

SHMINI – COMING TOO CLOSE

April 18, 2020

Rabbi David Wolpe

0:00

Shabbat Shalom! Those of you who have seen previous weeks know that the setting is different. That is because we are trying bit by bit to bring you the best video experience of the shabbat service, just like in olden days when the video experience was called “Being there,” and the difference between seeing something on a screen and being there is in some ways the subject of this morning's talk. You may know, if you look around, that I am in my office at the synagogue. I don't know how easily you can tell but I came here surrounded by books and by the atmosphere of the synagogue despite the fact that it is empty, because I thought that it might be easier and smoother to have the transmission from here. And this [shabbat] we read about Nadav and Avihu.

1:13

And Nadav and Avihu, for those of you who may not remember, were the children of Aaron, the high priest—the *Kohen Gadol*. And Nadav and Avihu brought what the Torah calls *eish zar*, a strange fire, and as a result of bringing this fire—whatever it was—to the altar, they were killed. And then God says something very strange, “*Bikravi ekadesh*, with those who are close to me, I will be sanctified.” And so there is a sense in which we are supposed to understand Nadav and Avihu not so much as people who rebelled but as people whose zealotry for God—*bikravai*, through my close ones—whose zealotry for God destroyed them. And there are, as you

can imagine, in the Midrash, in later commentators, no end of discussion about what Nadav and Avihu did why they were killed, the nature of their sin, the justice of the punishment. Some say that they wanted to replace Aharon, that they were scheming to take over others. That they were drunk, on and on and on, all based on various small hints in the text, but we don't know.

3:02

Here is what we do know: *Bikravai ekadesh* is in a strange way almost an oxymoron. An oxymoron is a phrase of two words that contradict one another, like “tall shortness” or “bitter sweetness.” Those sorts of oxymoronic phrases teach us something when they are poignant and powerful. There are a lot of jokes involving oxymoronic phrases, but we're not talking about serious ones. And *bikrovai*, with my close ones, *ekadesha* will be holy, reminds us that the root for *kadesh* means separate. *Kidusha* is separateness in Judaism. And to say with my close ones I will be holiest to say with those who are close I will prove myself separate. Nadav and Avihu are like Icarus in the Jewish tradition. You may remember the Greek myth of Icarus who flew too close to the Sun, and so his wings which were made of wax melted and he fell into the sea. Icarus got too close to the fire and was destroyed, Nadav and Avihu get too close to the fire and are destroyed in the Haftara Uza, who sees that the Ark is falling and tries to hold it up gets too close and is destroyed. And this idea which seems counterintuitive that closeness can destroy you... This is an idea that at this exact moment governs our lives. We, for the first time, understand, in a way that we never did, the dangers of closeness.

5:18

When we talk about social distancing, we realize that there is a certain inherent pain involved, even in people we don't know. Yesterday, someone came to my door to read the meter and as I opened the door, I backed up, and I apologized because I felt terrible. It was like, I didn't mean to do it to him, and he said he understood, but in human relations the natural impulse is to say that closer is better... and yet, sometimes *kedusha*, sanctity, holiness requires distance. That's why at the very outset I said that giving a sermon through video is in some ways the theme of the talk, of the drash, this morning because it is only through distance that we may one day be close. And if we were too close, the consequences would be closer to what became of Nadav and Avihu—a fire that would engulf many of us.

6:33

It is very strange to think of the Torah portion in this new way, but it teaches us in part the unfathomable reserves that the Torah has to illuminate different aspects of our lives. It was not until I re-read *Shmini* this week, our Torah portion, that I began to think of Nadav and Avihu as the anti-modeling of social distance, as teaching us that sometimes in closeness is danger, and in distance is safety, and that even though the natural impulse is to be like Nadav and Avihu and Icarus and Uza to draw close, that that is the reflex, that sometimes discipline has to override impulse, and distance override intimacy.

7:48

And so I find myself staring at a camera instead of at a face and feeling a little bit like Nadav and Avihu, that is having the impulse to draw close. But, I have an advantage that they do not have: I've read their story, and I know how it ends. And so, I continue to encourage all of us to practice the discipline of distance... The recognition that to be farther away can sometimes be our salvation. To understand that *kidusha*, that holiness, requires sometimes separateness. Remember the end of the Havdalah service: "*Bein kodesh l'chol ben or l'choshech bein Yisrael laamim bein yom hash'vi-i l'sheishet y'mei hamaaseh.*" All these divisions that make up life, sometimes life is composed not only of embraces but of boundaries. These days we are drawing boundaries so that we are not consumed by an *eish zar*, by a strange fire. But one day—God willing, one day soon—the fire will go out, and we will embrace again *Shabbat shalom*.