

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The great seven day ceremony of the dedication of the Mishkan has passed. Now, on the eighth day, the actual service and public purpose and use of the Mishkan is to begin. But this day will be marred by the tragedy of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aharon.

The eighth day represents the difficulties of life that always follow great and exalting moments and events. The Psalmist asks "Who can climb the mountain of God?" That itself is a difficult task. But then David raises an even more difficult task: "And who can maintain their place on his holy place?"

After the triumph and euphoria of climbing the mountain, of dedicating the Mishkan, of the marriage ceremony and of the birth date of the child, then the real work of maintaining that exalted feeling begins. It is not coincidental that the circumcision day of a Jewish boy is on the eighth day of his life. The eighth day represents the beginning of the struggles and difficulties, even of the tragedies as we see in this week's parsha. This is what life has in store for every human being.

Those of us who remember the great days in our Jewish national lives – 1948 and the declaration of the state and 1967, the reunification of Jerusalem – know how difficult it is to retain that optimism and faith after long decades of strife, turmoil, disappointment, mistakes and enmity. Yet the key to our survival and success lies in our ability to somehow do so. It is the eighth day that is the true test of human and Jewish mettle.

The Torah also informs us in this week's parsha that God, so to speak, prefers to use holy and faithful people as examples to others of the problems caused by improper behavior. Aharon's sons are seen, in Jewish tradition, as being righteous, dedicated people. Yet it is their deviation, no matter how well intentioned and innovative as it was, from what they had been commanded to do that led to their tragic demise.

The rituals and traditions are not to be tinkered with according to personal ideas, wishes and whims. And, if this is true, as it is for every individual Jew no matter his or her position in life, how much more so is it true for people who are priests in the Temple/Mishkan,

leaders of religion and purported role models to the young and the general community at large. The closer one gets, so to speak, to spirituality and Torah greatness, the greater the responsibility for discipline and probity in obedience to the Torah's commandments and values. Deviations and mistakes at that exalted stage of achievement can, as we see in this week's parsha, prove to be lethal.

The rabbis warned wise men, scholars and leaders about speech that is not carefully thought out or actions that are impulsive. The effect upon others can be devastating and negative. The countermeasure of God, so to speak, to prevent this is frightening as the parsha teaches us. We should always be mindful of the eighth day, as reflected in the daily incidents that make up our lives. ©2025 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The second half of Exodus and the first part of Leviticus form a carefully structured narrative. The Israelites are commanded to construct a sanctuary. They carry out the command. This is followed by an account of sacrifices to be offered there. Then, in the first part of today's sedra, the cohanim, the priests, are inducted into office.

What happens next, though, is unexpected: the dietary laws, a list of permitted and forbidden species, animals, fish and birds. What is the logic of these laws? And why are they placed here? What is their connection with the sanctuary?

The late R. Elie Munk (The Call of the Torah, vol. 2, p. 99) offered a fascinating suggestion. As we have mentioned before in these studies, the sanctuary was a human counterpart of the cosmos. Several key words in the biblical account of its construction are also key words in the narrative of creation at the beginning of Genesis. The Talmud (Megillah 10b) says about the completion of the sanctuary, that "On that day there was joy before the Holy One blessed be He as on the day when heaven and earth were created." The universe is the home God made for man. The sanctuary was the home human beings made for God.

R. Munk reminds us that the first command God gave the first human was a dietary law. "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." The dietary laws in Shmini parallel the prohibition given to Adam. As then, so now, a new era in the spiritual history of humankind, preceded by an act of creation, is marked by laws about what one may and may not eat.

Why? As with sex, so with eating: these are the most primal activities, shared with many other forms of life. Without sex there is no continuation of the species. Without food, even the individual cannot survive. These, therefore, have been the focus of radically different cultures. On the one hand there are hedonistic cultures in which food and sex are seen as pleasures and pursued as such. On the other are ascetic cultures marked by monastic seclusion in which sex is avoided and eating kept to a minimum. The former emphasize the body, the latter the soul. Judaism, by contrast, sees the human situation in terms of integration and balance. We are body and soul. Hence the Judaic imperative, neither hedonistic nor ascetic, but transformative. We are commanded to sanctify the activities of eating and sex. From this flow the dietary laws and the laws of family purity (niddah and mikveh), two key elements of kedushah, the life of holiness.

