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WHEN ZEAL TURNS FATAL: LEADERSHIP WARNINGS FROM THE NADAB AND ABIHU NARRATIVE

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Abstract

The catastrophic climax of the Tabernacle's inauguration in the Bible, where Nadab and Abihu's unauthorized "strange fire" leads to their divine immolation, serves as a potent ancient narrative encapsulating fundamental leadership principles with enduring relevance. This paper posits that the episode reveals a sophisticated leadership framework, demanding humility over arrogance, consultation over impulsiveness, sobriety over altered consciousness, respect for authority, emotional equilibrium, and the subordination of impulse to rational judgment. Through methodical analysis, we demonstrate how this seemingly punitive biblical tale transcends its context, offering nuanced leadership ethics applicable across secular and religious domains, illuminating the privileges and profound responsibilities inherent in positions of authority.

Keywords: Nadab, Abihu, Moses, Tabernacle, leadership, humility, grandstanding, purpose washing, cognitive biases.

Introduction

Western literary titans—Homer, Plutarch, Plato, Shakespeare, and Hemingway—offer vital lenses into leadership's complexities. Yet, the Hebrew Bible, singularly impactful, consistently ranks among history's most transformative texts. As the bedrock of Abrahamic faiths, it guides billions in personal conduct, existential meaning, and ethical commerce, transcending mere literature. Even secular readers recognize its literary mastery and profound human insights.

The Hebrew Bible's distinction lies in its fusion of narrative depth, ethical rigor, and historical weight. Through stories of fallible leaders, moral quandaries, and divine interactions, it confronts enduring questions of power, accountability, justice, and purpose—questions acutely pertinent to modern leadership. Crucially, the text avoids simplistic hero worship. It portrays leadership in its full human spectrum, encompassing both sublime achievement and devastating corruption, furnishing a nuanced framework that acknowledges leadership's inherent dual potential.

The biblical narrative of King Solomon, lauded as history's wisest person, offers a stark testament to the Bible's refusal to sanitize its heroes. Rather than presenting an idealized portrait, the text unflinchingly reveals how even Solomon's profound wisdom could not prevent catastrophic leadership failures, ultimately fracturing his empire (Friedman & Friedman, 2019).

A substantial and rigorously developed body of leadership literature extensively leverages biblical narratives to extract insights applicable to contemporary practice (Friedman & Krausz, 2024; Friedman & Langbert, 2000; Friedman & Vlady, 2024; Maxwell, 2002; Visotzky, 1998; Woolfe, 2002). Within this rich tradition, the figure of Moses has emerged as a particularly fertile ground for scholarly inquiry, attracting sustained attention from leadership theorists (Baron & Padwa, 1999; Beck, 2003; Cohen, 2007; Friedman & Friedman, 2018; Grumet, 2014; Herskovitz & Klein, 1999; Kreisel, 2024; Morris, 2006; Wildavsky, 1984). This focused examination underscores Moses' enduring relevance as a complex and multifaceted case study in leadership.

This paper offers a novel perspective by examining the leadership dynamics of two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, figures largely overlooked in existing analyses.

Nadab and Abihu

A tragedy occurred on the eighth day (after the seven days of installment discussed in Leviticus 8:33-35) of the ceremony for dedicating the Tabernacle (*Mishkan*) and consecrating the priests. Using firepans and "strange" (i.e., unapproved) fire (probably coals) that God had not commanded, Nadab and Abihu, two of Aaron's sons, offered incense to God (Leviticus 10:1). They were punished accordingly, "measure for measure," and "Fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Leviticus 10:2).

Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and placed incense on it; and they offered the Lord strange fire, which He had not commanded them. A fire came forth from the Lord, consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses told Aaron, "This is what the Lord meant when He said, Through those nearest to Me I am sanctified, and thus I will be honored before all the people." And Aaron was silent (Leviticus 10:1-3).

Many factors contributed to Nadab and Abihu's wrongdoing. The following are some of the explanations. Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchai (known as Rashi, 1040–1105), the foremost commentator on the Torah, cites Rabbi Eliezer's and Rabbi Ishmael's opinions.

