

May 4, 2019, Temple B'nai Shalom

**Oy the pressure! “Divine service can brook no errors on the part
of the people’s representatives.”¹**

Acharei Mot is the culmination of the section of Torah called the holiness code. It opens with direct mention of the sudden and tragic deaths of 2 of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu. We learned about their death *five* weeks ago in *parshat Shemini*. I quote the text: “Now Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which [God] had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; they died at the instance of the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the Lord meant when [God] said: ‘through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.’ And Aaron was silent.” [Lev. 10:1-3]

Why, five weeks after it happened, is this disturbing event mentioned so directly?

From a literary perspective it serves as the bracket that completes the Leviticus texts on (ritual) pollution. Since the offering Nadav and Avihu brought was unauthorized by God, it was the cause of the first recorded defilement of the sanctuary. It sent a strong reminder to those who witnessed it at the time, that the sanctuary must always, be free of impurity. It reminds the modern reader that we have our own holy work to do; to keep our own internal sanctuaries, the place inside us where we can touch God, free from sin.

The question about this story that generations of commentators have asked is “What was it that Nadav and Avihu did that was worthy of capital punishment?” Everett Fox wrote: “Some see it as accidental: Nadav and Avihu somehow misconstrued what they were supposed to do; but divine service can brook no errors on the part of the people’s representatives.”² Others suggest they died because they didn’t wash their hands and feet before making the offering; [or]...they were not wearing ... the outer layer of the priestly clothing...[or] they taught Jewish law in front of their teacher Moshe...[or] perhaps Nadav and Avihu were drunk and not fully in control of their ritual duties. *Jacob Milgrom* was a prominent contemporary American Jewish Bible scholar and a Conservative rabbi. He suggested the story serves to warn the Israelite

¹ The Five Books of Moses, Everett Fox; p.546

² Ibid

audience to stay away from offering their own incense (which often was connected to idolatry). Historically, that makes sense; but death for the “sin of bringing an offering unauthorized by God”, considering what came before, [namely the golden calf], seems disproportionate.

These sudden deaths are troublesome because they feel like a heartless and mean response from God for something that could simply have been a mistake. Despite that it is challenging for us, we see evidence of that God many times in Torah.

But perhaps the deaths of Nadav and Avihu is *not* disproportionate considering their positions in the community. They were Priests; the spiritual leaders of the community. Their job descriptions were meticulously prescribed by God. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote: “the simplest answer [to the question of why Nadav and Avihu’s offering was a capital crime, is], given by the Torah itself. (Num. 3: 4, 26: 61). It is that they acted [spontaneously], on their own initiative. They did what they had *not* been commanded.” [Close quote] Evidently, [during Temple times] it [was virtually suicidal] to act spontaneously in matters of the spirit.”

My Leviticus teacher, Rabbi Nehemiah Polen, taught: to offer a sacrifice or make an offering to God was our ancestors’ attempt to “draw near” God. But it had to be done precisely on God’s terms. Nadav and Avihu like all biblical priests were required to serve God in a way that *never* changed. Spontaneity was completely out of place. Until of course, the temple was destroyed in 70 CE and offering sacrifices was no longer possible. In the years that followed, the rabbis created a prayer service which became our attempt to “draw near” God. This is true especially in the Amidah, which includes both fixed and spontaneous prayer.

Was Nadav and Avihu’s sin simply that they should have known better? That’s a hard pill for me to swallow, but once again, Rabbi Polen brought some clarity. If one of us went to work in a nuclear facility, he explained, and didn’t follow the rule book meticulously, we might die! The holy of holies which Nadav and Avihu entered, was a dangerous and very powerful place. They acted spontaneously, ignoring the rules; and they died.

We know that repetition in Torah is very significant, so I feel uncomfortable that my initial question lingers: “Why, six weeks after it happened, is this disturbing event mentioned so directly?” I’m sure there is a lesson in its repetition. Truthfully, I don’t know what it is...yet.