However, we can go further. Genesis 1 is not the only account of creation in Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. There are several others. One is contained in the last chapters of the Book of Job. It is this that deserves close attention.

Job is the paradigm of the righteous individual who suffers. He loses all he has, for no apparent reason. His companions tell him that he must have sinned. Only this can reconcile his fate with justice. Job maintains his innocence and demands a hearing in the heavenly tribunal. For some 37 chapters the argument rages, then in chapter 38 God addresses Job "out of the whirlwind". God offers no answers. Instead, for four chapters, He asks questions of His own, rhetorical questions that have no answer: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?... Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep?... Does the rain have a father?... From whose womb comes the ice?"

God shows Job the whole panoply of creation, but it is a very different view of the universe than that set out in Genesis 1-2. There the centre of the narrative is the human person. He/she is created last; made in God's image; given dominion over all that lives. In Job 38-41 we see not an anthropocentric, but a theocentric, universe. Job is the only person in Tanakh who sees the world, as it were, from God's point of view.

Particularly striking is the way these chapters deal with the animal kingdom. What Job sees are not domestic animals, but wild, untameable creatures,

magnificent in their strength and beauty, living far from and utterly indifferent to humankind: "Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Do you make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud snorting?... Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread his wings toward the south? Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high?... Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope? Can you put a cord through his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook?... Nothing on earth is his equal—a creature without fear. He looks down on all that are haughty; he is king over all that are proud."

This is the most radically non-anthropocentric passage in the Hebrew Bible. It tells us that man is not the centre of the universe, nor are we the measure of all things. Some of the most glorious aspects of nature have nothing to do with human needs, and everything to do with the Divine creation of diversity. One of the few Jewish thinkers to state this clearly was Moses Maimonides: "I consider the following opinion as most correct according to the teaching of the Bible and the results of philosophy, namely that the universe does not exist for man's sake, but that each being insists for its own sake, and not because of some other thing. Thus we believe in Creation, and yet need not inquire what purpose is served by each species of existing things, because we assume that God created all parts of the universe by His will; some for their own sake, and some for the sake of other beings..." (Guide for the Perplexed, III:13).

And again: "Consider how vast are the dimensions and how great the number of these corporeal beings. If the whole of the earth would not constitute even the smallest part of the sphere of the fixed stars, what is the relation of the human species to all these created things, and how can any of us imagine that they exist for his sake and that they are instruments for his benefit?" (Guide for the Perplexed, III:14)

We now understand what is at stake in the prohibition of certain species of animals, birds and fish, many of them predators like the creatures described in Job 38-41. They exist for their own sake, not for the sake of humankind. The vast universe, and earth itself with the myriad species it contains, has an integrity of its own. Yes, after the Flood, God gave humans permission to eat meat, but this was a concession, as if to say: Kill if you must, but let it be animals, not other humans, that you kill.

With His covenant with the Israelites, God invites humanity to begin a new chapter in history. This is not yet the Garden of Eden, paradise regained. But, with the construction of the sanctuary—a symbolic home for the Divine presence on earth—something new has begun. One sign of this is the fact that the Israelites are not permitted to kill any and every life-form for food.

Some species must be protected, given their freedom, granted their integrity, left unsubjected to human devices and desires. The new creation- the sanctuary- marks a new dignity for the old creation-especially its wild, untamed creatures. Not everything in the universe was made for human consumption. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, placed fire on it, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire which He had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before God, and it devoured them, so that they died before God.” (Leviticus 10:1–2) The portion of Shemini begins with the great drama of the weeklong consecration ceremony of the Sanctuary. The nation is exalted, the leadership is inspired – but suddenly joy is turned into tragedy when the two sons of Aaron the High Priest are consumed by a fire sent down by God.

What caused such a hapless event? The biblical text seems to say that it was because “they offered a strange fire which [God] had not commanded.” What possible sin could these two “princes” in Israel have committed to make them worthy of such punishment?

What was this strange fire? The phrase is so ambiguous that the various commentaries offer a number of possibilities. Immediately after the deaths of Aaron’s sons, the Torah issues a command forbidding Aaron and his sons to ever carry out their Sanctuary duties under the influence of any intoxicants. If a person cannot “...distinguish between the holy and the mundane, and between the unclean and the clean...” (Lev. 10:10) he doesn’t belong in the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting). Thus, it’s not surprising that one midrash (Vayikra Raba 12:1) looks upon this injunction as a biblical hint that Nadav and Avihu were inebriated when they brought the incense offering, the intoxicant turning their incense offering into a “strange fire.”

