

"And the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihhu, each took his own incense-pan... and they offered before Hashem strange fire... and then a fire came out from Hashem's Presence and consumed them." (10:1-2)

Rashi cites one reason for the death of Aharon's sons to be their decision to voice *halachic* rulings in the presence of their teacher, Moshe. The *Talmud* (*Eiruvim* 63a) explains that they asserted the *halacha* about placing wood shavings on the Altar, despite the fire's miraculous descent from heaven. The *Talmud* confirms that the act of rendering *halachic* decisions in front of one's Rebbe is punishable by death. To illustrate this point, the *Talmud* quotes a story concerning a student of Rabbi Eliezer who rendered a decision in his Rebbe's presence. Rabbi Eliezer mentioned to his wife that the student would not live another year, and he did not. The *Ein Yaakov* suggests that the student truly deserved such a dreadful punishment because *Chazal* have likened one who publicly embarrasses another to a murderer. A student who renders a *halachic* decision in the presence of his Rebbe is acting as if his Rebbe were incapable of making the decision on his own. Such a student displays a conduct comparable to that of a murderer. Thus, he merits the death penalty.

Horav Chaim Shmuelewitz Z"l asks a striking question regarding this *Talmud*. Why did Rabbi Eliezer not simply forgive his student for this infraction, rather than allow him to die? Would such clemency be considered too much for a teacher to grant his pupil? Should not one always go to the greatest lengths to prevent another individual from suffering retribution on his account? He explains that this frightening punishment is not simply the result of a personal vendetta. It is not simply a matter of a disciple granting proper reverence towards his mentor. Rather the principle is one of the foundations of discipline of the *masoretic* tradition of our people. A teacher cannot and must not be forgiving.

We must understand that our right to exist comes through recognition of the authority of Hashem, His *Torah* and its disseminators, from Moshe until today. Our subservience to this noble tradition, cognizant of our spiritual inferiority to *Torah* leaders of earlier generations is an inherent component of our approach to *Torah* Judaism. Awareness of the erudition of *Torah* scholars of previous generations encourages us to study their *halachic* decisions reverentially before boldly proffering our own views. A student who challenges his Rebbe by asserting his own position in his Rebbe's presence is, in effect, exhibiting a total disregard for the fundamental principles of *Torah*. This attitude of scorn and defiance, albeit inadvertent, poses a great danger to the future of *Torah* transmission. Therefore, strong disciplinary action is mandated.