Rabbi Eliezer said that Aaron's sons died only because they gave *halakhic* [Jewish law] decisions in the presence of their teacher, Moses. Rabbi Ishmael said they died because they entered the Sanctuary while intoxicated by wine. You may know this with certainty because, after their death, the Torah (Leviticus 10:8-10) warned those who survived that they should not enter the Tabernacle when intoxicated by wine (Rashi on Leviticus 10:2).

One Midrash highlights that Nadab and Abihu were inebriated (this is not explicitly stated in the Torah). They might have been mildly intoxicated before the event, which could have led to their bold and impulsive behavior in front of their father and Moses. Wine is known to reduce inhibitions, leading even reserved individuals to act impulsively without considering consequences. Wolak (2013) cites Leviticus Rabbah to show that many of the sages assert that the primary offense of Nadab and Abihu was entering the Tabernacle in an inebriated state. He makes the point that "alcohol interfered with their ability to behave professionally in accordance with God's expectations" (p. 224).

The Torah states (Leviticus 10:2), "Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed them," but we do not know why they died. However, from what he commanded Aaron, saying to him (Leviticus 10:9), "Wine or intoxicating drink you shall not drink," we know that they died only due to the wine (Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 12:1; based on the translation by Sefaria.org).

The tragic fate of Nadab and Abihu, whose impulsive actions while under the influence of wine led to their demise, serves as a powerful precursor to the queen-mother's warning to King Lemuel about the perils of overindulgence, especially with wine. The Book of Proverbs, traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, though its authorship is debated, may be up to 3,000 years old. It ends with the advice of a queen-mother to her son, King Lemuel (often identified as Solomon). She urged him to govern with justice and compassion for the poor (Proverbs 31:3-9) while explicitly warning against the dangers of self-indulgence, particularly with wine. She emphasized that the pursuit of pleasure, especially excessive drinking of wine, can be the root of a leader's downfall, as the desire for comfort and power often leads to poor decisions and moral decay (Proverbs 31:4): "It is not [proper] for kings, O Lemuel; it is not for kings to drink [much] wine, nor for princes to desire strong drink."

According to Bar Kappara, the two brothers were punished for four transgressions:

Bar Kappara said in the name of Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar: Due to four matters, Aaron's sons died: for drawing near; for sacrificing, for alien fire, and because they did not take counsel from one another. For drawing near, because they entered the innermost sanctum [the Holy of Holies]; for sacrificing, because they sacrificed an offering regarding which they were not commanded; for alien fire, they brought in fire from a stove; and because they did not take counsel from one another, as it is stated: "Each took his fire pan" (Leviticus 10:1), each on his own, as they did not take counsel from one another (Leviticus Rabbah 20:8; based on the translation by Sefaria.org).

The Midrash gives other reasons in the name of Rabbi Levi:

Rabbi Mani of She'av, Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin, and Rabbi Yochanan, in the name of Rabbi Levi, said: Due to four matters, Aaron's sons died, and death is written regarding all of them. Because they were intoxicated with wine, and death is written in its regard, as it is stated (Leviticus 10:9): "You shall not drink wine or intoxicating drink, [you, nor your sons with you, upon your entry into the Tent of Meeting, that you not die]." Because they were lacking vestments, and death is written in its regard, as it is stated (Exodus 28:43): "They shall be on Aaron and his sons [whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting...so they will not bear iniquity and die]." What were they lacking? It was the robe, in whose regard death is written, as it is stated (Exodus 28:35): "It shall be on Aaron to serve...[and he will not die]." Because they entered without washing hands and feet, as it is stated (Exodus 30:21): "They shall wash their hands and their feet, and they will not die," and it is written (Exodus 30:20): "When they come to the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash in water." And because they did not have children, and death is written in its regard; that is what is written (Numbers 3:4): "Nadav and Avihu died before the Lord...and they had no children." Abba Hanin says: It is because they did not have wives, as it is written (Leviticus 16:6): "And atone for himself and for his household"; "his household," this is his wife

Rabbi Levi said: They were arrogant. Many women were sitting unmarried, waiting for them. What would they say? 'Our father's brother is king, our mother's brother is a prince, our father is the High

Priest, and we are the two deputy priests; what woman is worthy of us?"