Another midrash explains that Nadav and Avihu so envied Aaron and Moses that they couldn’t wait for them to step down so that they could step up. This is the strange fire of jealousy which hadn’t been commanded of them; they themselves initiated a sacrifice without asking permission of their elders, Moses and Aaron. They were too ambitious for their own good.

Rashbam writes that Nadav and Avihu were told not to bring the incense offering lest their fire diminish the glory of God’s name and the miracle of the heavenly fire; nevertheless, they brought it and therefore were punished.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, my late rebbe and mentor, has often taught that in order to grasp how the sages wanted us to understand a given Torah portion, we should always turn to the haftara for that week, which often serves as a commentary in and of itself.

Three separate events take place in the haftara of this portion, chapters six and seven in II Samuel. Thirty-thousand of the nation’s chosen join with King David on his journey to restore the previously conquered holy ark to Jerusalem, turning the occasion into a celebratory procession accompanied with all kinds of musical instruments. The ark is transported in an oxcart that belongs to the brothers, Uzzah and Ahio; when the oxen stumble, Uzzah reaches out to take hold of the ark.

Right then and there, God strikes Uzzah dead.

Three months pass before David again attempts to bring back the ark, and when he arrives triumphant in the city of Zion, he dances with all of his might, upsetting his wife who chastises him: “How did the king of Israel get his honor today, who uncovered himself today in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows who shamelessly uncovers himself” (II Samuel 6:21).

The third incident records that David decides he wants to build a permanent dwelling for the ark of God rather than allowing it to rest in a curtained enclosure. At first the prophet Nathan is encouraging, but later in the night a voice tells him that although David’s throne will be established to last forever, he personally will not build the Temple; his son Solomon will. In the account of the same event recorded elsewhere, the blood that David caused to flow in the various wars he fought prevents him from building a Temple which must be dedicated to peace (I Chronicles 22:8).

All three incidents point to the same theme: the emotional instinct of the individual has to take a backseat to the objective commandment of God, especially in the realm of ritual.

Uzzah certainly did not intend disrespect when he took hold of the ark; nevertheless, touching the holiest object in existence was forbidden. Since Michal is the daughter of King Saul, and knows first-hand that a king’s honor is not his own but is rather the nation’s, she cannot applaud David’s leaping and dancing in wild abandon – even if it be in religious ecstasy. As such, the monarch of Israel must never lose his objective reason and allow emotion to dominate his behavior.

And as to who will build the Temple itself, King David himself must be ruled out because of all the spilled blood; his wars may have been necessary but even the most just of wars brings in its wake excessive killing, even killing of the innocent, emotional hatred and passionate zeal. What the haftara reflects back on is that performing a mitzva which God didn’t command

– no matter how inspired, spiritually or ecstatically – invites a disapproving, destructive blaze from heaven. Like Uzzah, Aaron's sons got too close to the sacred, took the sacred into their own hands. They went beyond God's command and beyond reason. The Torah avoids telling us the specific motivation behind the "strange fire" in order to underscore that it doesn't matter how laudable the purpose may be – if God didn't command it, it's forbidden. Ecstasy, even in the service of God, can become a disservice, turning the offering on its head; instead of expanding spirituality, it invites destruction.

It can often lead to righteous zealotry, to passionate pursuit of God's honor at the expense of human life and respect for others. Indeed, it is forbidden to serve God when intoxicated, when inebriated with one's passion rather than with one's reason; religious fire can turn into "self-righteous fanaticism" which can tragically lead to the desecration of the divine name, to suicide bombers.

There is yet another less dramatic lesson to be learned from Nadav and Avihu. Too much zeal in ritual can sometimes stop us from seeing the forest for the trees. We get so involved in a small detail – important as it may be – that it overwhelms the meaning of what our real goals ought to be. Nadav and Avihu added to the ritual demanded by God – but more is not necessarily better!

