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On The Parsha

In Parshas Shmini, we encounter one of the Torah's most tragic episodes: the sudden death of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, as they bring an unauthorized offering before Hashem. The Torah describes their actions with striking brevity: "And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, each took his fire pan, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered a strange fire before Hashem, which He had not commanded them." (Vayikra 10:1). The consequences were swift and severe, "Fire went out from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem." (Vayikra 10:2).

The Ramban offers insight into the nature of Nadav's and Avihu's error. Unlike other interpretations that suggest that they were intoxicated or that their sin was rooted in arrogance (i.e. Hashem did not want their offering because they were arrogant), the Ramban proposes that they erred out of excessive religious zeal. He writes, "It seems to me that these two sons of Aharon died because they drew near before Hashem in the Holy of Holies... They entered the innermost sanctuary and offered their incense there... They thought that such an act of devotion would be pleasing to Hashem."

According to the Ramban, Nadav and Avihu acted with good intentions, but their mistake was profound—they substituted their own judgment for Hashem's command. They believed they understood what would please Hashem even though Hashem did not say He wanted it.

This episode powerfully illustrates the importance of consultation before embarking on a significant course of action. In Pirkei Avos (1:6), Yehoshua ben Perachya teaches, "Make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend." By not adding a qualifier to the statement, this fundamental teaching emphasizes that *all* people need a teacher and a friend for consultation purposes, regardless of their spiritual stature.

Rather than consulting with their father Aharon or their uncle Moshe before bringing this unauthorized offering, they acted independently, trusting their own spiritual intuition above the authority of Aharon and Moshe. Had

they sought counsel, perhaps this tragedy could have been avoided. In addition, by failing to consult with those wiser than themselves, they also missed an opportunity for guidance on how their sincere religious zeal could have been directed into more proper channels.

The essence of integrity in Torah thought is not merely the sincerity of our intentions. Rather, it is the honest alignment of our actions with Hashem's will as expressed through His Torah and Mitzvos. We might be tempted to think that our personal spiritual intuitions can guide our religious practices, but Parshas Shmini reminds us that genuine service requires humility, faithful adherence to Hashem's commands, and the wisdom to consult with appropriate teachers and friends before undertaking a significant course of action.

Halacha – Jewish Law

QUESTION: Please weigh in on the following dilemma:

"Devorah" received an expensive but utterly hideous sweater from her mother-in-law for her birthday. When she opened it in front of her mother-in-law, she managed a convincing display of enthusiasm: "Oh wow, it is so unique! I have never seen anything like it!"

The next day, Devorah went to the store to exchange it. As Devorah approached the returns counter with the sweater and gift receipt, she spotted her mother-in-law shopping in the same store. Her mother-in-law had not seen her yet, but she happened to be heading toward the returns area as well.

Should Devorah, A) dive behind a clothing rack to hide (looking ridiculous but ensuring that her mother-in-law does not find out that she is returning the sweater and thus maintaining the lie that she likes the sweater), B) proceed with the return of the sweater and risk getting caught (the most honest approach at this point, but potentially hurtful to her mother-in-law's feelings), or C) let herself be seen by her mother-in-law and pretend that she is buying something to match the sweater (furthering and reinforcing the deception)?

ANSWER: The Gemara (Yevamos 65b) says that one may deviate from the truth (in certain circumstances) to

maintain peace (e.g. to avoid hurting someone's feelings). This principle is codified by the Rambam in Hilchos Gezeilah v'Aveidah 14:13. In light of this principle, let us analyze Devorah's options.

Option A: Hiding behind a clothing rack - This maintains the original deviation from the truth (pretending to like the sweater) and adds a childish and undignified element of hiding behind a coat rack to avoid detection. The Chofetz Chaim (in Sefas Tamim) cautions that even when permitted to deviate from truth, one should minimize the extent of deviation. Furthermore, the Sefer Chassidim (§426) writes that one should avoid placing oneself in situations where lying becomes necessary. By hiding and not coming clean, Devorah maintains the lie rather than undoing it and risks another lie should she get caught.

Option B: Proceeding with the return - This is the most straight forward and honest approach, but risks causing unnecessary pain to her mother-in-law if/when Devorah gets caught, potentially hurting her feelings and damaging their relationship. The Gemara (Kesuvos 16b-17a) says that the praising of a bride as beautiful even when she may not be, is permitted (according to Bais Hillel who we generally abide by) because it is not considered falsehood due to the subjective nature of beauty and the importance of maintaining peace.

Option C: Pretending to buy something to match the sweater - This option involves furthering and reinforcing the deception and goes beyond the initial lie. The Sefer Yereim (§235) and other Halachic authorities note that the permission to deviate from the truth for peace has its limits - it should be minimized and not become habitual.

Halachic Conclusion

The permission to lie to avoid hurting someone's feelings applies primarily to past events (like in our case, pretending to like a gift that was already purchased for Devorah) but not to creating additional, ongoing deceptions (e.g. like pretending to shop for a match to the sweater). In this author's view, none of the above options are preferable. Rather, Devorah should postpone the return for another day when her mother-in-law is not at the store. This is preferable to the risk of being caught and then having to lie again, or being honest about the sweater and risk hurting

her feelings as the Chafetz Chaim writes in Shmiras HaLashon that consideration for another's feelings is a fundamental Torah value.

Chizuk - Inspiration

During World War II, Rabbi Eliezer Silver ZT"l (1882-1968) traveled across Europe to rescue Jewish refugees and orphans. He was President of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada and was instrumental in saving thousands of lives through the Vaad Hatzalah (Rescue Committee).

One of the most striking stories about Rabbi Silver concerns his integrity with charitable funds. After the war, he raised substantial amounts of money for orphans and refugees. One day, a visitor found him sitting in his small, modest apartment with two separate phones for two separate phone lines.

Curious, the visitor asked why he needed two phones. Rabbi Silver explained that one line was for his personal calls, while the other was strictly for his charitable work. He refused to use even a single penny of the charity's funds for his personal needs—not even sharing a phone line.

This meticulous care with other people's money—especially charitable funds—exemplified Rabbi Silver's extraordinary level of integrity. Even in something seemingly minor like a shared phone line, he understood that true honesty means being precise in the separation between personal resources and those entrusted to him for the benefit of others.

Rabbi Silver's dedication to rescue work and his unwavering ethical standards made him one of the most respected rabbinic authorities in America during the mid-20th century. His story continues to inspire people to maintain absolute integrity, particularly when handling resources meant for those in need.

*"May I back out of a school carpool that
I have already committed to?"
"Should I report a co-worker who is acting dishonestly?"*

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