

"WHICH DOUBLE STANDARD?"

In our Sidra we read the strange story of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of the High Priest Aaron, who met a tragic end. It was the very day on which they and their father Aaron were consecrated to the service of the tabernacle. It was the greatest day in the life of Aaron as he formally began his ministry. On this day, Nadab and Abihu made some basic error in the service. They offered an *אש זרה*, "a strange fire" to the Lord. As a result, they were struck dead at the altar.

It is not clear exactly what sin it is that they committed. There are many, many opinions and interpretations offered in Rabbinic literature. As usual, this indicates that none of them has claim on certainty.

Thus, some Rabbis were of the opinion that their sin consisted in undertaking the service while in a state of intoxication. Others maintain that they boldly entered the inner part of the Sanctuary, where entrance to them was forbidden. In one interpretation, filled with charm and a bit of whimsy, some Rabbis maintained that Nadab and Abihu were arrogant, and their arrogance expressed itself in the fact that they were bachelors by preference! They said to many of the available young ladies, "We are important people: our uncle is Moses, the leader of the people; and our father is Aaron, the High Priest; our maternal uncle is Prince of the Tribe; and we are assistants to the High Priest. No one is good enough for us!" Yet another interpretation has it that their arrogance expressed itself in a grab for power. They kept on saying *מתי ימורנו שני הזקנים האלה ואנחנו נוהגים שררה על הצ'בור*, "When will these two old men -- Moses and Aron -- die, so that we can take over the leadership of Israel?" They were guilty of over-ambitiousness. Or, another expression of arrogance was that *הורו הלכה בפני רבי*, they presumptuously decided the Law in the presence of their teacher Moses, a violation of the most fundamental ethics of Jewish discipleship.

Yet, as we ponder these various descriptions of the wrongdoing of these two men, it occurs to us that none of them is really that bad that it should require such a sudden and severe response by God. Capital punishment -- for show-offiness? For not wanting to marry? For drinking too much? Is this not an over-reaction?

Moreover, the question is intensified by the fact that the Torah, which mentions their sin and their punishment, does not at all excoriate them or condemn their characters. On the contrary, after their death God says through Moses to Aaron, *וְאֵלֶּיךָ אֶקְדָּשׁ*, "through those who are close to Me, will I be sanctified." They are called people who are "close" or "near" to God. Furthermore, in the Oral Tradition this is not the only honorific applied to Nadab and Abihu. They are also called *מכובדים*, those who are "respected" or "honored" by Me. In an interesting exchange, Moses says to Aaron, after the death of the latter's two children, "Aaron my brother: I knew all along that this House of God would somehow be sanctified by having a tragic event happen to someone beloved of God. I thought it would be either you or me. Now that it happened to Nadab and Abihu, I see *שֶׁהֵם גְּדוּלָּה*, that they are greater than you or I!"

But if so, if the sin does not seem to be so terribly dreadful, and if these two men were called close to God, honored of God, beloved of Him, greater than Moses and Aaron -- then why this severe and harsh decree of death as their punishment? The question is especially pointed according to an interpretation that the "strange fire" meant an excess of religious zeal as a result of which they violated the technicalities of the service. Should one expect the punishment to be so very harsh for a mere technical oversight?

The answer is that there is a double standard at work here. There is one standard that Judaism and the Torah hold up for ordinary people, and quite another one, far more demanding and exacting, for superior people. It is based upon the premise that great achievement implies greater responsibility. Great talent leads to great obligation. A great reputation means a duty to fulfil greater expectations.

Thus, for instance, the Halakhah reflects this double standard. Certain types of behavior, although not recommended, are permitted to ordinary people. However, the scholar is denied such luxury. Thus, Maimonides (Yesodei Hatorah 5:11) tells us that a man who is great in scholarship of Torah and well known for piety, is in violation of the principle of "the desecration of the Name of God," if לִקַּח וְאִינוֹ
לְאִתּוֹ , he does not pay his bills on time; if
דִּבְרוֹ עִם הַבְּרִיּוֹת אֵינוֹ בֹּחֵת , if his speech with his fellow man is
not cultured and respectable; if אֵינוֹ מִקְבֵּל בְּסֵבֶר פָּנִים יְפוֹת ,
he does not greet people warmly.

So, Nadab and Abihu, precisely because they were so eminent and spiritually superior, had a greater obligation to conform to the divine command and do exactly as instructed, and not even allow their religious passion to lead them to a minor deviation from the law. What in any other case would seem to be a mere technicality, was for Nadab and Abihu, because of the higher status they had to accept upon themselves, a crime of major proportions.

This double standard is applied to Jews as such by no one less than the prophet Amos (3:2) -- *רק אתכם ידעתי מכאן משפחות האדמה*, "Only you have I known (chosen) from all the families of the earth, therefore I have held against you all your sins." It is precisely because of our covenantal relationship with God, that we are kept to a higher standard and a higher code of behavior than other people. It is because of our chosenness that we are required to keep the Sabbath, observe the dietary laws, and live up to the 613 commandments, which other people are not required to do. This obligates us as well to a far stricter moral and ethical code. That is why Jews, with a background of millennia of such indoctrination in this kind of double standard, has become sensitized to any wrongdoing by Jews, and leave us shocked when we are aware of moral backsliding especially by religious Jews. Even the most assimilated Jew knows that "there are certain things a Jew just doesn't do..."