Adam warned Eve not to eat of the fruit nor to touch the tree, the second admonition having been his own. The midrash teaches that the snake pushed Eve against the tree, demonstrating that she could touch the tree without being hurt, and in one instant the serpent's battle of convincing her to eat the fruit was won. Adding to ritual can sometimes have the opposite effect; our sages teach us that by adding we sometimes subtract and detract.

Nadav and Avihu are rare Jews, sons of Aaron, nephews of Moses, their lives dedicated to service in the Temple, privileged to be among the chosen few to have had a sapphire vision of God's glory back at the sealing of the covenant in the portion of Mishpatim. We cannot even begin to comprehend their spiritual heights. Nevertheless, they die tragically. For one brief moment in their lives, they did not ask themselves if God commanded this extra fire or not. When people on the level of Nadav and Avihu fail to distinguish between divine will and human will, allowing their subjective understanding to take over, the punishment is instantaneous death. The rest of us may not call down a divine fire each time we substitute our own will for the will of God; nonetheless, we should realize that confusing the two is playing with fire. Excess in the ritual realm can often lead to zealotry and hypocrisy. It is enough to do what God commands. We can then be fairly certain that we are serving God and not our own ego, that we are acting in pursuit of divine Service and

not excessive subjective passion. One dare not get too close to the divine fire, lest one get burnt by that very fire.



A Contemporary Postscript

The offering of Nadav and Avihu is biblically described as a "strange fire," *eish zara*, reminiscent of the Hebrew *avoda zara*, strange service, the usual phrase for idolatry. The Bible does isolate and emphasize a unique prohibition of fire idolatry, immolating one's child to the idol Moloch, a strange and false god who demands the fire consumption of children as the manner of his devotion.

At least three times, the Bible specifically forbids this form of idolatry, "a strange service." Initially it is to be found in the biblical portion of sexual immorality, the prohibition of giving one's seed to a strange and uncertified place (someone else's wife, one's close relatives, individuals of the same sex, animals); within this context, the Bible commands, "And you shall not give of your seed (children) to be passed over to Moloch" (Lev. 18:21).

Barely one chapter later, the prohibition is fleshed out: "An individual who gives his seed to Moloch must be put to death...And I shall put My face against that individual and cut him off from the midst of his nation because he has given his seed to Moloch, in order to defile My Sanctuary and profane My holy name..." (Lev. 20:2)

A third description of this abomination appears in the last of the five Books of Moses, "Let there not be found among you one who passes over his son or daughter into fire" (Deut. 18:10). Combining the various elements involved in the three verses similarity in language – "passing over one's child in fire to Moloch" – causes the Talmud to rule that the prohibition is literally sacrificing one's child in fire to the false god (Sanhedrin 64, Ramban on Lev. 18:21).

Apparently, such an abominable act could only be performed in a moment of religious fanatic ecstasy, a moment in which one's false religious value took precedence over the life of one's innocent child. The "strange fire" brought by Nadav and Avihu was certainly not the same; but since it too emanated from a moment of religious ecstasy, such ill-advised and uncommanded fires had to be "nipped in the bud"!

Tragically, Islamic fundamentalism has adopted precisely this abomination as a major form of its terrorist activity: educating and training their youths to blow themselves up in the fire of destructive materials in the name of Allah and with the promise of a paradise of seventy-two virgins. Indeed, these "priests" are worse than the priests of Moloch: these modern-day human sacrifices are "inspired" not only to sacrifice themselves, but also to blow up scores of innocent people – children and women as well as civilian men – along with themselves!

The fourteenth-century scholar Rabbi Menahem Meiri taught that idolatry has little to do with thought – theology – and has everything to do with action – morality: an idolater is one who is “immorally defiled in his deeds and ugly in his personality traits” (Bet Habechira to Mishna 1 of Avoda Zara 2). Islamic fundamentalism has turned Allah into Moloch-Satan, and made every mosque which preaches the doctrine of suicide bombing a hell-haven of idolatry. ©2025 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

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Divine Justice

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

On the day following Yom Tov (*Isru Chag*), we do not recite *Tachanun* (a penitential prayer recited on all non-festive days). In fact, the custom is not to recite it during the entire month of Nissan. During the same time, we also omit eulogies and *Tziduk Ha-din*. (*Tziduk Ha-din* is a prayer which affirms G-d's justice and righteousness, and is recited after a death, usually at the funeral.) Nevertheless, the *Encyclopedia Talmudit* cites the observation of the *Shibolei HaLeket* that for mourners on *Isru Chag* “The custom is to recite *Tziduk Ha-din* together (***be-yachad***). The normal way would be more like a eulogy (and thus prohibited).” This makes it clear that there are two styles of reciting *Tziduk Ha-din* at a funeral – either one person reads the words and everyone repeats after him, which is not permitted on *Isru Chag*, or everyone recites it together, which is permitted.

