

"And the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan... and they offered before Hashem a strange fire." (10:1)

Nadav and Avihu brought a "strange fire" on the *mizbayach*, an offering that Hashem had not commanded them to bring. This violation resulted in their immediate death. The *Yalkut Shimoni* points out that this erroneous offering was the result of their not consulting with Moshe or with each other. This criticism seems questionable. Indeed, they should have consulted with their *Rebbe*, Moshe prior to offering the fire, but why were they censured for not consulting one another? Indeed, if such erudite and righteous men as Nadav and Avihu reached the same conclusion independently, it would seem obvious that consulting each other would not have made a difference in their conclusion.

Chazal are teaching us the importance of seeking the advice of our superiors, our equals, and, in truth, even of our subordinates. *Horav A.H. Lebovitz, Shlita*, asserts that even if two equals, such as Nadav and Avihu, both feel the same way about a specific problem, it behooves them to confer with each other. Open minded discussion may cause them to change their minds. Discerning a matter often clarifies the basic issues. Theories and logical assumptions, which had previously been considered evident, suddenly become questionable under close scrutiny. Had Nadav and Avihu consulted one another, the resulting discussion would possibly have brought to light the *halachic* limits of offering this *korban*, perhaps saving them from their fatal error.

It is essential to discuss our plans and aspirations with our peers even if we know that they are in agreement with us. An objective opinion can help us to sift through our own subjectivity and hidden motives. Thus, we may be able to anticipate negative repercussions which have not been apparent to us alone.

Seeking advice is not easy. Following the advice of peers is probably even more difficult, as *Horav Lebovitz* asserts. Our pride and ego defy the notion that we might actually be wrong in our opinions. "Denigrating" ourselves to ask others for advice seems degrading, especially if the other party is, in our opinion, neither smarter nor more competent than we.

Horav Lebovitz suggests a possible approach for overcoming this obstacle. In the words of *Ben Zoma (Pirkei Avos 4:1)*, "Who is a wise man? He who learns from all people." He cites *Rabbeinu Yonah* who explains that one who truly loves wisdom will search everywhere for it. Each human being has his own uniqueness, something can be learned from every individual.

The essential point of *Ben Zoma's* observation is that ultimately wisdom is not simply one established body of knowledge which one either does or does not possess. It is not a quantifiable substance which, when you have enough of it, qualifies you as a wise man. Wisdom is rather a quality, an attribute, an approach to life. If one is to become "wise," he must retain the ability to learn from others and to add something to his own personality as a result of this "lesson." Hence,

as *Reb Yitzchak Bunim z.l.* posits, wisdom is not a permanent quality to lock away in the treasure vaults of the mind. The process of acquiring wisdom never ends. Once one ceases to "act" wisely, to acquire wisdom, he is no longer viewed as a wise man.

He suggests two specific criteria for one who seeks to learn from others. First and foremost, one must acknowledge that we are actually capable of learning from every person. This undoubtedly requires humility, a quality which we do not ordinarily expect in the wise. Resist as we will, we must condescend and learn. *Chazal* use water as a metaphor for describing *Torah*. When one is thirsty, he is not particular from whom he accepts water. Water is water. When one needs it, he takes it from anyone who offers it. This same attitude should apply to *Torah* and to wisdom.

The second important quality one should possess is the ability to value constructive criticism and disapproval. To actively receive only the praises of our friends and blandishments of our family is to miss a valued opportunity for growth. Friends who never call attention to our faults do us a disservice. On the other hand, we often gain insight into our flaws from the derision and ridicule of our detractors. Indeed, even when our enemies exaggerate, a kernel of truth may pervade their words. If one is "wise" enough to acquiesce to these criteria, he will merit to develop wisdom.