

בס"ד

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

Parshas Shemini

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Compiled from the works of
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**An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi
Parshas Shemini**

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Rashi in His Own Words

ויקרא י', ב': וַתִּצַא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וּגו'

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 the Lord and consumed them...

Rashi Heading: And fire went forth: Rabbi Eliezer says, "Aharon's sons died, only because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe, their teacher (by offering incense on their own)." Rabbi Yishmoel says, "(They died because) they had entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine. The proof is that after their death, (the Torah) warned the survivors that they may not enter the sanctuary after having drunk wine. This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant... as told in Vayikroh Rabbah¹."

Synopsis

This week's Torah portion, Shemini, tells us of a celebration that took a tragic turn. At the end of the book of Shemos, the Jewish people spent a great deal of time and effort building the "Mishkan – Tabernacle." We then spent seven days dedicating it. Each day Moshe would erect and dismantle the Mishkan. Finally, on the eighth day (which was the first day of the month of Nissan) the Mishkan was constructed for real, Hashem's presence would rest in this world, and Aharon would take his rightful place as the High Priest. However, during this celebration, something went wrong. Two of Aharon's sons brought a strange fire before Hashem. The Torah then tells us that² "Fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before Hashem." Rashi cites the opinions of two of our Sages as to the reason for their untimely death. Rabbi Eliezer says that Aharon's sons died because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe, their teacher. Rabbi Yishmoel says that they died because they entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine.

The Rebbe asks, among other questions, why Rashi needs to explain the reason for their death; the Torah explicitly says that they died because they³ "brought a foreign fire before Hashem, which He had not commanded them (to bring)." Furthermore, we know that Rashi always explains the simple meaning of each verse; the reasons which he cites from the Midrash do not seem to be the simple meaning at all!

The answer is as follows. As we have stated many times, Rashi is extremely precise with every word that he writes, including the headings of each of his explanations. The title that he chooses for his comments are the words, "and a fire went forth – וַתִּצַא אֵשׁ." In other words, the difficulty which he is explaining lies in those words. G-d punishes

1. Midrash Rabbah, Vayikroh 12, 1.
2. Our Parshah, Vayikroh 10:2.
3. Our Parshah, Vayikroh 10:1.

measure for measure. Because they brought a “foreign fire,” they were punished by a fire that went forth. However, just two verses earlier,⁴ we saw the same words used to describe a great reward. “A fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering...” This made it clear that G-d’s presence rested upon the Mishkan. It was a revelation of G-dliness. We, therefore, know that the “fire going forth” as a result of the incense which was offered by Nodov and Avihu was also holy; it was also a sign of a revelation of G-dliness. This being the case, we need to understand why they were punished! Therefore, Rashi explains to us that their punishment came as a result of something lacking in their service of Hashem. Of course, whatever the problem was, it was considered a sin only concerning their high level and stature.

Rashi’s Explanation

This week’s Torah portion, Shemini, tells us of a celebration that took a tragic turn. After completing the building of the “Mishkan – Tabernacle,” we spent seven days dedicating it. Each day Moshe would erect and dismantle the Mishkan. Finally, on the eighth day, the Mishkan was ready. It would begin serving as Hashem’s dwelling place in this world. Aharon would take his rightful place as the High Priest. However, during the celebration, something went awry. The Torah tells us that⁵ “Aaron's sons, Nodov and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it, and brought a foreign fire before Hashem which He had not commanded them (to bring).” We are then told that⁶ “Fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before Hashem.” Rashi cites two reasons for their untimely death. Rabbi Eliezer says that Aharon’s sons died because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe, their teacher, Rabbi Yishmoel says that they died because they entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine. Rabbi Yishmoel cites proof for his opinion, that after their death, (the Torah) warned the survivors that they may not enter the sanctuary after having drunk wine. This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant... Rashi cites as his source for this from the Midrash⁷. However, as we shall see later, Rashi leaves out the content of Rabbi Yishmoel’s proof.

Difficulties in Understanding Rashi

The reason for the passing of Nodov and Avihu is stated explicitly in the previous verse, “They offered a strange fire which Hashem did not command them to bring.” Why does Rashi need to offer any explanation whatsoever? We know that first and foremost, Rashi always explains Peshat, the simple meaning of the verse. However, in our case, the reasons which he offers seem to have nothing whatsoever to do with the simple meaning of the verses, rather they are taken from a Midrash.

Rashi is always extremely precise with the words he chooses for the heading of each of his explanations. The words in the heading of his comments are the words which he is explaining. Since Rashi is explaining why they died,

4. Our Parshah, Vayikroh 9:24.

5. Our Parshah, Vayikroh 10:1.

6. Our Parshah, Vayikroh 10:2.

7. Vayikroh Rabbah 12, 1.

one would think that the heading should have been “and they died” rather than “a fire went forth.”

It is known that whenever Rashi gives two explanations, it's because neither of them explains all of the details regarding that which he is discussing according to Peshat. There is a difficulty with each explanation. However, the first explanation he cites is *closer* to the simple explanation of the verse. We need to understand what the difficulties are with each of Rashi's explanations, and why the first is closer to Peshat.

It is very rare for Rashi to cite a teaching in the name of the Sage who originally said it. On those occasions that he does, it is because it provides additional understanding to a sharp student. We need to understand what the fact that these two explanations were said by Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yishmoel adds to our understanding.

As previously said, Rashi's language is very precise. Why does he tell us that “This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant ... as told in Vayikroh Rabbah?” If he wanted to tell us the location of the Midrash in order that we look at it ourselves, he could have just stated that “this is analogous to a king... as told in Vayikroh Rabbah.” Why does he mention the faithful attendant without telling us the entire analogy? We must say that the “faithful attendant” is an essential part of Rashi's explanation. What do these few words add to our understanding?

The Explanation

In order to understand the answer to our questions, we must see Rashi's explanation from the proper perspective. We assumed that Rashi is explaining why Aharon's sons died. That is not the case. As noted previously, if Rashi was explaining the reason for the punishment of Nodov and Avihu, the heading of his commentary would have been the words from the verse “and they died” rather than the words “a fire went forth.”

Rashi's difficulty with our verse is something totally different. We know that G-d repays a person measure for measure. At first glance, it makes perfect sense to say that since Nodov and Avihu brought a “foreign fire,” a fire went out and consumed them. However, this cannot be the case. Just two verses earlier⁸ we saw the words “a fire went out” used to describe a great reward! “A fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering...” This “fire going out” demonstrated to us that G-d's presence rested up the Mishkan. The people rejoiced. Therefore, Rashi understands that the “fire going forth” as a result of the incense which was offered by Nodov and Avihu was also holy; it was a sign of Hashem's presence resting among the Jews. This being the case, why were Nodov and Avihu punished? They were not punished for bringing incense. Rather, they were punished because relative to their superlative level there was some impropriety on their part.

That is the reason that Rashi begins his explanation by saying that “Rabbi Eliezer says, ‘Aharon's sons died, only because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe, their teacher.’ In other words, Rashi is making it quite clear that they did not die as a result of bringing a strange fire. This does not contradict the fact that it says that they brought a “foreign fire which they were not commanded to bring.” To the contrary; this is saying that *they* were not commanded to bring it, but rather they took it upon themselves. The only thing which they did wrong according to this opinion, was deciding what to offer, and where to offer it. They should have relied upon their teacher Moshe.

8. Our Parshah, Vayikroh 9:24.

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According to Peshat, it is difficult to say that such a seemingly small infraction should warrant such a severe punishment. Rashi alludes to the answer to this question by saying that the one who said it was Rabbi Eliezer.

Throughout the works of the Sages, we find incredibly high praise heaped upon Rabbi Eliezer, particularly regarding his fantastic knowledge of Torah⁹. Nevertheless, he said that “whoever says words of Torah which he did not hear from his teacher causes G-d’s presence to depart from Israel¹⁰.” From this, we can understand that it is even worse to say something which one did not hear from his teacher *in front of his teacher!* This explains the severity of their punishment.

However, this explanation also leaves us with a question. How can we say that the actions of Nodov and Avihu brought the Divine presence into the world when, according to Rabbi Eliezer, their efforts should have *removed* the Divine presence! That is the reason that Rashi quotes a second reason that they entered the Sanctuary while inebriated. This was not yet prohibited. Hence it was not considered a sin.