But maybe together we can find more clues in midrashim that cross many centuries and many countries. Midrash comes from the root “drash” meaning to seek, inquire or interpret. Rabbis in Talmudic times knew the bible by heart. They could draw analogies and lessons and create their own midrashim, believe it or not, *without the help of google*. I bring explanations about what the sin of Nadav and Avihu was, from 2 midrashic sources. The first, from the book of Exodus, is slightly fanciful but demonstrates a deep understanding of human nature: “Unto Moses [God] said: ‘Come up unto the Lord, thou, and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu.’” (Ex.24:1) This verse of midrash and the one after it, intimate that Moses and Aaron walked to God first, followed by Nadav and Avihu, then by all of Israel... Nadav said to Avihu, “When will these two old men die, so that you and I may lead this generation?” The Holy One said to them, “Boast not thyself of tomorrow (Prov. 27:1) We shall see who will bury whom.” This explanation for God’s role in the death of two of Aaron’s sons, brings an important lesson. God chastised them for disrespecting their elders and exhibiting extreme hubris, a particularly ugly human tendency. Perhaps, according to this midrash, the story is repeated in order to teach the lessons of respect for elders and the importance of humility.

A second midrash comes from the Lubavitcher Rebbe. One of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, he provided an unexpected commentary. It takes God off the hook for the deaths, and, surprisingly, explains Nadav and Avihu’s actions in what some would say, is a positive light. The Rebbe quotes Ohr Hachaim³, a prominent rabbi in Morocco from the late 17th century: “[Theirs was] a death by Divine “kiss” like that experienced by the perfectly righteous—it is only that the righteous die when the Divine “kiss” *approaches them*, while [Nadav and Avihu] died by *their approaching it* . . . Although they sensed their own demise, this did not prevent them from drawing near [to G-d] in attachment, delight...and [profound] love, to the point that their souls ceased from them.”⁴ [close quote] In other words, Nadav and

³ Or ha-Hayyim after his popular commentary on the Pentateuch, was a Talmudist and kabbalist; born at Meknes, Morocco, in 1696; died in Jerusalem, Ottoman Empire on 7 July 1743. He was one of the most prominent rabbis in Morocco.

⁴ The Mysterious Death of Nadab and Abihu, Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Courtesy of MeaningfulLife.com

Avihu were righteous and compelled to come near God with such a profound desire that despite knowing they might die, they could not stop themselves.

For the Chassidic Masters, life includes the retention of a spiritual soul within a physical body. The soul has two powerful forces: One is striving for transcendence. It yearns to be free of the physical body and the complications of material life. Its goal is to reunite with its Creator. The second force is a will for actualization, a commitment to live a physical life and leave a permanent and positive impact on the world for future generations.⁵ Nadav and Avihu were unable to find balance between those two competing forces. They forsook their physical lives in favor of the ecstasy of transcendence; their souls attached to God separated from their bodies and they died.

This Chasidic midrash is confusing. God created the world for humankind. It doesn't make sense that the desire of a righteous person to draw near and cling to God, would cause him to be removed from earth, unable to share the blessings of his light, among the living. My teacher, Rabbi Art Green, in his book, Speaking Torah, addressed that concern. Sharing a teaching from a major 18th century Chasidic text⁶ he wrote: "... *really* the person who...is joined to God in this mysterious way is able to draw forth divine blessing, bringing it down from above while remaining alive...[His] attachment to YHWH [makes him] more alive! That is God's will as the Giver of life."⁷

Following the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, God, Godself, acknowledging their offering was flawed, commands their example of [bringing a *spontaneous*] *unauthorized* offering, was *not* to be repeated. "YHWH said to Moshe: Speak to Aaron your brother, (so) that he (does) not enter, at (just) any time, the Holy-Shrine, [so]... he (does) not die."^(16:2) Humankind was not created for the purpose of letting spiritual ecstasy consume or overpower our physical being. God wants us to be firmly anchored in reality; to nurture and support our human relationships. The deaths of Nadav and Avihu, teach us to balance the needs and limits of our physical bodies with our spiritual desire to draw near God.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Me'or Eynayim: Composed in Chernobyl (c.1763 - c.1797 CE). Teachings of Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl (1730-1797). This major chasidic work was edited by his student Eliyahu and is arranged according to the weekly Torah portion and holidays.

