

Rabbi Gewirtz's D'var Torah for Parshat Shmini

Enthusiasm and self-confidence are two positive *midot* (character traits) that we strive to instill in ourselves and in our children. But the term *midah* (trait) and its plural *midot* (traits) literally mean measure(s). The Rabbis chose that term to indicate that each trait is positive only in an appropriate measure. Too much or too little of it will be negative.

Rabbi Chaim ben Attar (18th century Morocco and Israel) discusses an example from Parshat Shmini, in his commentary, Ohr HaChaim.

Nadav and Avihu, the two oldest sons of the High Priest, Aharon, lose their lives in the performance of an attempted Mitzvah. On the eighth day of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) inauguration, they attempted to bring an offering that was not scheduled. Their thorough knowledge of the rules of *korbanot* (sacrificial offerings) assured them that the offering was proper and desired by G-d. They miscalculated. The fire that consumed the offering overcame them too and they died.

The Ohr HaChaim finds a clue to the reason for their miscalculation from the verse that introduces the incident.

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אֵשׁ מִמִּזְבֵּחוֹ...

And Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his pan...

One would expect, the Ohr HaChaim points out, that the Torah would first say their names, and then add they were Aharon's sons. Ohr Hachaim explains that the Torah intentionally reverses the order so that we understand the words as causes for their mistake and not just for identification.

First they are described as "Aharon's sons". They possessed their father's passion for serving G-d. They were excited to express their love for G-d in creative ways and were sure that G-d would approve of their motive and their novel offering. Then they are described by their names, to indicate that their personal qualities as righteous individuals made them confident that they could rely on their own judgement and not consult with Moshe and Aharon before acting.

Even positive qualities like enthusiasm and self-confidence can be expressed inappropriately. It never hurts to get another opinion. It's difficult to make objective and unbiased judgements when we are charged with any emotion, even a positive one.