

ONEG SHABBAS

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Oneg Shabbas explores drinking in the weekly Torah portion, along with timely essays on drinking in Jewish life.

Did Nadav's & Avihu's Deaths Have to Do Drinking?

Introduction

While there is no explicit mention of any drinking in this week's Torah portion, there is an oblique reference to it. I'm specifically referring to Nadav and Avihu's deaths, where our Torah portion describes them as dying in the following way (Numbers 3:4):

And Nadav and Avihu died before The LORD, when they offered alien fire before The LORD in the wilderness of Sinai.

The story is certainly a curious one, as described by Dr. Arthur J. Wolak:

The reason for the sudden death of Nadab and Avihu remains one of the Torah's most perplexing mysteries. The lack of specific details in Leviticus 10:1-3 and 16:1 is surprising, for not only were Nadab and Avihu the eldest of the priestly four sons of Aaron, the first High Priest, but according to tradition they were "next in importance after Moses and Aaron, ranking even higher than the seventy elders."

Arthur J. Wolak, "Alcohol and the Fate of Nadab and Avihu: A Biblical Cautionary Tale against Inebriation", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2013), 219.

In searching for what could be the unnamed cause of their deaths, there is, as we discussed several weeks ago in *Parashat Shemini*, an intriguing juxtaposition of the prohibition against priests drinking on the job afterwards. Whether a midrash or an interpreter, this immediate juxtaposition is just too glaring to ignore. Indeed, there are numerous midrashim which make this connection, such as this example from the early second century (ויקרא רבה י"ב:א):

Rabbi Yishmael taught: The two sons of Aaron died only because they entered **intoxicated with wine**...

A colorful third-century rabbi deployed a metaphor that helps fill this in (ויקרא רבה י"ב:א):

Rabbi Pinhas said in the name of Rabbi Levi: "This is analogous to a king who had a loyal servant. He found him standing at the entrance to taverns. He beheaded him quietly, and appointed another servant in his stead. We do not know for what reason he killed the first. However, from what he commanded the second, saying: 'Do not enter the area at the entrance to the taverns', we know that it was for that reason that he killed the first. So too, 'fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed them' (Lev. 10:2), but we do not know why they die, except from what He commanded Aaron, when He said: 'Drink neither wine nor beer' (Lev. 10:9) - from this, we understand that **they died only because of the wine.**

While there are other midrashim in this vein, including as explored in these pages for *Parashat Shemini*, this should demonstrate the connection. Indeed, as Dr. Wolak describes, "The Rabbis of the Midrash understood that alcohol was the underlying problem that led to Nadab and Avihu's demise, based on the proximity of the warning against intoxication to the account of their death" (Wolak, "Alcohol and the Fate of Nadab and Avihu", 223).



But Nadab and Avihu died by **GOD's** will, when they offered alien fire before **GOD** in the wilderness of Sinai; and they left no sons.

Midrashim That Indicate That Do Not Lay Blame on Drinking

However, there are also midrashim that attribute Nadav's and Avihu's deaths to non-drinking possibilities, such as the following selections from *Midrash Tanhuma (Aḥarei Mot 6:1)*:

It was taught in a baraita in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: Nadav and Avihu died only because they had taught halakhah in the presence of their master, Moses.

and also this (ibid.):

Bar Qappara said in the name of Rabbi Jeremiah bar Eleazar, "Aaron's sons died because of four things:

For the drawing near, for the sacrificing, for alien fire, and for not taking advice from each other.

For drawing near, in that they entered the innermost sanctuary.

For the sacrificing, in that they offered a sacrifice, which they had not been commanded [to offer].

For alien fire, in that they had brought fire from a cookhouse (instead of from off the altar). And for not taking advice from each other.

as well as this (ibid.):

Abba Hanin says, "Because they had no wives, and it is recorded, 'and he shall make atonement for himself and for his household' (Lev. 16:6)."