It seems that with the passage of time, people stopped being familiar with these two styles. This leads the *Beit Yosef* (citing the *Agur*) to write, “*Tziduk Ha-din* may be recited only when praying alone (***be-yachid***).” Accordingly, the custom today is that when praying with a congregation, during the month of Nissan we do not say the prayer of *Tzidkat'cha Tzedek* at Mincha on Shabbat. This is because this prayer is essentially *Tziduk Ha-din* for Moshe Rabbeinu, who died on Shabbat at Mincha time. Thus, reciting it in *shul* would be a communal *Tziduk Ha-din*.

It should be noted that Parshat Shemini records the death of two of Aharon's sons. Aharon reacted with silence (“*Va-yidom Aharon*”). Since Aharon was in effect affirming G-d's justice, perhaps he did so silently because it was during Nissan. ©2017 *Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

“**T**hey shall speak to the Children of Israel saying, “These are the creatures you may eat from among all the land animals.”” (Vayikra 11:2) When it came to most mitzvos, Moshe would teach them to Aharon alone. Then Aharon's children would enter, and Moshe would teach it to them as

Aharon listened. Then the elders would enter and Moshe would teach it again, and Aharon and his sons listened. Finally, he would teach the mitzva to all the Jews, as Aharon, his sons, and the elders listened. Each of them would then teach the mitzva to the successive groups until they'd each learned it four times.

Here, though, Moshe was to tell it to Aharon. Aharon would tell it to his children, and they would pass it on. What changed here, and why does it make a difference? Rashi tells us that this time, Hashem made them all equal messengers to teach the laws of Kashrus to the Jewish People because they had all equally remained silent when Nadav and Avihu died. More than that, says Rashi, they all equally accepted Hashem's decree with love.

When Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's two older sons died, it was a huge shock. They were great tzaddikim, who excelled in their Torah knowledge, and yet, in an instant, everything was gone because they did something Hashem did not approve of. There were many questions swirling around in everyone's heads. “How could this happen?” “What could they possibly have done that was so bad they needed to die?” “Isn't Hashem supposed to be merciful?” The praise of Aharon and his sons was that they didn't give voice to any of these questions. Instead, they reminded themselves that Hashem loves us and knows what He is doing. All we can do is watch, and hopefully, learn.

When it comes to Judaism, many people sadly think of it as a religion that restricts its adherents. You can't do this, and you can't do that. They find it difficult to “give up” so many things. “Look at all the people eating whatever they want and enjoying themselves, why is it OK for them but not for us?” [The Midrash Tanchuma, also quoted by Rashi, answers that question.] “Maybe a pious ascetic could follow these draconian rules, but how are normal people like me supposed to do it?”

Therefore, Hashem directed Moshe, and Aharon, and Elazar and Isamar, to teach the laws of Kashrus. These were people who realized Hashem sees more of the picture than we do and knows what is harmful for us. Not only Moshe, nor Aharon, were able to do this, but Aharon's remaining sons as well. They learned by watching their father, and they set the example for others.

Instead of seeing a limitation or deprivation, they viewed themselves as having been saved from mistakes. Just as a nutritionist will tell someone that certain foods will hurt their bodies, and others will keep them healthy, Hashem provided us with guidelines for what we can eat if we hope to remain spiritually thriving. We don't exactly understand the mechanism (see sidebar) but we trust that Hashem has our best interests in mind, and that these strategies are just what the doctor ordered.

A man had two sons, an optimist and a pessimist. He gave the pessimist the gift of a remote-control car, with all the bells and whistles. The boy was gloomy and morose. "It's probably going to break before the week is out."

