Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum—Love: Devotion, Desire and Deception

Grandma Rose's Magic

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A Project of the Aleph Society
Balancing Love and Obedience: The Curious Case of Nadav and Avihu

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Facilitator’s Note: This class can be taught in either a 60-minute or 90-minute session, depending on your time limitations. For a 60-minute session, omit the Introductory Activity. For a 90-minute session, include the Introductory Activity and allow more time for discussion throughout.

Introduction (3 minutes)

The story of the deaths of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, at the dedication of the Tabernacle (Mishkan) raises questions about the tension between spontaneous or intuitive religious expression and obedience to the religious system. We will look at this tragic and baffling episode together, try to understand what happened, and examine its implications for our lives today.

Introductory Activity (15 minutes)

- Write the word “Obedience” on one piece of paper and place it on one side of the room. Write “Worship of the Heart” on another piece of paper and place it on the other side of the room.

- Pose the following questions for participants to think about as they make their decisions about the ideal form of worship:

  1. What do you think is the highest or best form of Jewish worship?
  2. Is it obedience to God and Torah, even if it conflicts with your ideas or needs? Or is it subjective worship of the heart, serving God lovingly without the constraints of a fixed system?

- Ask participants to stand where they believe the Jewish ideal is (i.e., all the way on one side of the room or the other, somewhere halfway between, etc.).

- Briefly discuss where participants placed themselves and why (5 minutes or less—you don’t want this to take up all your time!)

Let’s examine this dichotomy through the story of Aaron and his sons.

Part One: The Dedication of the Tabernacle (10 minutes)

Our story begins in the wilderness. The Children of Israel have been freed from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and received the Torah. They have been commanded to build a Tabernacle, the portable place for Divine worship while the people dwell in the wilderness.

Aaron, the brother of Moses, is the High Priest, and his sons are priests. After seven days of preparation, the Tabernacle is inaugurated with Aaron and his sons bringing sacrifices, and Aaron blessing the people. God’s presence then descends upon the Tabernacle.
Read the story together.


22 Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being. 23 Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. 24 Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and rejoiced, and fell on their faces.

Ask:

1. Imagine that you are one of the spectators at the Tabernacle's inauguration. How do you feel at this point?

Continue reading the story; the next events take us by surprise.

Text #2: Leviticus 10:1–2. English translation adapted from JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.

1 Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord strange fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. 2 And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord.

Ask:

1. Imagine that you are still a spectator at the inauguration. How do you feel now?

2. According to the text, why do Nadav and Avihu die?

Part Two: What did Nadav and Avihu do Wrong? (17 minutes)

The commentators struggle to understand what Nadav and Avihu did to warrant death by fire. We will look at the explanations of Sifra, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, all of whom focus on the
fact that their offering of the incense was an action “that God had not commanded them” (verse 1). Sifra is a late 2nd century commentary on Leviticus. Rabbi Hirsch was a 19th century German rabbi and religious thinker. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best-known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

» Read Texts #3, #4 and #5 aloud.

Text #3: Sifra, Shemini 32.

”יקוה בנו אורות” — אław המشفותם. כות ברהא אוש תרשעה תפשו להוסך ארחא עלא האבה."

“And Aharon’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his censer”—they, in their joy, since they saw a new fire [the heavenly fire], they arose to add love to love.

» Ask:

1. According to the Sifra, what was Nadav and Avihu’s motivation for bringing an incense offering?
2. What does the Sifra mean when it says that Nadav and Avihu came to “add love to love”?
3. What is wrong with adding “love to love”?


No place is allowed in the whole service of the offerings of the Sanctuary of the Torah for subjectively doing just what you think right...For the proximity of and getting near to God, which is the purpose of every offering, is only to be found by the way of obedience, by compliance with God’s Will and subordination to it. This is one of the points in which Judaism and Paganism go in diametrically opposite directions. The Pagan brings his offering in an attempt to make the god subservient to his wishes. The Jew, with his offering, wishes to place himself in the service of God; by his offering he wishes to make himself subservient to the wishes of his God. So that all offerings are formulae of the demands of God, which the bringer, by his offering, undertakes to make the normal routine for his future life. So that self-devised offerings would be a killing of just those very truths which our offerings are meant to impress upon the bringers, would be placing a pedestal on which to glorify one’s own ideas, where a throne was meant to be built for obedience, and obedience only. We can understand that the death of the priestly youths, and their death in the first moment of the consecration of the Sanctuary of God, is the most solemn warning for all future priests of this Sanctuary; it excludes from the precincts of the Sanctuary of God—which was to be nothing else but the Sanctuary of His Torah—every expression of caprice, and every subjective idea of what is right and becoming! Not by fresh inventions even of God-serving novices, but by carrying out that which is ordained by God has the Jewish priest to establish the authenticity of his activities.

