



PROBING THE PROPHETS

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“Troubling Stories; Eternal Message”

Our parasha’s account of the death of Aharon’s two sons during the joyous celebration of the Chanukat HaMishkan, is one of the most troubling and puzzling stories in the Torah. Similarly, the haftarah’s story of the death of Avinadav’s son, Uza, while celebrating the relocation of the Holy Ark to Yerushalayim, is an equally troubling and puzzling episode. In both stories, the punished individuals were rejoicing with the people, celebrating a great spiritual moment. In both stories the sons seemed to have had the best intentions of serving Hashem and enhancing that holy moment. Therefore, we are left wondering what precise sin(s) was committed by the children of these holy men that targeted them with G-d’s ultimate punishment. Over the years, we have learned of different approaches to unravel the mystery, I would like to focus on two approaches that, I believe, will help us better understand these events and will leave us with a lesson to apply

to our own lives.

Common to both stories is the misguided attempt of seemingly well-meaning individuals to serve Hashem as they saw fit, but in doing so, they were actually defying G-d’s wishes. Aharon’s sons decided to offer the ketoret, although not bidden to do so. The entire ritual of that holy day was detailed beforehand and every rite that was to be followed was one that had been commanded to Moshe – a demand repeated often in the Torah. For this very reason, the text refers to their offering as an “esh zarah”, an “alien fire,” unacceptable to G-d... especially on the day when the formal laws of the worship of Hashem were being set in motion.

The sin of Uza, recounted in the haftarah, is even more difficult to understand than the sin of Aharon’s sons. However, it too reflects a cavalier attitude in serving G-d. The Holy Ark rested upon a cart pulled by two oxen, a custom unknown in Israel, for it was known that, due to its sanctity, the Aron was to be carried upon the shoulders of the Levi’im (“Bakatef Yisa’u” Bamidbar 7; 9). [In contrast, the Philistines placed the captured Aron on a cart when they transported the Ark back to Israel (see Shmuel A 6; 11)]. Now, when the oxen stumbled, Uza grabbed hold of the



Mazal Tov to
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Ark, hoping to steady it and prevent it from falling. Although a seemingly innocent act, it was, in reality, a trespass of the most holy of things. Rather than steady the animals or seize the cart or hold on to the poles (that were there for precisely that purpose), Uza shows an inappropriate familiarity with the Holy Ark by grabbing hold of this most holy appurtenance, adorned with the k'ruvim, from where Moshe heard Hashem's call.

I recall reading the words of Chief Rabbi Dr. J. Hertz who explained homiletically (so no one should take offense) that when people might “slip”, failing to uphold the holy Torah properly, the job of teachers and supporters is to strengthen them through inspiration and explanation – but they must never put hands on the eternal Torah, i.e., to “touch” it by altering or changing that which is holy, in order to make it more “palatable” to the people.

For thousands of years we have borne the yoke of Torah and successfully passed down its morality to the next generation. There may be different ways to teach and inspire different generations, but never have we-nor should we-change our Holy Torah to fit the preferences or changing attitudes of each different generation.

Torah tziva lanu Moshe MORASHA kehillat Ya'akov” the Torah is a “Morasha”, a “heritage” to all of our nation. Our job is to keep it alive and pass it down to the future in the exact same state that we received it.

Unchanged, undefiled and, therefore, eternal. ■

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