To the other son, the father presented a large pile of manure. The boy began jumping up and down with excitement. "Oh, thank you Daddy!" he squealed. "I just KNOW there's a pony here, somewhere!" ©2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In some circles, it is assumed that the laws of kashruth, the dietary laws, are related to health. By abstaining for example, from the consumption of swine, one is protected from trichinosis. A cursory glimpse of our portion indicates otherwise. The Torah states that the reason for kashruth is kedusha. In the words of the Torah, "You shall be kedoshim for I am kadosh." (Leviticus 11:45)

In fact, every time the Torah discusses the dietary laws, it gives as its underlying reason -- kedusha. (See, for example, Deuteronomy 14:21) An analysis of this term can give us a deeper understanding of the dietary laws.

On one level, kedusha means "separation." Thus, when someone contributes something to the Holy Temple, the Beit Hamikdash, it is called "hekdeshe" for it can be used for no other purpose other than the Temple. From this perspective, kashruth forces the Jews to identify him or herself as the Torah insists that the everyday activity of eating has the stamp of Jewishness.

Another approach to kedusha comes to mind through considering what many deem as the three major Jewish rituals – the Sabbath, the laws of family purity and the dietary laws. It is not a coincidence that these rituals correspond to the three major physical drives of the human being—the desire to be powerful, the desire to engage in sexual relations and the desire to eat.

In each case, the Torah does not insist that we abstain from these fundamental human drives. Rather, it channels the fulfillment of these desires in a way that gives them more meaning and purpose. The Torah understands the human quest to be powerful, but asks that on the Sabbath we abstain from all work, allowing for time to evaluate the purpose of this quest and to recognize that our creative powers come from God. In a similar fashion, the Torah sees the sexual encounter in a positive light. Indeed, sexual pleasure, onah, is a cornerstone of the marital encounter. Here again, however, the Torah asks that we commit ourselves to the laws of family purity as a way of ensuring that the physical act does not become the sole expression of a couple's love. Finally, the Torah wants people to enjoy

food. Through such laws as humane slaughter of animals, the laws of kashruth lift the eating process to a higher plain.

No wonder the word kadosh surrounds each of these rituals. Shabbat is referred to as Shabbat kodesh. The very word that begins the marital relationship is kiddushin. And the way we eat is likened to the service of the Holy Temple (Beit Hamikdash).

Thus, the word kadosh is a term that embraces human physicality, but asks that the physical act be elevated and, in fact, sanctified. Observance of Jewish ritual is not solely an act that connects us to God. It is a means through which human life can be ennobled; it is nothing less than a pathway to an ethical and kadosh existence. ©2016 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Aharon Challenges Moshe

The Torah related the story of the death of Nadav and Avihu, the two older sons of Aharon, because they brought a "strange fire" to Hashem. In previous years we have discussed these deaths and the reasons given by the Rabbis for this unusual occurrence. Moshe spoke to Aharon and his two remaining sons and warned them that they should not mourn their two sons and brothers, as they were anointed with oil and were, therefore, dedicated to serve Hashem. As part of their service to Hashem, these Kohanim were required to eat from certain offerings that were brought in the Temple. This, however, did not occur, and Moshe became upset.

The Torah states, "Moshe spoke to Aharon and to Elazar and Itamar, his remaining sons, 'Take the meal offering that is left from the fire-offerings of Hashem and eat it unleavened near the Altar; for it is just that which is holy of the highest degree. You shall eat it in a holy place for it is your portion and the portion of your sons from the fire-offerings of Hashem, for so have I commanded. And the breast of the waving and the thigh of the raising you are to eat in a pure place, you and your sons and your daughters with you; for they have been given as your portion and the portion of your sons from the sacrifices of the peace-offerings of the B'nei Yisrael. They are to bring the thigh of the raising and the breast of the waving upon the fire-offering fats to wave as a wave-service before Hashem; and it shall be for you and your sons with you for an eternal decree, as Hashem has commanded.' Moshe inquired insistently about the he-goat of the sin offering, for behold, it had been burned – and he was wrathful with Elazar and Itamar, Aharon's remaining sons, [bidding them] to say, 'Why did you not eat the sin-offering in the Kodesh (holy place), for it is that which is holy of the highest degree; and He (Hashem) gave it to

you to gain forgiveness for the sin of the assembly and to atone for them before Hashem? Behold, its blood was not brought into the Sanctuary within; you should have eaten it in the Holy, as I had commanded.' Aharon spoke to Moshe, 'Was it they who this day offered their sin-offering and their olah-offering before Hashem? Now that such things befell me – had I eaten the sin-offering this day, would Hashem approve?' Moshe heard and he approved."