» Ask:

1. According to Rabbi Hirsch, what is the problem with subjective service of God?
2. Do you think obedience is the ideal service of God? Why or why not?
3. According to Rabbi Hirsch, what is the correct balance between subjective acts of love and obedience to the system?
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Text #5: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “A Bridge to the Infinite—Parshat Vayakhel.”

Building the Mishkan [Tabernacle] can be compared to constructing a spaceship. Space travel requires vehicles that can journey to distant, extraterrestrial places, but these voyages—no matter how long they are—are ultimately circumscribed by finite, physical parameters. The Mishkan, on the other hand, faced an even greater challenge: transcending the vast distance, and differences, between an infinite God and a finite humanity.

In order to build a spacecraft, one must develop a design, gather raw materials and fashion each component. Every part must be checked and double-checked, to assure that it meets the exacting specifications. All the pieces are then joined together into a cohesive unit. Finally, each part must be rechecked, each subsystem must be tested, and the whole structure must be reassembled. The Mishkan, too, was assembled, deconstructed and then constructed anew, to verify that each part perfectly complemented the others...

...On the last, climactic day of the dedication of the altar (Leviticus 9:1-9:24), the spiritual energy of God was to enter into the physical space of the Mishkan. The actions that would bring about this extraordinary, awe-inspiring event required exacting attention to detail: Moses directs Aaron (the Kohen Gadol, or High Priest) to perform the various sacrifices “as God has commanded” (Leviticus 9:7), and Aaron does so, “according to the law” (Leviticus 9:16), and “as Moshe had commanded” (Leviticus 9:21). It is only after the precise construction of the Mishkan and the flawless performance by Aaron, and only after Aaron and Moshe have blessed the people—creating a bond with them and among them—that God revealed Himself: “…And the glory of God appeared to the entire nation. And a fire went forth from God and consumed [the offerings] on the altar; the whole nation saw and sang with joy and fell on their faces” (Leviticus 9:23-24). The consequence of heedlessness is dramatically demonstrated in the very next verse: Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, bring “a strange fire”—an unauthorized offering...and are immediately consumed by Divine fire (Leviticus 10:1-2).

Ask:

1. The metaphor of a spacecraft is a powerful one. Do you think it is accurate? Why or why not?
2. Does thinking of the Tabernacle as something requiring the precision of a spacecraft influence your thinking of Nadav and Avihu’s actions? How?

According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, the criticism of Nadav and Avihu was that they did not pay sufficient attention to detail. Per his metaphor, just as space travel requires very specific guidelines, so too does building the Tabernacle. This leads us to the essential question:

Ask:

1. Is personal and emotional expression inherently irreconcilable with obligation?

Part Three: Moses’ Response (15 minutes)

Imagine that you have witnessed the awful death of Nadav and Avihu. What do you do now? How do you expect that Moses, the uncle, and Aaron, the father, will react?

Let’s continue our reading of Leviticus to find out.
3 Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.” And Aaron was silent. 4 Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, “Come forward and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp.” 5 They came forward and carried them out of the camp by their tunics, as Moses had ordered. 6 And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, “Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and anger strike the whole community. But your kinsmen, all the house of Israel, shall bewail the burning that the LORD has wrought. 7 And so do not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die, for the LORD’s anointing oil is upon you.” And they did as Moses had bidden.

Ask:

1. Why do you think Moses tells Aaron and his sons to refrain from outwardly mourning?
2. Do you think this is a proper response by Aaron, given his role as High Priest? Why or why not?