In addition, from this (Exodus 24:1): "To Moses, He said: Ascend to the Lord, [you and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu]." This teaches that Moses and Aaron were walking ahead, Nadav and Avihu were walking behind them, and all of Israel behind them. They were saying: 'When will these two old men die, and we will assert authority over the public?' Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Rabbi Aivu: They said it to one another with their mouths. Rabbi Pinḥas said: They contemplated it in their hearts. Rabbi Berekhya said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them (Proverbs 27:1): "'Do not glory in tomorrow" (Proverbs 27:1). Many young donkeys have died and their hides have been spread over their mothers.' [Their hides have been turned into saddle packs and placed on their mothers. The point is that sometimes children die while their parents are still alive and active.]

In addition, from this (Exodus 24:11): "Against the noble of the children of Israel, He did not extend His hand." Rabbi Pinḥas said: From here [it may be derived] that they were deserving of the hand being extended, as Rabbi Hoshaya said: Did cakes go up with them to Sinai, that it states (Exodus 24:11): "They beheld God [and ate and drank]"? Instead, it teaches that they feasted their eyes on the Divine Presence. "They beheld God" like someone looking at another while eating and drinking. Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Actual nourishment, just as it says (Proverbs 16:15): "Life is in the light of the king's countenance." Rabbi Tanḥuma says: It teaches that they exposed their heads, acted with arrogance, and feasted their eyes on the Divine Presence (Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 20:9-10; based on the translation and explanation by Sefaria.org).

The Babylonian Talmud maintains that anyone who issues a halakhic ruling in his teacher's presence is deserving of death because it is disrespectful. Nadab and Abihu are examples of two individuals who were guilty of this transgression.

Rabbi Eliezer says: The sons of Aaron died only because they issued a halakhic ruling before Moses, their teacher. What did they expound [in support of their conclusion that they must bring fire inside instead of waiting for fire to come down from the heavens? It is stated in the Torah (Leviticus 1:7):] "And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar, [and lay the wood in order on the fire," which led] them to say: Although fire descends from Heaven, it is nonetheless a mitzvah to bring ordinary fire. [Although they derived this from the verses, they were punished for ruling in the presence of their teacher.] (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 63a; based on the translation by Sefaria.org).

The Midrash Tanchuma (Acharei Mos 8) claims that Nadab and Abihu died as a punishment for their father, Aaron's, sin of making the Golden Calf.

The following Midrash focuses on the fact that Nadab and Abihu made a reckless decision without consulting anyone. They did not even discuss it with each other.

The Torah states (Leviticus 16:1), "And the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron." What is the intent of this ("two")? Because it is written (Leviticus 10:1), "And the sons of Aaron took,

Nadav and Avihu, each his coal-pan" — "the sons of Aaron" — they did not seek counsel from Aaron; "Nadav and Avihu" — they did not seek counsel from Moses; "each his coal-pan" — each by himself; they did not take counsel from each other (Sifra, Acharei Mos 1:1).

Many of the above explanations are refuted by Isaac Abarbanel (1457–1508). He concludes that they were guilty of five sins: (1) They burnt incense in the Tabernacle without being told to do so by their father, Aaron, or Moses. This was a serious offense and demonstrated great conceit. (2) The incense was supposed to be offered by one priest, not two. Scripture states that "each took his fire pan." (3) They entered the Holy of Holies without anyone's permission. Only the High Priest entered the inner sanctum once a year on Yom Kippur. (4) They used fire (burning coals) from their own home, not from the Tabernacle. The fire for the incense was supposed to be brought from the Altar of the Burnt Offering that was in the Tabernacle. (5) This was a special day, and Moses himself was burning the incense all eight days of the inauguration. Moses was supposed to burn the incense on the eighth day, not Aaron. Aaron was given specific tasks by Moses, but burning the incense was supposed to be a ritual performed by Moses. Abarbanel maintains that this is what the Talmud means when it states that Nadab and Abihu issued a halakhic ruling in their teacher's presence. Aaron and Moses were their teachers, and they had no right to burn the incense that day.

Danger of Arrogance

Most of the above explanations suggest that Nadab and Abihu acted thoughtlessly because of self-importance and egotism. According to one opinion, they were so haughty that they could not even find a suitable wife. If they brought the incense into the Holy of Holies, as suggested by many commentators, they had to be unusually arrogant. Even the High Priest was only permitted to enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1-2). The warning of the death penalty there is connected to the fate of Nadab and Abihu. To summarize, their excessive pride led them to remain unmarried, presumptuously anticipate the demise of Moses and Aaron, usurp tasks assigned to others, conduct sacred rituals according to their own preferences, and even trespass into the Holy of Holies without proper authorization.

