

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Shemini

26 Nissan, 5777 – April 22, 2017

Compiled from the works of
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson
The Lubavitcher Rebbe

by
Rabbi Shmuel Mendelsohn
North Miami Beach, FL

A Project of
Vaad L'Hafotzas Sichos
Copyright 2017©

An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi

Parshas Shemini

Likkutei Sichos Volume 12, Pages 49 – 56

Rashi in His Own Words

ויקרא י' - ב': ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל אותם וימתו לפני ה':

רש"י ד"ה ותצא אש: רבי אליעזר אומר לא מתו בני אהרן אלא על ידי שהורו הלכה בפני משה רבן. רבי ישמעאל אומר שתויי יין נכנסו למקדש, תדע שאחר מיתתן הזהיר הנותרים שלא יכנסו שתויי יין למקדש. משל למלך, שהיה לו בן בית וכו', כדאיתא בויקרא רבה:

Vayikroh 10:2: And fire went forth from before Hashem and consumed them. They died before Hashem.

Rashi Heading – And fire went forth: Rabbi Eliezer says, Aaron's sons died only because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe their teacher. Rabbi Yishmoel says (that it was because) they entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine. The proof is that after their death (Hashem) warned the survivors that they may not enter the sanctuary after having drunk wine. This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant¹ etc., as recounted in Vayikra Rabbah.

Synopsis

This week's Torah portion, tells us of the dedication of the Tabernacle. For seven consecutive days Moshe erected the Mishkan, dismantled it and performed its service each day. Our portion describes the eighth day. The Mishkan was erected and remained standing. Aharon took his rightful place as the High Priest, and his sons took their places as priests. Finally G-d's presence, the holy Shechinah, rested upon the Tabernacle.

However, this rejoicing was to become mixed with tragedy. The Torah tells us that² “Aharon's (two elder) sons Nodov and Avihu each took his pan and placed fire in them. They each placed incense upon them and brought before Hashem a foreign fire which He did not command them (to bring).” Immediately³ “Fire went forth from before Hashem and consumed them. They died before Hashem.”

Rashi cites the words from the verse “and fire went forth,” and quotes a difference of opinion between the Sages as to the reason for this harsh punishment. He tells us that “Rabbi Eliezer says, Aaron's sons died only because they

1. Rashi merely alludes to the continuation of the Midrash with the phrase “et cetera.” The actual conclusion of the Midrash is “When he found him standing at tavern entrances, he severed his head in silence and appointed another attendant in his place. We would not know why he put the first to death, but for the fact that he commanded the second one, ‘You must not enter the doorway of taverns.’ From this we know that for this reason he had put the first one to death. So too here, ‘And fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before Hashem.’ We only know *why* they died because He commanded Aharon, ‘Do not drink wine that will lead to intoxication.’ We know from this that they died precisely on account of the wine. For this reason Hashem showed love to Aaron by directing His words to him alone. Hence it is written ‘Do not drink wine that will lead to intoxication.’”

2. Vayikroh 10:1.

3. Vayikroh 10:2.

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe their teacher⁴. Rabbi Yishmoel says (that it was because) they entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine.”

Why does Rashi need to explain the reason for their punishment? The Torah explicitly stated that they were punished because they each “brought before Hashem a foreign fire which He did not command them (to bring).”

Why does Rashi find a need to bring any more explanation?

This can be explained from the fact that Rashi is extremely precise in his choice of words, even those which serve as the heading of his comments. Those are the words in which the difficulty lies. Here the words “and fire went forth” are used to describe the ultimate punishment, death. However, just two verses earlier⁵ the identical words were used to describe the greatest reward. There it is written that “a fire went forth from before Hashem” and it consumed the offerings which were upon the altar. The Torah is telling us that after all of the efforts of the Jews, the Shechinah finally rested upon the Tabernacle. How can it be that the same words in such close proximity to each other imply total opposites? First it is used to describe G-d resting among the Jews. It is then used to describe Hashem punishing Jews.

Therefore Rashi explains that here too the fire going forth was a sort of a spiritual revelation. Nodov and Avihu indeed performed a holy service. However relative to their exalted status their service was lacking in some facet. Therefore Rashi tells us both according to Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yishmoel exactly what was amiss.

Rashi's Explanation

This week's Torah portion, Shemini, we reach the eighth (that is the meaning of the word Shemini) day of the dedication of the newly built Tabernacle. Now it would be for real. As long as the Jews were encamped, the Mishkan would remain assembled. Hashem's presence would constantly rest there. This was a time of great rejoicing. However the joy was soon to be marred by a tragedy. Aharon's two elder sons, the great Tzaddikim Nodov and Avihu were to be executed by G-d Himself. The Torah tells us² that “Aharon's sons Nodov and Avihu each took his pan and placed fire in them. They each placed incense upon them and brought before Hashem a foreign fire which He did not command them (to bring).” Immediately thereafter we are told that³ “Fire went forth from before Hashem and consumed them. They died before Hashem.”