תאמי בשם רבי אליעזר, לא מתו נדב ואביהוא, אלא על שהורו הלכה לפני משה רבן בר קפרא בשם רבי ירמיהו בן אלעזר אמר, בשביל ארבעה דברים מתו בני אהרן, על הקריבה, ועל ההקריבה, ועל אש זרה, ועל שלא נטלו עצה זה מזה. על הקריבה, שנכנסו לפני ולפנים. ועל ההקריבה, שהקריבו קרבן מה שלא נצטוו. ועל אש זרה, שהביאו אש זרה מבית הכיורים. ועל שלא נטלו עצה זה מזה.

אבא חנין אומר, שלא היה להם נשים, דתנינן תמן, וכפר בעדו ובעד ביתו, היא אשתו.



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and, finally, this list (ibid.):

Rabbi Mani of Sha'av and Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi, "Aaron's sons died because of four things, and [a death is recorded in connection with all of them:

Because they entered without washing hands and feet, and it says, 'When they come unto the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water lest they die' (Ex. 30:20);

because they entered while lacking [the proper priestly] clothes, and it says, 'And they shall be upon Aaron and his sons in their coming to the tent of meeting...' (Ex. 28:43);

...because they had no children, and [a sentence of] death is recorded in connection with [that lack], where it is stated, 'But Nadav and Avihu died...and they had no children' (Num. 3:4);

and because they entered and had drunk wine, and it says, 'Drink neither wine nor beer... lest you die' (Lev. 10:9)."

While these other rabbis avoid the aspect of Nadav and Avihu possibly having served while having drunk wine, Rabbi Levi provides a few other possibilities, but still leaves the possibility open that they had been drinking wine.

Indeed, as Dr. Wolak describes that first midrash of this section regarding Rabbi Eliezer (Wolak, "Alcohol and the Fate of Nadab and Abihu", 224):

Yet, one can still infer that alcohol made Nadab and Abihu act improperly – by giving instruction in the presence of Moses. The view of R. Eliezer, as well as the simple belief that it was a particular ritual offense that caused the death of Nadab and Abihu, in no way contradicts the premise that alcohol ingestion was the underlying problem.

Does Wine-Drinking Have to be the Problem?

While Dr. Wolak makes an interesting argument that even when these midrashim do not mention drinking that it may still be part of what got Nadav and Avihu killed, which can seem quite compelling, there is something else to consider, especially in light of this week's Torah portion, as Dr. Sheila Tuller Keiter points out:

The drunkenness theory also works in concert with many of the other explanations. If there was something wrong with the method, timing, or intent behind their offering, alcohol may have been the culprit.

Yet the argument regarding alcohol fails to explain the conspicuous use of the term strange fire, which appears twice in the genealogies of Aaron later in the Torah.

...
The Torah does not revisit the matter of priestly drunkenness. Instead, it emphasizes the strange fire, which suggests its centrality to Nadav and Avihu's error.

Dr. Sheila Tuller Keiter, "The Cause of Nadav and Avihu's Death: Incense Smoke?", *TheTorah.com* (27 March 2024) [<https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-cause-of-nadav-and-avihu-death-incense-smoke>]

Was the Pre-Offering or the Offering the Problem?

Another midrash shows Rabbi Akiva using our Torah portion to ask where the culpability lies for Nadav's and Avihu's deaths, throwing into question as to whether their potential drinking would have been responsible (ספרא, אחרי מות, פרשה א ב):

רבי מני דשאב ורבי יהושע דסכנין בשם רבי לוי, בשביל ארבע דברים מתו בניו של אהרן, ובכללן כתיב בהן מיתה.

על שנכנסו בלא רחיצת ידים ורגלים, וכתוב בהן מיתה, בבאם אל אהל מועד ורחצו מים ולא ימתו (שמות ל, ט).

ועל ידי שנכנסו מחסרי בגדים, דכתיב בהן מיתה, שנאמר: והיו על אהרן ועל בניו בבאם אל אהל מועד וגו' (שם כח, מג).