We will look at two commentaries explaining Moses’ puzzling directive to Aaron and his sons. These were written by Rashbam, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, a 12th century French commentator, and Rashi, his grandfather, the 11th century French commentator.

Text #7: Rashbam. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

And Moses said to Aaron: Do not mourn or cry, and do not desist from your work, for I have told you: This is what the Lord spoke, saying through My close ones I will draw near—through My High Priests who are close to me to serve Me I wish to be sanctified that my Name and Service will not be desecrated...

And before all the people I will be glorified: this is the honor of the Heavenly Presence, that [Aaron] sees his sons have died and sets aside his mourning in favor of the service of his creator.
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Ask:

1. According to Rashbam, why should Aaron and his sons refrain from mourning?
2. Imagine seeing Aaron and his sons continue their duties without any sign of mourning. How would you interpret their behavior? Would you experience that as a sanctification of God’s name?
3. Do you believe that obedience at great personal cost is the ultimate sanctification of God’s name? Why? Can you think of other stories in the Bible or in your life that support this idea?
4. According to this text, that Aaron and his remaining sons did not show outward signs of mourning was a true testimony to their dedication to God and their work in the Tabernacle. How can we contrast this stoicism with Nadav and Avihu dying because they “added love to love?”

In contrast to the commentaries that view Nadav and Avihu’s extreme love and subjective religious expression as deficient, Rashi presents us with a totally different point of view.

Text #8: Rashi. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

This is what the Lord spoke: But when did He speak? [It was when He said], “And I will meet with the children of Israel, and it will be sanctified through My glory (Exod. 29:43). Do not read מֵעָנָּי, but מֵעָנָּי, through My honorable ones.” Moses said to Aaron, “Aaron, my brother! I knew that this House was to be sanctified through the beloved ones of the Omnipresent, but I thought it would be either through me or through you. Now I see that they [Nadav and Avihu] were greater than I or you!”

Ask:

1. How does Rashi’s explanation (taken from the midrash, Leviticus Rabbah) contrast with the commentaries that disapprove of Nadav and Avihu’s spontaneity?
2. What is so great about religious personalities like Nadav and Avihu?
3. According to this explanation, Moses believes that Nadav and Avihu were even greater than himself and Aaron. Moses realizes that they were sanctifying God. Is it possible that Nadav and Avihu did not do something wrong?

Part Four: Aaron and His Sons Push Back (10 minutes)

In the following verses, we will see how Aaron and his remaining sons Elazar and Itamar push back against Moses’ directive to proceed as though all is fine. Aaron, Elazar and Itamar were given specific instructions about sacrifices in the Tabernacle, yet Aaron makes a change to the laws. Whereas Aaron remains silent at the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, here Aaron stands up for what he believes is correct.
Read Text #9 together.


16 Then Moses inquired about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron’s remaining sons, and said, 17 “Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and He has given it to you to remove the guilt of the community and to make expiation for them before the Lord. 18 Since its blood was not brought inside the sanctuary, as I commanded.” 19 And Aaron spoke to Moses, “See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would the Lord have approved?” 20 And when Moses heard this, he approved.

Ask:

1. How does Aaron push back against Moses’ directive to continue his priestly service as usual?
2. What is Aaron’s justification? How does he know whether his actions would have been approved by God?
3. How does Aaron reassert the value of intuitive and subjective worship of God? Why do you think he resists emotionless obedience?

Aaron believed that there was a time and a place for spontaneous worship, along with a sense of responsibility and commitment to obligation. Both exist in Aaron's world. While Aaron silently mourned the deaths of his sons, he also spoke up when he thought it was important to be able to express himself.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

Let’s consider the stories of Nadav and Avihu’s deaths, the restrictions on Aaron’s mourning and the altercation between Moses and Aaron about the sin offering.

Ask:

1. What do you think the Bible is telling us about the balance between obedience to a religious system and spontaneous, intuitive worship and love of God?
2. What do you think is the right balance?

On the one hand, the story of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu seems to warn us against spontaneous worship of God. On the other hand, the acceptance of Aaron’s response to Moses suggests that there is still room for more than just strict obedience.
Part One: The Dedication of the Tabernacle


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Part Two: What did Nadav and Avihu do Wrong?

Text #3: Sifra, Shemini 32.

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