Rashi cites the words from the verse “and fire went forth,” and explains the reason for their death. “Rabbi Eliezer says, Aaron's sons died only because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe their teacher. Rabbi Yishmoel says (that it was because) they entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine. The proof is that after their death (Hashem) warned the survivors that they may not enter the sanctuary after having drunk wine. This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant¹ etc., as recounted in Vayikra Rabbah.”

4. The Halachic decision which they rendered was as follows. Despite the fact that a heavenly fire descended upon the altar from above, nevertheless it was a Mitzvah to bring natural fire from below, i.e. from this world.

5. Vayikroh 9:24.

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

The first difficulty is understanding why Rashi found any need whatsoever to explain why Aharon's sons were executed. The Torah itself tells us the reason quite clearly. It says that² "they brought before Hashem a foreign fire which He did not command them (to bring)." It seems self-evident from the verse itself.

Secondly, even if we can find a need for Rashi to explain this, why does he need to give two explanations? We have a rule, that whenever Rashi offers two explanations he does so because there is some difficulty with the first explanation. This difficulty is not there in the second explanation. However the first explanation is closer to Peshat, the simple meaning of the verse. We need to understand what the particular problem is with each explanation which Rashi offers.

Thirdly, as a rule Rashi does not mention the name of the Sage(s) who he is quoting. Here he makes a point of telling us that one opinion is that of Rabbi Eliezer and the other is that of Rabbi Yishmoel. The only time he does so is when there is some question which will only bother an advanced student. The question can be resolved based on the fact that it was stated by a particular Sage. What does the knowledge that what Rashi is telling us was first said by Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yishmoel add to our understanding?

Finally, Rashi generally does not cite sources. Here he does cite Vayikroh Rabbah as the source for Rabbi Yishmoel. However, Rashi merely hints at what is written there by writing "et cetera." He skips the lengthy explanation there (see fn.1). He only lets us know that it is an analogy of a king who had a faithful attendant. He also tells us that it is written in Vayikroh Rabbah. If Rashi is trying to explain something to us with the little bit that he said, it would seem that he wrote too little. If he would only like to let us know where to find the source, it would seem that he wrote more than is necessary.

The Explanation

It is quite clear that Hashem rewards (and G-d forbid punishes) measure for measure. It is therefore quite understandable that because they offered a "foreign fire," Hashem "repaid" them with a fire which consumed them. However, this presents us with a great difficulty according to Peshat. A mere two verses prior to our current verse, the Torah writes that⁶ "and fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fats upon the altar. All of the people saw, sang praises, and fell upon their faces." There the Torah uses the same exact expression as here, "and fire went forth from before the Lord." There it expresses that G-d revealed Himself to the Jewish people. All of the toil and effort invested in building and preparing the Tabernacle had succeeded. The Shechinah descended to the Mishkan where it would remain. Here, just two verse further, the Torah uses the self-same phrase to express the execution of two righteous men. Rashi is reconciling the use of the same phrase within such close proximity referring to opposites.

6. Vayikroh 9:24.

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Rashi's language is extremely precise. This is even true regarding the language he selects to serve as the heading of his comments. That is the reason that his heading here is "and fire went forth." He is comparing it with the same words as they were used two verses ago. There these words implied a holy service which drew down a Divine light. Rashi is explaining that it means the same thing here. Nodov and Avihu were both exceedingly pious men. In fact, the incense which they offered was holy, hence it caused a holy fire to go forth. However, due to their immense stature there was something lacking for their service. For a lesser person it may not have been an ultimate punishment.

That is why Rashi (first) writes that "Rabbi Eliezer says, Aaron's sons died *only* because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe their teacher ..." The emphasis is on the word "only." Had they not rendered a decision in the presence of their teacher, they would not have died.

How could this failing have possibly warranted such a serious punishment? Rashi answers this by telling us that it was said by Rabbi Eliezer. Throughout the Talmud we find tremendous statements in praise of Rabbi Eliezer. Nevertheless he said that⁷ "repeating something which one did not hear from one's teacher causes the Shechinah to depart from Israel." How much more so is this true if one says something in front of his teacher which he did not hear from him! Certainly this would cause G-d's presence to depart from Israel! Based on this we can certainly understand the severity of their sin!

However, now we need to pose the question in the other direction. According to Rabbi Eliezer Nodov and Avihu were indeed guilty of a serious offense. They caused the Shechinah to depart from the world! How can we say that it was only an infraction relative to their stature?

