

Dear Community,

Judaism often forces us to confront conflicting aspects of ourselves and the world around us. We are commanded to have faith in G-d, while directed to engage in the philosophical investigation of His existence and essence. We are enjoined to live in a state of joy, yet fear of heaven is demanded as a pillar of our faith. In this week's Torah portion, we are shown a devastating example of a similar conflict, the paradox of personal passion and stated divine law.

The Torah ascribes the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aharon, to their sacrifice of an 'Eish Zarah,' a foreign fire. Our sages give varying explanations of this sin; some interpret it as bringing Ketoret, sacrificial incense, without being commanded to do so. Others interpret their sin as drinking alcohol before conducting the divine service. Yet others reference Midrashim showing that their error was in their refusal to marry, seeking to dedicate themselves fully to G-d.

The Kli Yakar asks how our Sages could give us such a diversity of interpretations if the Torah explicitly states that their sin had something to do with a 'foreign fire.' How can this seemingly unambiguous statement lead to such a variety of explanations?

The answer cuts right to the core of the most difficult balancing acts we have to deal with as Jews. There are some people who are, by nature, spiritually inclined. They are drawn to the mystical, to the passionate nature of faith, to the romantic perception of G-d. Nothing is as it seems, and they seek deep spiritual meaning in everything. To them, the legal, technical aspects of Judaism may be necessary, but tarnish its beauty.

There are others for whom the notion of a spiritual experience seems almost fictional. They, at the best of times, question the value, or even possibility, of spiritual ecstasy, and often harshly deride it as fantasy. Yet, these people marvel at the intellectual structure of Judaism. What to the first group seems to be a dry discussion of when a cow gave birth, to the latter it is a journey from mind to heart. Getting lost in the depth of a Gemara connects them to G-d far quicker than any trip to Israel. They quiver with impatience during a long prayer service, often sticking their nose into a text rather than

sway and sing with the Chazzan. While these two classes are on the extrema we all fall somewhere along this spectrum.

Judaism demands from us a delicate balancing act: the laws are the laws, and the way of life we must follow, but we must also live with passion, constantly rediscovering our faith and love of G-d. This paradox, the notion of individual love and spiritual expression, mixed with conformity to a revealed, dictated legal and moral structure, is part and parcel of what it means to be an observant Jew.

Fire, in many places, is interpreted as passion. Fire can be holy, divine, or it can be 'Zarah' strange, the antithesis of what we are here to do. Nadav and Avihu, men of stature and great spiritual passion, erred in getting lost in the ecstasy of the moment. They sought expressions of love and connection to G-d outside of the proscribed bounds of Jewish law. Whether it was the abnegation of their obligation to marry, performance of the sacrifice not permitted to them, or the desire to heighten their spiritual joy through wine, they fell prey to temptation of 'my Judaism' as opposed to Judaism.

We are told to have a personal connection with G-d, yet we need to avoid the often narcissistic need to redefine religious practice as whatever is personally meaningful to us. Rather, we should be plumbing the depth and breath of Judaism to find our place in its broad arms. Halacha, tradition, makes up the form and structure of Judaism, and true religious experience takes place within its bounds.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein