

What went wrong?

For a half year, the Jewish people had been preparing for this moment. On the day after Yom Kippur, Moshe told them of the building of the Mishkan, the contributions began to flow in immediately, and by Chanukah the whole thing was done.

Hashem designated the first day of Nisan – two weeks before Pesach – as the day when the Mishkan would be set up and the Shechina would be revealed there. For a week before, Moshe, Aaron, and Aaron's sons practiced setting up the Mishkan and doing all of the services in the Mishkan, offering Korbanos and Ketores.

Finally the great day arrives. Everything is done as had been directed, and the Glory of Hashem appeared to all the people. And all the people saw this and they sang the praise of Hashem and fell on their faces. (That is a loose translation of the second half of Shmini 9:24) Things are really great! The people are reassured that Hashem has forgiven them for the Golden Calf, and He has chosen to rest His Presence among them in the Mishkan they had built for Him. What could be better?

Immediately, in the very next verses (Shmini 10:1 & 2), it all falls apart. The two sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, offered Ketores which had not been commanded. A "fire came out from before Hashem" and consumed them and they died. What a tragedy in the midst of the great celebration! The party is over. Moshe gives instructions for them to be removed so that the celebration is not marred. Aaron and his remaining sons are instructed to carry on despite their loss, which will be mourned by the all of the people. Much of what follows is picking up the pieces.

Reading through the story it seems that Nadav and Avihu committed some heinous sin, made all the worse by the timing, causing their own death in the midst of this national occasion for joy.



But there is a line which does not fit at all with that. Moshe's first reaction, in the very next verse (10:3), is not "How terrible!" or "How could they do this?!" He says to Aaron, "This is what the L-rd meant when He said: Through those near to Me, I show Myself holy." He is declaring that this was the greatest Kiddush Hashem (Sanctification of Hashem's Name), something that he thought would be achieved through himself or Aaron, but now he sees that Nadav and Avihu are greater than them, nearer to Hashem.

Looking a little closer at the text, we notice that the first five words of verse 10:2 describing how they were consumed by a fire, are identical to the first five words of the verse which appears only two verses earlier, describing the heavenly fire which descended and consumed the offerings on the Alter. That Heavenly fire was a sign that Hashem's Presence was among them, and triggered the singing and celebration. Can it be that the exact same words, "A fire came out from before Hashem and consumed ..." would be used to show Hashem's love and closeness to the Jewish people, and as an indicator of Hashem's displeasure and immediate retribution for horrific wrongdoing? It doesn't seem likely.

The Or Hachaim says that the "uncommanded" offering of Nadav and Avihu was a feeling of all-encompassing love for Hashem and delight in the proximity of His Presence, which was so overpowering that their bodies could not contain their souls. This is the "intoxication" which is one of the explanations of their "sin." The other explanations can be understood similarly. For example, "the fire which had not been commanded," is the incredible passion which they felt, which is not "commanded" or expected of ordinary people.

In fact, this passion to the point of expiration is not only uncommanded; it is undesired. Immediately after this incident, the Torah gives the injunction against serving in the Mishkan while intoxicated. Having had that Kiddush Hashem once, it is not to happen again.

Why not? It seems like a great achievement, to sublimate one's physical self to sensing the Presence of Hashem so palpably that the delight overwhelms to the point of expiration. Is this not the ultimate high?



Apparently not. Here is a story (You can find it where I found it, here: <https://www.skokiechabad.org/2332780>)

Dr. Velvl Greene was a professor of epidemiology and public health at the University of Minnesota. This was around 1960. Professor Greene was involved in the NASA program to find life on Mars. Rabbi Moshe Feller had recently arrived in Minnesota, and had reached out to Dr. Greene. At one point, Rabbi Feller called Dr. Greene and said, “Velvl, I know you’re traveling somewhere by plane. Before you take this trip, please do me a favor. Call the airline and order a kosher meal.”

Velvl replied, “What? You know I don’t keep kosher. If I don’t keep kosher in my house, why do I need a kosher meal on the plane?”

Rabbi Feller responded that when the other Jewish passengers hear that Professor Velvl Greene had asked for his kosher meal, it could inspire them as well. Why should they lose out just because he’s not there yet?

Velvl responded, “Look, I’m not so sure about all this, but if it is going to make you happy, I’ll do you the favor.”

Dr. Greene ordered the kosher meal, and boarded the plane the next day. But when the flight attendant came by, she handed him a regular, non-kosher meal. Dr. Greene was ready for this too. Clearing his throat, he declared for everybody to hear, “No, ma’am, I ordered a kosher meal!”

“Your name, please?”

“Professor Velvl Greene.”

All heads turned. Professor Greene had ordered a kosher meal! The attendant said, “Okay, I’ll be right back.”

While his fellow passengers were feasting, the flight attendant was nowhere to be found. The professor was hungry; his mouth was starting to really salivate from the aromas of the food all around him. He pushed the little button, and when the attendant returned he said, “My kosher meal?”



She replied, “We’re still checking.”

After a few minutes, and after everyone on the plane had been served, the flight attendant came to his seat and said, “Um, Dr. Greene, there must have been a mistake. We don’t seem to have your meal on the plane.”

Dr. Greene was about to blurt out, “Fine, give me another meal.” After all, this wasn’t his idea. He ate all sorts of food at home. Problem was, how could he ask for that meal after he had just made such a big deal on the plane for everyone to know that Professor Velvl Greene had ordered a kosher meal? How would it look if he suddenly said, “Fine, give me a regular meal”?

But Greene was angry. He was very angry. He was angry at the airline. He was angry at himself for listening to this nonsense. He was angry at G-d, because the least G-d could do was arrange for his meal to be on this plane, especially after Greene had done something nice for G-d! But he was most angry, fuming at Rabbi Feller for convincing him to do this. And Greene decided that he would show him yet.

He landed at Chicago’s Midway airport to change planes. He walks off his plane, and there in front of him was a hot dog stand. The hot dogs looked and smelled good, plump and juicy. Velvl Greene was very hungry, but he was even more angry than hungry. He headed first to the phone booth and called the rabbi—collect to make a point.

“This is a very upset and hungry Professor Greene calling from Midway airport in Chicago,” he said. “I’ll have you know that they did not have my kosher meal on the plane, and I’m starving. I also want you to know that there is a hot dog stand 20 feet away from me. Before I go ahead and buy one and eat it, I just wanted to tell you that I’m going to eat it. I’m going to have it with mustard, onions, relish and kraut. After I finish the first one, I’m going to have a second one!”

The rabbi was quiet for a minute, and then he said, “Velvl, on many occasions you have asked me about the essence of Judaism, what it all comes down to, what it calls forth from within us. Tonight, right now, in this telephone conversation, I’m



going to tell you the essence of Judaism. It's about passing the hot dog stand and not buying anything. It's about being able to get on your connecting flight without having eaten the hot dog. That's all of Judaism; the rest is commentary."

The professor says, "Feller, you're nuts. I always thought you were nuts; now I know you're nuts. This is all of Judaism? Feller, as every bite of this hot dog goes down my throat, I'm going to be thinking of you and saying your name. I am going to eat this in your honor."

And he hung up the phone.

He headed straight for the stand, stood in line and waited for his turn. He was about to place his order, when something very strange happened. He tried to say, "Can I have a hot dog?" He wanted it, he was hungry, he was angry, and gosh, those hot dogs looked better and better with each rotation of the grill.

But he couldn't. He found a seat and waited, hungry, for his next flight.

And, that is the ultimate Kiddush Hashem. It may have been a great Kiddush Hashem for Nadav and Avihu, as a one-time thing, before this type of service changed status from "not commanded" to "commanded not to," to obliterate the separation between existing in the physical world and rising above it.

But, Hashem did not create us as human beings with physical bodies so that our souls should abandon them to soar free in the spiritual realms. He placed our G-dly souls into those bodies so that we use them to serve Him, and raise them up to be Holy instruments of service; bodies which eat kosher, eat matzah on Pesach, fast on Yom Kippur (or when there is no kosher food around), and generally bring Hashem's Presence into the physical world rather than escaping from it. Perhaps that is the connection between the first part of the Parsha and then next part about kosher animals and purity.

And when Hashem's Presence sufficiently permeates this world, it will be ready for the revelation of Moshiach NOW!