Consequently, it could bring G-d’s presence into this world. That is why Rashi says, “after their death, (the Torah) warned the survivors that they may not enter the sanctuary after having drunk wine.” Rashi is pointing out that they did not disobey any commandment.

However, this leaves us with a different problem. If they broke no law, why would they deserve a punishment? They certainly should not deserve such a severe punishment! Rashi answers this by adding, “This is analogous to a king who had a faithful attendant ... as told in Vayikroh Rabbah¹¹.” The Midrash follows these words by saying, “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 executed the first, but for his commanding the second one, ‘You must not enter the doorway of taverns,’ from which we know that for such a reason he had put the first one to death.”

From the Midrash, we understand that even though the king never commanded his first servant not to frequent taverns, he should have realized this on his own. After all, he was the king’s trusted servant! The same is true regarding Nodov and Avihu; even though they transgressed no commandment, as Hashem’s trusted servants, they should have understood on their own that it was improper to enter the Sanctuary while intoxicated. However, we are still left with a difficulty. Even though Aharon’s eldest sons should have known better, why should that warrant a death penalty?

It is to answer this question that Rashi adds that this explanation came from Rabbi Yishmoel. Our Sages say regarding Rabbi Yishmoel¹² that “he is a Kohen (actually he was a High Priest – Kohen Gadol), and he helped Kohanim.” Rashi’s commentary in the Talmud¹³ explains that he helped Kohanim, i.e., he would always try to find leniencies for them. Therefore, according to Rabbi Yishmoel’s explanation, Nodov and Avihu did not sin. He would not explain their actions in such a way that would make these two Kohanim guilty of transgressing any commandment.

9. One notable example of many is found in Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1, 3. “The stone upon which Rabbi Eliezer sits is comparable to Mount Sinai, and he himself is comparable to the Ark of the Covenant.”

10. Talmud Berachos 27, b. See also Yoma 66, b and Sukkah 26, b.

11. Midrash Rabbah Vayikroh 12, 1.

12. Talmud Chullin 49, a.

13. *Ibid.*

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However, according to Rabbi Yishmoel, if they did not sin with fire, how is this punishment measure for measure? Why did a fire go forth and consume them? It is for this reason that Rashi quotes Rabbi Yishmoel as his second explanation.

A Deeper Lesson from Rashi

Although Nodov and Avihu were on an incredibly lofty level, nonetheless, they received a most severe punishment for not displaying proper subservience to their teacher. We find the same regarding Rabbi Eliezer. Despite his greatness in Torah described above, he said that “one who says a Torah teaching which he did not hear from his teacher, causes G-d’s presence to depart from the world.” In other words, being subservient to one’s teacher concerns the Divine revelation to the entire Jewish nation!

From here, we see that one must not say that he is a great Torah scholar and has no need to depend on someone else for a halachic decision. Likewise, one can think that he does not need a guide in life choices, in his manner of serving Hashem. He is fully capable of deciding what is right or wrong for himself.

That is what Rashi is teaching us. None of us are as high as Nodov and Avihu; however, “Aharon’s sons died, *only* because they rendered a halachic decision in the presence of Moshe, their teacher.” Not only did their lack of subjugation bring a punishment upon themselves, but it affected the entire world.

At the same time, we must also use all of our faculties to learn Torah. We must grasp the Torah with our intellect, to the extent that it becomes absorbed within us.

One might ask how it is possible to use all of one's understanding to the fullest, and simultaneously subjugate our entire being to Hashem. We find the answer to this in Rashi as well. “This is analogous to a king who had a *faithful attendant* ...” Since we are discussing the Jewish people, G-d’s “faithful attendant,” He gives us the ability to connect both opposites. We can employ our understanding to learn Torah and be subservient to Hashem at the same time. Through this, we can bring about the connection between the world and G-dliness; the world will be conducted according to the halachic rulings of Torah. This will hasten the promise that⁷ “the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh together shall see that the mouth of the Lord spoke,” with the coming of our righteous redeemer!

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

I hope that you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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