

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## PARSHAS SHEMINI

### Names and Descriptions in Torah

#### Identifying the Sin of Nadav and Avihu

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן נֹדֵב וְאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחַתְתּוֹ... וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם

*The sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan... and they brought before Hashem an alien fire that He had not commanded them.*<sup>1</sup>

Numerous explanations are offered by the sages, both in the Talmud and the Midrash, as to what the sin of Nadav and Avihu was [this notwithstanding the fact that the Torah itself seems to have provided the reason: offering a fire that Hashem had not commanded them]. Of these reasons, Rashi cites two:<sup>2</sup>

1. They issued halachic rulings in the presence of their teacher, Moshe.
2. They entered the Sanctuary while intoxicated.

As we know, Rashi cites the opinions of the Sages that he feels are in accord with the pshat of the verse. In our case, Rashi himself cites the evidence that supports the idea that they were intoxicated, for the very next section in the Torah warns against this very sin. However, what basis does Rashi see in the text for citing the first reason – issuing halachic rulings before their teacher?

If we look at how verse 1 begins, it refers to them as “the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu.” This is actually very unusual, for as a rule, when the Torah introduces a person and some form of description as to who they were, it first mentions their name and then adds the description. In our case, the order has been reversed – first it describes them as the son of Aharon and only then tells us their names! What lies behind this reversal?

In regular cases, when the description follows the name, it means that the description fits the name. However, if the description is followed by the name, it indicates that the person has somehow moved away from the description. A classic illustration of this idea is the Torah’s description of Shimon and Levi when they attacked the city of Shechem, “וַיִּקְחוּ שְׁנֵי בְנֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁמֵעוֹן וְלֹוִי אֲחֵי דִינָה אִישׁ חֶרֶב” – *Two sons of Yaakov, Shimon and Levi, brothers of Dinah, each took their sword.*<sup>3</sup> We see that the title “sons of Yaakov”

1 Vayikra 10:1.

2 Verse 2 s.v. *vateitzei*.

3 Bereishis 34:25.

is mentioned before their names, while “brothers of Dinah” is mentioned afterwards. And indeed, commenting on the first title, Rashi says, “they were Yaakov’s sons but did not act as such,” while on the second title he says, “Since they placed themselves at risk for her, they are called her brothers.” We see that the question of whether the description is one that the person was faithful or foreign to depends on whether it comes before or after his name.

Likewise, in our case, by first mentioning *what* Nadav and Avihu were – “sons of Aharon” – and only then saying *who* they were, the Torah is indicating that they were looking to move *away from* that description, namely, that they did not wish to see themselves as subordinates to their elders, but rather, were seeking to attain authority themselves, as expressed by issuing halachic rulings in the presence of their elders. Hence, with this explanation also having a pshat-related basis in the verse, Rashi cites it as well. Once again, we see the importance of noting not only what the Torah says, but also where in the verse it says it.

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## From the Haftarah: Finding Alignment

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The Haftarah relates how, when the Aron (Holy Ark) was being brought to Yerushalayim, it reached a point where the oxen who were drawing the wagon on which the Aron rested, so that it was in danger of falling from the wagon. A certain individual called Uzza reached out to steady the Aron, and was struck dead by Hashem for doing so, thereby bringing a pall to descend on the entire event.<sup>4</sup>

Rav Kook asks: With the Aron in danger of falling, how could Uzza be faulted for reaching out to steady it?

He answers that the Aron was in danger of falling because it was in a state of imbalance with the animals that were drawing the wagon. Had Uzza steadied the animals, the Aron would have been fine.

Many times throughout history, the animal, i.e. people, and the Aron, representing Torah, are in a state of imbalance with each other. The story of Uzza teaches us that the response to such an imbalanced situation is not to bring the Torah in line with the animal, but the animal in line with the Torah.<sup>5</sup>

Shabbat Shalom and Besoros Tovos.

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<sup>4</sup> Shmuel II, 6:6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Heard from my father, Rabbi Isaac Bernstein zt”l.