ועל ידי שלא היה להם בנים, כתיב בהן מיתה, שנאמר: וימת נדב ואביהוא ובנים לא היו להם (במדבר ג, ד).

ועל שנכנסו שתויי יין למקדש, וכתוב: יין ושכר אל תשתו ולא תמתו (ויקרא י, ט).



R. Yossi, the Galilean says: "They died because of the drawing near (and entering the holy of holies without permission), and not because of the incense offering."

Rabbi Akiva says: "They died because of the offering and not because of the drawing near. One verse states 'when they drew near before the LORD and they died' (Lev. 16:1), and another verse states 'and they offered before the LORD a strange fire' (Lev. 11:1). The resolution: 'when they drew near (with) a strange fire before the LORD' (Num. 3:4) – They died because of the drawing near and not because of the offering."

Rabbi Elazar, son of Azaryah says: "The offering is sufficient (for death) unto itself, and the drawing near is sufficient unto itself."

While there is a lot going on in this three-way rabbinic dispute, Rabbi Abraham ben David (1125-1198) (popularly known as Ra'avad) helps explain these positions, including their connection to drinking (על רב"ד על ספרא, אחרי מות, פרשה א ב):

It seems to me that [Rabbi Yosei the Galilean] opines like Rabbi Ishmael, who said that they entered while **intoxicated with wine**....

Rabbi Yosei the Galilean says that their punishment was not deserving of death merely for their offering—whether it was truly a “strange fire” or whether they brought it at an improper time.

...
However, this is not the view of everyone. Rabbi Akiva does not agree with this, whereas Rabbi Elazar may agree. Still, since the punishment for entering was only stated after their death, they were not punished for that; rather, they died because they issued a halakhic ruling in the presence of their teacher, Moses.

...
Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah holds that they died both for the sin of the offering and for the sin of approaching. He maintains that they entered **while intoxicated with wine** and erred, either by not bringing the fire from the proper hearth or by bringing it at the wrong time, like Rabbi Ishmael in both respects. ...

ר' יוסי הגלילי אומר, על הקריבה מתו ולא מתו על ההקריבה.

ר' עקיבא אומר, "בקרבתם לפני יהוה וימותו", וכתוב אחד אומר "ויקריבו לפני יהוה אש זרה" (ויקרא י)...

"בהקריבה אש זרה לפני ה'" (במדבר ג, במדבר כו) – הוי על ההקריבה מתו ולאמיתו על הקריבה.

ר' אלעזר בן עזריה אומר, כדאי הקריבה לעצמה וכדאי קריבה לעצמה.

נראה לי דסבירא ליה כר' ישמעאל דאמר שתויי יין נכנסו....

קאמר ר' יוסי הגלילי שלא היה עונש כדאי למיתה בהקרבתם בין שהיתה אש זרה ממש בין שהכניסוה בלא עתה....

מיהו לאו דברי הכל היא דר' עקיבא לא סבירא ליה הכי ור' אלעזר איפשר דסבירא ליה הכי מיהו כיון דעונש ביאה לא גאמר אלא לאחר מיתתן לא נענשו עליה אלא על שהורו הלכה בפני משה רבן מתו....

ור' אליעזר בן עזריה סבר על עונש ההקריבה ועל עונש קריבה מתו. דקסבר שתויי יין נכנסו וטעו שלא הכניסו האש מבית הכירים או שהכניסוה בלא עתה. וכר' ישמעאל בתרויהו:

Conclusion

While there are certainly midrashim that attribute Nadav's and Avihu's deaths to their having been drinking or otherwise intoxicated while offering their final sacrifice, there are also midrashim that attribute their premature deaths to other factors. While people typically think of their deaths as being caused by drunkenness or otherwise drinking while on the job (as articulated by Dr. Wolak), it would also be helpful to consider we should consider other possibilities (as articulated by Dr. Keiter), as raised by these rabbis. While it seems possible that drinking did not cause their deaths, it's also part of the conversation that it may have been.

L'chaim 