That is why Rashi also tells us Rabbi Yishmoel's opinion. Their offense was entering the Sanctuary after having drunk wine. However, this took place before we had received that commandment. That is why Rashi continues, and says that "the proof is that after their death (Hashem) warned the survivors that they may not enter the sanctuary after having drunk wine." Rashi is telling us that we did not receive this commandment until *after* Nodov and Avihu entered the Temple. Accordingly, they did nothing wrong.

However, based on this we need to understand why they deserved any punishment whatsoever. They performed a holy service in the Temple, and they transgressed nothing whatsoever in which we had been commanded. They certainly did not deserve to be punished so severely!

That is why Rashi continues and tells us of an analogy of a king who had a trusted servant. That tells us everything we need to know in order to understand why they were punished according to Rabbi Yishmoel. Nodov and Avihu were trusted servants of the King – Hashem. As such, they should have understood on their own that it is inappropriate for them to enter the Sanctuary having drunk wine.

7. See Talmud Berachos 27, b. See also Talmud Yoma 66, b and Sukkah 27, b.

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

That is also why Rashi cites this opinion in the name of Rabbi Yishmoel. The Talmud says regarding Rabbi Yishmoel that⁸ “a Kohen (he served as High Priest) helps Kohanim.” Rashi explains there in his commentary to the Talmud that Rabbi Yishmoel always tried to find leniencies for Kohanim. He therefore interprets our verse in a way which minimizes the sin of Aharon’s son; according to Rabbi Yishmoel it was not even a sin at all.

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

None of us can even remotely approach the level of Nodov and Avihu. Nevertheless, they “died only because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe their teacher.” No matter how great one thinks he is, or no matter how great he actually is, he must always humble himself before his teacher. No one may declare himself a rabbi, and think that he has no reason to wait for someone else’s ruling. That was the only reason that Aharon’s sons died; “they died *only* because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe their teacher.” Any other approach pushes away the Shechinah.

However, humility alone does not suffice. One must strive to grasp everything he learns to the best of his ability. As Rabbi Yishmoel said, the problem was that “they entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine.” Wine is the spiritual idea of understanding. Having drunk wine means that one is at one with his understanding. That’s the manner in which we must learn. However when we “enter the sanctuary,” when we are involved in prayer, it must be with the greatest humility.

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Shemini, Mevorchim Hachodesh Iyar 5726)

To dedicate a week, a month or a year of

The Rashi of the Week, visit

<http://www.rebbeteachesrashi.org/contact-us-dedicate-an-issue>

You can find us on the web at www.RebbeTeachesRashi.org.

8. See Talmud Chulin 49, a.

**DEDICATED IN HONOR OF
the Lubavitcher Rebbe**

* * *

**IN HONOR OF
Chaim and Aiden Oded שיחיו Morris**

*

**DEDICATED BY THEIR PARENTS
Rabbi & Mrs. Menachem M. and Chaya Mushka שיחיו Morris**

* * *

**IN LOVING MEMORY OF
Mr. Yoel ben Reb Sholom Dovid Hacoheh ע"ה Mankes
Passed away on 28 Nissan, 5776
May His Soul be bound in the Eternal Bond of Life**

*

**IN HONOR OF
Shimshon ben Chassibah שי'
Yosef Yitzchok ben Sarah שי'
and Shoshana Devorah Hodya bas Tovah Sarah שתחיל'
For a complete and speedy recovery**

*

**DEDICATED BY
Mr. and Mrs. Yonatan Itsik Hacoheh and Shaindel Miriam שיחיו Mankes**

* * *

**IN HONOR OF
Yisroel Hacoheh ben Berocho שי' Cohen
For a complete and speedy recovery**

* * *

**IN HONOR OF
Berocho bas Soroh שתחיל' Cohen
For a complete and speedy recovery**

* * *

**DEDICATED BY
Hatomim Moshe Shlomoh Zohar שי' Mars**

*

May he merit to be a Chossid, a Yerei Shomayim and a Lamdon

מוקדש לזכות

כ"ק אדמו"ר נשיא דורנו מליובאוויטש

לזכות

חיילי "צבאות השם" חיים ועדן עודד שיחיו מאריס

*

נדפס ע"י הוריהם

הרה"ת ר' מנחם מענדל וזוגתו מרת חי' מושקא שיחיו מאריס

לעילוי נשמת

ר' יואל בן ר' שלום דוד הכהן ע"ה מנקס

נפטר ביום כ"ח ניסן ה'תשע"ו

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

*

לזכות

ר' שמשון בן חסיבה שי'

ר' יוסף יצחק בן שרה שי'

ושושנה דבורה הודי' בת טובה שרה שתחי'

לרפואה שלימה וקרובה

*

נדפס ע"י משפחתם

ר' יונתן איציק הכהן

וזוגתו מרת שיינדל מרים שיחיו מנקס

נתרם ע"י

הת' משה שלמה זהר שי' מאריס

*

יהי רצון שיזכה להיות חסיד, ירא שמים, ולמדן