The above narrative underscores the danger of being arrogant and not consulting with others before making an important decision. Effective leaders should never act impulsively and injudiciously without carefully considering all options. This is why consulting with others is so crucial. Indeed, the narrative begins with (Leviticus 9:1), "It was on the eighth day, Moses called to Aaron and his sons, and to the elders of Israel." Moses summoned the elders on the eighth day of the inauguration because they played a vital role in the chain of authority responsible for the consecration of the priests. They worked with Moses to foster social unity, teach the people, and settle conflicts.

Moral Grandstanding?

Moral grandstanding is when someone uses discussions about ethics not to genuinely explore right and wrong, but mainly as a way to make themselves look morally better and improve their social standing. As described by philosophers Tosi and Warmke (2021), it is a misuse of moral conversation where the speaker's primary purpose is self-promotion to gain prestige and status rather than contributing to understanding or solving ethical problems. This behavior is often driven by a strong need for personal recognition and admiration, turning moral language into a calculated performance to boost their reputation instead of an authentic engagement with ethical issues. Substantial evidence suggests that individuals often believe they are morally superior to the average person (Tosi and Warmke, 2021).

It is unclear from the Torah whether Nadab and Abihu were attempting to grandstand to demonstrate their moral superiority. However, many commentators who argue they were arrogant would probably also agree that they were trying to elevate themselves in the eyes of others. This could help explain why they faced such severe punishment.

Leaders of organizations should refrain from grandstanding. Genuineness is crucial; substance, not image. Claiming to be socially responsible without engaging in meaningful action—"purpose washing"—can significantly harm an organization's reputation and alienate potential employees. A related deceptive practice, known as "woke-washing," involves companies or organizations adopting a superficial image of social responsibility by aligning with progressive causes or using the language of social activism, while their internal practices and actions fail to align with these values. Similarly, greenwashing is a deceptive tactic where organizations pretend to be environmentally conscious without making genuine efforts to support the environment (De Jong, 2023, pp. 166-167).

Importance of Humility

There is another essential lesson for leaders from this narrative. After the tragic death of Aaron's two sons, Aaron and his two surviving sons, Elazar and Itamar, slaughtered three goats.

Then Moses carefully inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and it had already been burned up! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, saying, "Why have you not eaten the sin offering in a holy place, for it is most holy, and it was given to you to remove the guilt of the congregation and to atone for them before the Lord? Since its blood was not brought inside the holy place, you should certainly have eaten it in the holy place, as I commanded!" And Aaron said to Moses, "Behold, this very day they offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and such things have befallen me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would it have been good in the sight of the Lord?" And when Moses heard this, he approved (Leviticus 10:16-20).

He was upset with Elazar and Itamar (Leviticus 10:16) for burning the goat of the sin offering and not eating it. It is understandable why Moses was upset. They all saw what happened that day when Nadab and Abihu did not follow the law and were punished with death. Subsequently, Moses admitted that he had forgotten the law that an acute mourner (an *onen*) was not permitted to partake of consecrated foods. Aaron justified what was done, and Moses heard and approved (Leviticus 10:20). This narrative demonstrates Moses' great humility. He admitted that he made a mistake and did not remember the law. This is the first halakhic dispute recorded in the Torah, and Moses lost the argument! The lesson is apparent. Even the greatest of individuals can be wrong, which is why leaders need to consult with others before making decisions. The Torah contrasts Moses's great modesty with Nadab and Abihu's arrogance.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Jackson (2023) posits that embracing uncertainty is a strength, not a weakness. By acknowledging the unknown, leaders cultivate receptiveness to new information, driving organizational curiosity and deeper analysis, leading to superior outcomes. This openness also promotes inclusive decision-making and strengthens team dynamics by valuing diverse perspectives and active listening. Furthermore, aligning with Heick's (2012) emphasis on the power of questions, this approach underscores that continuous organizational learning hinges on thoughtful inquiry rather than fixed answers. Research increasingly demonstrates the value of humility as a leadership trait (Chan, Hekman, & Foo, 2024; Kelemen et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024; Resnick, 2019).