⁷ Speaking Torah, spiritual teachings from around the Maggid's table by Art Green (with others) pp. 285-286

When death is violent and unexpected, loved ones and the general community-especially those who witnessed the event, will be profoundly impacted. We have not yet examined that aspect of loss. Toward that end, I introduce you to a final *midrashic* perspective; one which I hope to visit regularly: that of biblical *women*.

Please meet Elisheva, Aaron's wife and the mother of Nadav and Avihu. She is described in midrash, with a quote from Proverbs: "She is clothed with strength and splendor; she laughs at the final day". (Prov. 31:25) ...In her book Praise her works, Conversations with Biblical Women, Penina Adelman, a contributor as well as the editor, explains the phrase "she laughs at the final day" as follows: "At the end of her time on earth...having experienced all the fullness and happiness life can bring, as well as the pain and grief...[there she will be,] laughing at it all."⁸ Adelman imagines the voice of Elisheva telling her own story. "You'd probably like to know how I could laugh at my life- at the life we all share for our brief time on this earth. [I learned to laugh during] the years working as a midwife with my mother-in-law, Yocheved and my sister-in-law Miriam....We worked hard ... to urge the baby out of its mother. We helped God birth these babies but nobody... knew what would become of them... Nadav and Avihu were my fussy ones. They were never content, even as adults...Was it God's glory or their glory, they were honoring when they brought their fire? When I saw them struck down, my spirit briefly left me and went to be with them. My boys had come from my womb and now they were returning to the earth's womb. At that moment, I could not weep and I could not laugh." (p. 136-137)

Elisheva is not the first woman in Torah to lose a son in the service of God. Speaking from the perspective of a biblical woman, she found meaning where there seemed to be none. From her pain, her midrashic voice concludes the Children of Israel would stay together, as a cohesive group, only if they lived by "the rules". Perhaps, if she had been able to study Torah and Talmud with the rabbis, (or if she's lived in the 20th century!) she would have found comfort in the words of the Lubavitcher Rebbe that her sons died a righteous death.

This is a challenging story. I am not able to wrap it up in a nice, neat package and conclude with a "feel good" message-which is exactly what we all need now when senseless death

⁸ Praise her works, Penina Adelman, p. 135

surrounds us, threatens our sense of security and defies our desire to trust that love and goodness will prevail. I conclude with some questions and a suggestion that has helped me.

Are the midrashim about Nadav and Avihu being drunk or disrespectful, worthy explanations for bringing up this disturbing story, again? Are you sympathetic with Nadav and Avihu's passionate desire to be close to God? Do Elisheva's words about "following the rules" ring true for you? And the most challenging but most important question for me: how can we live our lives so we *enhance* the gift of life, *increase* God's presence on earth and *contribute* to the-flow of blessing and holiness upon humankind?

We do *not* need to be perfect, but when our *intentions* are *pure*, our deeds will likely follow. Penina Adelman urges us to "step into Torah and leave behind the stance of 'outside observer.'"⁹ With your permission, we will take that journey, together. We will learn from our female, as well as our male, biblical ancestors. We will wrestle with rabbinic perspectives across the generations from Talmudic times to modern and contemporary thinkers. Our goal will be to invite wisdom and experience from all times and places. We will combine it with our own so we and future generations will become worthy channels of light and holiness into our precious but broken world.

Shabbat shalom

Please rise as you are able and join us on page 428 for the chatzi Kaddish

⁹ Praise her works, p. xix