There are two conflicting actions which affected Moshe's reprimand of Elazar and Itamar. Moshe had just instructed Aharon and his sons, Elazar and Itamar, about eating the portions set aside for the Kohanim from various sacrifices, but specifically the sin-offering, "You shall eat it in a holy place." At the same time, because of the death of Nadav and Avihu, the two elder sons of Aharon, all of the remaining Kohanim were in aninut, a stage of mourning that takes place from the moment of death until the burial of the bodies. Normally in this stage of aninut, all one's concentration would be placed on the preparations for burial to the exclusion of many mitzvot of the Torah. A person in aninut would refrain from work, eating meat, drinking wine, and other activities which might take his mind away from the task of preparing the body for burial. It is normal for a person in aninut to avoid meat and wine because they are signs of pleasure and enjoyment.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the command to eat the mincha offering was a command intended for the mincha offering of an individual, not the mincha offering of the entire congregation. "These community mincha-offerings and peace-offerings were quite unique, so that their treatment could not be deduced from what was prescribed for the individual mincha-offering and the individual peace-offering. Added to this, they (the Kohanim) were in aninut, and even the Kohein Gadol was nevertheless not allowed to eat kodshim when in that state. Only in the moment of service is the demand made of him that his personal feelings of grief and pain must completely retire before the national objective consciousness of Hashem which is to be achieved by the service. But in the eating, it is just the subjective personal enjoyment of the food, which is to be raised to a symbolic service-procedure."

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin attempts to understand why Moshe would have insisted that Aharon and his two remaining sons eat from the mincha offering even though they had just experienced the death of Nadav and Avihu. Rashi stated that the reason was because Moshe had commanded them. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that there was a different reason given within the pasuk for this insistence, "because it is your portion and the portion of your sons from the fire-offerings of Hashem." Eating was part of the process of forgiveness, for the joy of that eating was a sign of the acceptance of the offering and the

forgiveness of the sin. Moshe believed that it was necessary for Aharon and his sons to eat now so that the act of eating would be a part of the inherited ritual for all future generations of Kohanim. That is why Moshe insisted on eating the remainder of the mincha-offering that day, and it was also the reasoning behind his insistence that they eat of the breast and lower leg of the peace-offering even though that could be eaten on the next day, after the burial and the period of aninut was concluded.

Moshe became angry when he saw that Aharon and his sons did not eat from the sin-offering, and he rebuked Elazar and Itamar for failing to have learned from the deaths of their brothers. HaRav Sorotzkin agreed with the opinion that the reason for their brothers' deaths was that they "taught a law in front of their teachers" without first consulting with them. Moshe believed that Elazar's and Itamar's action was without consulting Aharon. After they explained that they were following the instructions from Aharon, "it was good in his eyes."

Aharon's answer to Moshe is somewhat puzzling. Aharon believed that it was his first task to focus Moshe on himself and away from his sons. He explained to Moshe that Elazar and Itamar were not the ones who brought their sin-offering and their olah offering that day. Therefore, it was not their responsibility to eat from the offerings, but only his responsibility. Aharon's argument was that these were his offerings for the community, and he believed that Hashem would approve. The Kli Yakar explains that with an individual sin, the Kohanim (who did not participate in the sin) eat and the individual atones. Here, this first communal sin-offering also atoned for the sin of the Golden Calf, in which Aharon had participated. He, therefore, believed that he could not eat from it since he was not distanced from it.

We must admire that Aharon challenged Moshe on this issue. He used the same logic that is part of the Oral Law brought down in the Talmud. But logic is not enough. We are neither Aharon nor Moshe, and we must seek the great Rabbis should we question how a law is applied. May we consistently seek their knowledge, wisdom, and guidance. ©2025 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

The nachash, the snake, makes two appearances in the parsha. Actually, one is better described as a conspicuous non-appearance and the other is one where it is described in words but not by name. And that latter reference includes something unique in the Torah: a graphic representation.

The eight "creeping creatures" -- the shemonah sheratzim -- convey tum'ah, ritual impurity, when their corpses contact a person, a food, vessel or garment.

