

How could Nadav and Avihu have commented about Moshe and Aharon “When will these two elders pass away and we will become the leaders over the community”!?

In our Parsha, Parshas Shemini, the Torah tells us [Vayikrah 10:1] “The children of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took a pan and put in it fire, and put upon it Ketores, and they brought it before Hashem, a strange fire, one for which Hashem had not commanded, and a fire went out and consumed them”. It seems clear from this possuk that the cause of their deaths was the bringing of the “strange fire for which Hashem had not commanded”.

However, in the words of Chazal [Vayikrah Rabba 20:10] we find a seemingly different cause: “Nadav and Avihu would walk behind Moshe and Aharon... and say ‘When will these two elders pass away and we become the leaders over the community’... said to them Hashem ‘Do not pride yourselves with tomorrow’”.

This seems extremely baffling! First of all, why would Chazal give a seemingly totally different reason for something the Torah has already given the reason for? Secondly, how is it that great men such as Nadav and Avihu would talk this way about their Rabbeim!?

The Gemorrah [Kidushin 31a] tells us “Greater is a Mitzvah which one has been commanded to do, than one which one has not been commanded to do”, which Tosafos explains is only because of the extra pressure and worry of having to battle the Yetzer Hora [ed. note see Tos. in Avodah Zora 3a]. It would seem that otherwise a voluntary Mitzvah would be greater. Says the Ya’arais Devash [v2 drosho 9], accordingly, in the future when Hashem will destroy the Yetzer Hora [Sukkah 52a], a voluntary Mitzvah will be of a greater level.

Nadav and Avihu were under the impression that since the Mishkan had been built, the Chet Ha’eigel had been forgiven and the Yetzer Hora had been destroyed, just as had been before the Chet Ha’eigel had been done, at Matan Torah. Therefore, doing Mitzvos without being commanded on were of a greater level. They therefore brought a fire without being commanded.

The Arizal says that Nadav and Avihu had their minds on bringing the world to the perfection of before the Chet of the Eitz Hada’as [see Chidushei HaRim Parshas Acharei Mos]. With this we can now understand their intention for saying “When will these two elders pass away and we become the leaders over the community”. What they meant was: when will these elders, symbolic of the Commanded Mitzvos, pass on, so that the era of the future can begin, when the world returns to perfection and Voluntary Mitzvos be at a greater level than Commanded ones. [ed. note: To this Hashem answered them ‘Do not pride yourselves with tomorrow’ i.e. the time is not yet ripe].

We now understand that the seemingly different reason Chazal have given for their deaths is really not a different reason at all, for in truth they are both one and the same. Nadav and Avihu’s death had been because of their bringing a strange fire on which Hashem had not commanded, which was the same idea behind them saying “When will these two elders pass away and we become the leaders over the community”. Both ideas were motivated by the drive to serve Hashem at the highest level of devotion, through being free of the Yetzer Hora and being able to serve Hashem voluntarily, something which the world was not yet ready for. Their death was not so much a punishment as it was a direct affect of the intense devotion that accompanied the doing of a voluntary Mitzvah. Their passion to serve Hashem was so great that it caused their souls to depart. This devotion was one of the future, one which we look forward to having, speedily in our days.