

We are reminded of G!d's swift Divine retribution in this week's Parsha. In Sh'mini, Aaron and his son's have just completed all that G!d has asked of them to dedicate the Mishkan, that portable Sanctuary our ancestors carried around the desert. They begin to officiate as kohanim, or priests. The Divine presence comes to dwell in the Sanctuary, and Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu suffer an unfortunate fiery death. When they brought a strange fire to the altar; an act blasphemous enough to cause G!d to lash out and kill them instantly. This image of G!d killing anybody is one I have trouble reconciling with the G!d that I know.

I struggle with the similarities between this condemning, angry G!d, and the G!d of my family of origin. I was born into the hellfire and brimstone of a Southern Baptist home. My father was born Jew-"ish" but had become a Southern Baptist preacher; à la the Preacher in the movie Footloose. Growing up in that environment was stifling and like my own personal Mitzrayim, or narrow place. I'm glad to say I reclaimed my Judaism almost 20 years ago and it still hurts to see any family of origin look at their family member askance because of their choices in life, be they about religion, gender, or sexuality.

Searching the Torah until it speaks to me in all my identities, I try to find answers as to why G!d would exact such Divine retribution from Nadav and Avihu. One possible explanation for the killing of Aaron's sons is that the Israelites were slaves for generations, and they followed Egyptian religious practices. There is even evidence that Jews followed Egyptian funeral practices, such as using sarcophagi, or Egyptian stone coffins. You might recall the Israelites had a history of praying to idols and burning offerings on altars back in Exodus during the incident of the Golden Calf. Were Nadav and Avihu just following what they had been doing since they

were young; recalling what the Egyptians did in the temples of their pantheon? Perhaps they could not divorce themselves from the old ways.

There are other explanations for the killings offered by our ancestors. Perhaps they were drunk, they pondered, or they were too self righteous, or maybe G!d didn't like the offerings they put forward. One interpretation even has them rewarded for their zeal to be close to G!d with first class martyrdom. How do we, as modern-day Jews, reconcile that G!d burned the sons of Aaron alive? As a parent who could never think of my child dying in that way, I struggle with G!d, the text, and the feeling that we have no easy answers.

You may be thinking that this sort of retribution theology -being smited because of some wrongdoing- is a thing of the ancient past. But, sadly, it is not. Just in the past six weeks we have seen Ultra-Orthodox rabbis stating that the COVID outbreak was Divine retribution for pride parades, and the Anti-LGBTQ Israeli health minister has walked back comments about COVID-19 being Divine retribution for our acceptance of LGBTQ people. Personally I think about my fire and brimstone family. Some time ago, my brother called to wish me a happy birthday and have a conversation. What happened next was unnerving. He said that he wanted me to move out of San Francisco because he was sure that G!d was going to smite the city. He reasoned that G!d was disappointed in those who had abandoned the covenant and that the cities had become wicked places where "homosexuals and people with loose morals had congregated."

He was concerned that these sinners were reinterpreting G!d's word and blaspheming against G!d. As he spoke, I realized that the blasphemers he was talking about were my chosen family

...(pause) and me. To him, we were all Nadav and Avihu bringing strange fire to G!d, and therefore retribution was waiting in the wings. I found a way to disengage from the conversation and began trembling afterward. I am the only family member I know of who would fit the description of the sinner that my brother thought deserved this Divine retribution.

When I first came-out to my family as bi and trans, many stopped inviting me to family events, took my pictures down off the walls, and told me that my soul would not be "saved" if I continued my wicked ways. My reaction was pretty swift; I created new pockets of community and chosen family from those who did truly love and care for me. I didn't look back to my family of origin except to those who did not abandon me. Today I imagine a very different call, now that we all see things in a new light. The family that rejected me because of my method of approach to life has finally grown enough in their own spiritual space to see me as the man I am and my chosen family as valid.

I tend to see G!d, like my family of origin, as ever-changing. The G!d of the Torah doesn't have to make sense to me, because as we grow and change in our outlook, so does G!d. Similarly, my family of origin no longer calls me on my birthday to plead with me to leave a city that they see as wicked. They see beyond my sexual preference, gender and religious choices. They finally see me as a man that they care about deeply. Those they used to label wicked and abominable are, like me, just struggling for visibility as humans rather than blasphemers' bringing strange fire to G!d. When those who could only see the surface layer learn more about how G!d has grown and changed since Sh'mini, then we will all indeed be closer to G!d... with no sacrifice needed.