The particular identities of each of the eight are not clear but what is clear is that the nachash, strangely, despite it being the animal-world representation of evil (as evident from the account of the first snake, in parshas Beraishis), is not among them. Vayikra 29:30

We do find the snake referenced, though, among creatures forbidden to be consumed (ibid 11:42), in the phrase "all that travel on the belly." And the letter vav in the Hebrew word for "belly" -- gachon -- is written enlarged in a sefer Torah. It is also, the mesorah teaches, the Torah's middle letter. It might be said that the Torah pivots on how we deal with what the snake represents -- evil, and its manifestation, the yetzer hora. And a vav resembles a snake.

Paralleling the oddity of the nachash not being one of the "abominable eight" is the fact that, in the following parsha, Tazria, we are taught that, while a white patch of skin on a person is a sign of the tum'ah attending tzora'as, if the patch spreads to cover a person's entire body, he is considered free of tum'ah (ibid 13:12-13).

How to explain those two seeming paradoxes, a tahor snake and super-tzora'as?

What occurs is that, while in the world in which we live, evil and tum'ah exist, and we must deal with them, they are ultimately phantasms. When one would expect them to be most ascendant, they dissolve into nothingness, like popped soap bubbles.

In the end, in ultimate reality, ein od mil'vado: "there is nothing but Him" -- divine Goodness. ©2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

Transcribed by David Twersky

Edited by Dovid Hoffman

The pasuk by the culmination of the Shivas Yemei Meluim (the Seven Days of consecration or dedication) of the Mishkan says, "And Moshe said to Aharon, draw near to the Altar and offer your Sin Offering and your Burnt Offering and atone for yourself and for the nation..." (Vayikra 9:7)

Rashi cites an interesting Toras Kohanim. Aharon was embarrassed at this point about going over and doing the Avodah (Temple Service). Moshe asked, "Why are you hesitant? This is what you were chosen for!"

Another Toras Kohanim says that Aharon saw the Mizbayach (Altar) appear to him in the form of an ox and he was afraid to approach. Moshe told him to get up the courage and approach the Mizbayach.

What do Chazal mean when they say that the Mizbayach appeared like an ox? It does not take a great darshan to suggest that the purpose was to remind Aharon of the aveira (sin) of the Eigel Hazahav (Golden Calf). However, if that was the case, shouldn't the Medrash have said that the Mizbayach appeared to

Aharon like a calf, rather than like an ox?

I saw a beautiful pshat (interpretation) from Rav Shlomo Breuer. The pasuk in Tehillim (106:19-20) says, "They made a calf in Chorev... and they switched their allegiance to the form of an ox." We see that the aveira started out as a calf, and somehow developed into an ox. Rav Shlomo Breuer says in the name of his father-in-law, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, that Klal Yisroel never intended for it to be real Avodah Zarah. They did not want to switch gods. Rather, they wanted an intermediary. They were afraid that Moshe had died and they wanted someone in his stead.

Aharon did something that, in retrospect, we need to say was a mistake. Aharon made a concession and said, "They want an intermediary? I will pick something for them that there is no way they will ever be able to transform it and give it any power. I will pick a weak little calf. How can anybody think that a little calf can become a god?"

What happened? The concession snow-balled and grew from being merely a calf and turned into the form of an ox -- something having its own power. This was Aharon's role in the aveira of the Eigel -- making the concession of the calf that grew into an ox. That is why the Mizbayach appeared to him now in the form of an ox.

Now we can understand what Chazal mean. Aharon was afraid to become the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). He thought, "I once had my try at leadership. I once tried to be a leader and I failed. I gave into the people. I made a concession when I should have said a firm 'No.'" As a result of that concession, the calf became an ox. That is why Aharon was hesitant. He felt that he was not cut out for the job.

Moshe told him, "Why are you hesitant? This is the very reason you were chosen!" One of the requirements of a Jewish leader is to have such a sense of hesitancy, a feeling of unworthiness. A leader who campaigns for the position and says "I am the best man for the job" is not a Jewish leader!

There was once a Jew who had such feelings. He thought that he was the right man for the job. That man's name was Korach. We all know what happened to Korach. Such a person is not worthy to be the leader.

Hesitancy, embarrassment, intimidation, and humility are the very essence of what is needed to be worthy of assuming Jewish leadership. ©2025 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