Why Leaders Should be Slow to Anger

A Midrash (Leviticus Rabbah 13) lists three instances when Moses lost his temper and, therefore, forgot a *halakha* (Jewish law). This is one of the cases. The Midrash is teaching us another principle of leadership. Leaders should be slow to anger. If they have a temper, people will be afraid to respond to them, even when they are making a serious blunder.

Schiffman (n.d.) cites the Midrash (Sifra) on this verse (Leviticus 10:20), which reports an intriguing disagreement between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Chananiah b. Yehuda. Rabbi Chananiah b. Yehuda asserted that Moses' anger caused him to make a mistake regarding the law. Rabbi Yehuda felt that the error resulted in anger. Schiffman postulates that they are both right: anger leads people to make mistakes and often originates from past errors. The fact that anger leads to mistakes is apparent. When people are irate, they act hastily without considering the consequences of their actions or the impact of their words. A relationship can be destroyed by harsh words spoken hurriedly when enraged.

Although not always apparent, anger can often trace its origins to cognitive biases and distortions. To make quick decisions, people use heuristics or rules of thumb, i.e., "cognitive shortcuts," when there is a great deal of required information to collect to make a correct decision, but time (or desire to do the extensive research) or money is limited (Caputo, 2013). Developing critical thinking skills involves understanding how these biases operate, as many hinder rational decision-making. Researchers have identified approximately 200 cognitive biases, and this list continues to expand. Heick (2019) categorizes the 180+ biases into four groups: Too Much Information, Not Enough Meaning, Need to Act Fast, and What Should We Remember?

Cognitive distortions are patterns of faulty thinking that can contribute to negative feelings and self-destructive behaviors. They are more serious, chronic, dysfunctional, and damaging; they are often linked to mental health disorders. Thus, cognitive distortions (irrational beliefs or distorted thinking) have been found to affect how people deal with others. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is about correcting these logical flaws.

One example of a cognitive distortion is dualistic, black-and-white, all-or-nothing, or binary thinking. It involves seeing people or events as belonging to two opposite and exclusive categories, such as good or bad, right or wrong, and us or them. Dualistic thinkers believe no middle ground or nuance exists in any situation, which can harm their reasoning and behavior. It can lead to poor decisions, conflict, and bias, ultimately preventing individuals from being creative and open-minded (Friedman, 2023). Seeing the world in such a distorted way is especially dangerous for a leader and makes it virtually impossible to make compromises. It is essential for leaders to rectify any form of skewed thought patterns and to ensure that they do not lose their cool and allow emotions to take over.

Conclusion

This chapter in the Torah deals with what happened on the eighth day of the ceremony for the priests' consecration and the Mishkan's dedication (traditionally believed to be the first day of the month of Nissan). The ancient story of Nadab and Abihu, though rooted in the specific context of priestly service within an archaic Tabernacle, offers remarkably pertinent lessons for contemporary leadership. Despite its historical setting, the story transcends time to illuminate fundamental principles essential for effective guidance. Key among these are the virtues of humility, consultation, respect for authority, impulse control, and personal restraint; qualities that remain just as vital in today's complex organizational landscapes as they were in antiquity.

To consistently demonstrate composure and sound judgment, leaders must steer clear of moral grandstanding, excessive alcohol consumption, and substance abuse. Many of these qualities are now understood to fall under the umbrella of emotional intelligence, which is the

capability to identify, understand, and effectively manage one's own emotions and influence those of others (White et al., 2024).

What makes this biblical narrative particularly sophisticated is its seamless integration of individual character development with broader institutional wisdom. This dual focus provides a robust framework for leadership that predates and, in many ways, anticipates insights from modern research. By acknowledging both the moral and practical dimensions inherent in leading others, the narrative establishes a foundation that is not only ethically sound but also demonstrably effective in real-world application, proving its timeless value beyond its original religious context.

Ultimately, the most profound takeaway from the Nadab and Abihu story is its emphasis on the process of leadership, not merely the outcomes. It powerfully reminds us that how results are achieved through diligent consultation, disciplined restraint, and genuine respect for all involved can be just as, if not more, important than the results themselves. In an era frequently marked by leadership failures stemming from ethical shortcomings rather than technical deficiencies, this ancient wisdom serves as an invaluable guide for cultivating principled and impactful leadership practices today.

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