be on the mizbeach. (Vayikra 1:7). The ketores would be burned there. In our incident, there already was a fire in the Mishkan. “And fire went forth from before HaShem and consumed the burnt offering and the fats upon the mizbeach, and all the people saw, sang praises, and fell upon their faces.” (Ibid 9:24). The offerings were placed on the mizbeach and then the fire came. Nadav and Avihu put fire in their pans *first* and then put the ketores in. This was a shortcut that is unauthorized.

And placed on it ketores. The ketores was for the heavenly smell *reach nechoach*. This is the “smell” that the kobronos give to Hashem. The ketores, here, was being burned, not on the mizbeach, but in the firepans. The commandment is “You shall make an altar for bringing ketores up in smoke; you shall make it out of acacia wood.” (Shemos 30:1). It says further, “Aaron shall make ketores of spices go up in smoke upon it; every morning when he sets the lamps in order, he shall make it go up in smoke.” (Ibid 30:7). It is *Aharon* that will offer the ketores. He, also, makes it go up in smoke *on the mizbeach*.

And they brought this close before HaShem—a foreign fire. It was definitely to Hashem. There was no bad intention of idol worship on their part. It was, however, an alien fire. This was twofold. First, because they had a fire in a pan and not on the mizbeach. The rule in the Mishkan, as stated, was the fire is to be upon the mizbeach. Second, there was already a fire in the Mishkan: HaShem’s fire. The kiddush HaShem was already made and the service already had its intended

impact. HaShem appeared to the Bnei Yisroel in His Glory. Moshe already told Aharon just earlier in the day, "This is the thing Hashem commanded us to do, and the Glory of Hashem will appear to you." (Vayikra 9:6). The Glory was not only for Aharon. "And the entire community approached and stood before HaShem." (Ibid 9:5). "And Moshe and Aharon went into the Ohel Moed. Then they came out and blessed the people, and the Glory of Hashem appeared to all the people." (Ibid 9:23). Just as there is 'an extra stroke that ruins the panting' there is also a completion to service.

That He did not command them to bring. Service has its parameters. Conducting extras out of order, unauthorized, and especially when the point has already been made, is erroneous. HaShem already had made His appearance and showed His Glory. His fire was in the mishkan. Taking their own fires, burning ketores in pans, and bringing their own man-made fire into mishkan was their error. It is not for them to think what can be made better. The service HaShem prescribed could not be made better.

Why did they die? The warning not to bring foreign ketores is not on pain of death. The passuk says "and fire went forth from before HaShem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem." (Ibid 10:2). The fire did not consume Nadav and Avihu. It consumed *them* the ketores offerings. Even though they erred, their ketores was then still consumed by Hashem's fire. Just as the heavenly fire came to consume the korbonos it came to consume the ketores, too. Nadav and Avihu died because it was too much for them. They were not ready to be exposed to such holiness and spiritual manifestation. They came close when they were not told to. Akin to "warn the people lest they break toward HaShem, to see, and many of them will fall." (Shemos 19:21). The people were warned not to approach too closely to Har Sinai to look at HaShem's Glory. They were not ready and they would perish. At a time of revelation there is the desire to put sense out of one's mind and to rush a toward manifestation of holiness. This can be seen in worshipers after an intense service, when they seem crazed or syncopal. This happened to Nadav and Avihu.

"Then Moshe said to Aharon, 'This is what HaShem spoke, *I will be sanctified through those near to Me, and before all the people I will be glorified.*'" And Aaron was silent." (Vaykra 10:3). Aharon could not understand this. How can his sons die just because they wanted to bring ketores? They did not deserve to die even if it was brought out of order (fire in the pan and ketores on top) or by them (as opposed to him) and when not requested. Moshe responded to Aharon, *HaShem was glorified before the people. Allowing a foreign fire and unauthorized service now*

would ruin that entire kiddush Hashem. Aharon then understood. He was silent and there was nothing to respond.

There is a nechma in the Torah for this episode. When Korach and his followers challenge Moshe's authority he tells them, "Let each man take his firepan and place ketores upon it, and let each man present his censer before HaShem." (Bamidbar 16:17). After Korach's contingent's ketores was not accepted by HaShem and they all perished, HaShem says, "Say to Eleazar the son of Aharon the kohen, that he should pick up the censers from the burned area, because they have become kodesh; the censers of these who sinned at the cost of their lives. And they—the kohanim—shall make them into flattened out plates as an overlay for the mizbeach, for they brought them before HaShem, and have become kodesh, and they shall be as a reminder for the Bnei Yisroel." (Ibid 17:2-3).

Nadav and Avihu also had firepans filled with ketores. However, their ketores was consumed by Hashem. Korach's and his contingent's were not. The reminder not to bring foreign ketores was not taken from Nadav and Avihu. Their memory was not tied to that humiliation. The reminder was from Korach. Nadav and Avihu's memories shall remain blessed.

Ironically, Roman and Orthodox Catholics use censers in their service, trying to mimic the ketores. Their censers are self-sustaining fires and they burn the ketores far from any mizbeach. The true service of the Torah shall be reinstated soon in our times.