This is the Jewish double standard. What makes this a noble rule, rather than an act of injustice? Because of noblesse oblige, a voluntary assumption of a higher and tougher code. It is because spiritual eminence imposes additional moral restrictions. Thus, it is a double standard that one accepts himself rather than upon others.

In other words, fundamentally there is a single standard of justice: *חוק אחד*, one rule that applies to all, men and women, Jew and non-Jew. In deviation from this rule, there are two types of double standard. One is the noble kind, in which I accept upon myself a different standard from the general one, one that is more demanding and more difficult.

But unfortunately, there is also the other kind of double standard. The one that is most popularly used currently, is one that reeks of hypocrisy and injustice and corruption and venality. It is the idea that there are two codes: an easier one for me, a more difficult one for you...

Take, for example, the territories that Israel conquered in 1967, when it was faced by war threats from Nasser and the Arabs. It is these territories that were at the heart of the 1973 war, and that are the focus of all the enmity and hostility today. The decision of the U.N. was that Israel may not keep them because no nation may keep "the fruits of war." But how interesting! There is not one country of those pressing this demand on Israel, not a single nation in the entire U.N., that can say that it did not acquire territory in war! The U.S.S.R. is certainly no Zaddik -- it gobbled up all the Baltic Republics during the last war. France and England became colonial powers by benefiting from "the fruits of war." The U.S. during the last century engaged in quite a number of such wars and now keeps these territories as part of the 48 continental states. So, today the double standard is in effect: an easier one for me, a harsher one for the State of Israel.

Or take the matter of refugees. There are at maximum some 700,000 Arab refugees today. Every other refugee group, now and through history, was expected to be absorbed by its host countries. This held true for Jewish refugees from the Arab countries -- which the State of Israel has forgotten to remind the world about. But since the Arab refugees can be kept as a gun levelled at Israel's head, an exception is made. A double standard is applied. So the whole world cooperates in keeping them in refugee camps, and in not assimilating them in the host Arab countries, which are so compatible with them culturally and religiously. The victim must be -- Israel.

But what about the Kurds? Why does no one care about those refugees? Why does no one care about the fact that the Kurds' desire for independence, which is no less than that of the Palestinians, and much older, are being crushed mercilessly. No one cares. Why not? There is a callous sentence that is current in international circles: "The Kurds have no friends." For me this is a nightmare. I think each and every one of us knows, in the very marrow of his bones, that in the crunch, in the real crunch, neither do Jews have any friends...

Iraq, which never ceases to proclaim the right of Arab refugees to return to their homes in Israel, and in the course of so doing dissolve the Jewish State, announces a deadline for the Kurds, after which it will not allow the Kurdish refugees to return to Iraq!

The U.N., so vocal about Palestinians and their rights, is so very reticent about South Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees.

Mr. Waldheim, who is not known for his bias in favor of Israel and Jews, will not even officially raise the issue of millions of refugees at the U.N.! Apparently, those dreadful pictures of mangled bodies of children -- are not worthy enough to be mentioned at the United Nations. The double standard!

And the American doves, who were so vociferous -- and properly so -- when the North Vietnamese were subject to American bombs -- why, oh why are they so silent when the South Vietnamese civilian populations are decimated by artillery shells made in Russia? Are Russian bombs more compassionate than American bombs?

And where are all the voices of the Left throughout the world, those voices that were so stridently and righteously indignant on so many issues -- why, oh why are they so silent about the suffering of millions of men, women, and children who are willing to risk unspeakable hardships as refugees rather than live under the Viet Cong, the same Viet Cong whose flag our college radicals raised on campuses throughout the country? The double standard! But, a double standard in reverse of the one that the Torah recommends. It is a despicable and reprehensible double standard.

Perhaps that is why the Torah demands that noble double standard of us Jews -- so that, in some small way, we may compensate for the other and more troubling one produced so callously by so many.

R. Israel Salanter, the founder of Musar, once made a comment which is the essence not only of the Musar movement but of all Judaism; "Too many people worry about their own material well-being and the other man's soul. But it should be the other way around: We should worry about our own soul and the other fellow's material welfare."

That indeed is what Judaism is all about: the peculiarly Jewish double standard -- be strict and demanding when scrutinizing your own soul and moral behavior; be generous and understanding when subjecting others to criticism. And, be concerned more about the economic condition of your neighbor -- helping him and sustaining him -- than about your own wealth, getting and grabbing and grasping all you can.

That is what the story of Nadab and Abihu teaches us: our sacred double standard. It is something that Jews ought to be thankful for, difficult as that double standard is for us.

How did we put it during the Passover Seder, just recently concluded, right after chanting the *אחת כמה* prayer? -- *אחת כמה* -- it is a double good, and a twin blessing, that God has given us.

The double standard is something for which we are eternally grateful.