

Parashat Shemini

Reactions to Aaron's Sons' Death

How does Moses comfort Aaron following the death of his sons?

What is Aaron's reaction to his sons' death and to Moses words of consolation?

Why did Aaron's sons' die on this special occasion?

In the *haftara*, why does Uzzah die on the day that the Ark is brought up to Jerusalem?

A. "Through they who are close to Me I will be sanctified"

Consolation

The Service of the Priests and the Manifestation of the Divine Presence

On the eighth day of the consecration of the *Mishkan* [Tabernacle], the celebrations reach their peak. After seven days of preparations (described in Lev. 8), the priests finally begin their service in the *Mishkan*. On this day, Aaron is commanded to perform a special task, which will culminate in manifestation of the Divine Presence upon the *Mishkan*.¹ Aaron follows his instructions to the letter, doing just as Moses commanded him, and the Divine Presence is finally manifest:

וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּצְאוּ וַיִּבְרְכוּ אֶת הָעָם וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד ה' אֵל כָּל הָעָם: וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת הָעֹלָה וְאֶת הַחֲלִבִּים וַיֵּרָא כָּל הָעָם וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם.

ויקרא ט', כג-כד

And Moses and Aaron came to the Tent of Meeting, and they came out and blessed the nation, and the glory of God appeared to the entire nation. And a fire came forth from before God, and it consumed upon the altar the burnt-offering and the fats; and when the entire nation saw it, they shouted with joy and fell on their faces. (Lev. 9:23-24)

The Death of Nadav and Avihu

It is at this majestic moment that tragedy strikes – Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu are killed:

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אֵשׁ מִחֲתָתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֶת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם: וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי ה'.

פרק י', א-ב

And Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu took each of them his censer and put fire in it and put incense upon it, and they offered strange fire before God, which He had not commanded them. And a fire came forth before God and devoured them, and they died before God. (Lev. 10:1-2)

¹ "...For today God shall appear to you" (Lev. 9:4).

A Subdued Initial Reaction

There are a number of different explanations regarding the nature of Nadav and Avihu's sin and the reason for their punishment.² We will not discuss these issues; instead, we will focus on the subsequent reactions of Nadav and Avihu's relatives – Moses and Aaron (as well as Aaron's remaining sons, Elazar and Itamar).

We might have expected the family to initially react with outward expressions of grief, but there is no mention of any such reaction in the Torah. Moses' reaction, described first in the Torah, is somewhat subdued:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אֶהֱרִן הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד...

ויקרא י', ג

And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what God spoke, saying: 'Through them who are close to Me I will be sanctified, and before the entire nation I will be honored.'" And Aaron was silent. (Lev. 10:3)

"And Aaron was silent"

We will discuss the precise meaning of Moses' words later on; for now, we will shift our focus to Aaron's reaction: "And Aaron was silent" (Lev. 10:3).

Aaron hears Moses' words and is silent. This could be understood as a transition from a state of audible grief and weeping to silence following Moses' words of consolation.³ However, as noted above, the verses do not mention any outward expression of grief on Aaron's part, only his silence in the face of his sons' death.

This silence might indicate a state of shock, or it might have been an outward silence that Aaron imposed upon himself in order to avoid infringing upon the holiness of the day – in which case it was only an external silence masking his inner turmoil.⁴ On the other hand, Aaron's silence may have been the result of serenity and total acceptance of God's judgment.⁵

² See Mordechai Tropper, "Chet'am shel Nadav VeAvihu," (*Shema'atin* 128, 5757) which catalogues the various opinions of *midrashim*, as well as both early and later commentators, regarding the nature of Nadav and Avihu's sin.

³ Ramban writes:

וטעם "וידום אהרן" – שהיה בוכה בקול, ואז שתק. או כטעם "ואל תרום בת עיניך" (איכה ב יח).

And the reason [that] "Aaron was silent [*vayidom*]" – for he had been weeping aloud, and then he was silent. Or, similar to "Let not the apple of your eye cease [*tidom*]" (Lam. 2:18). (Ramban on Lev. 10:3)

⁴ This is implied by Rashbam's comments:

"וידום אהרן" – מאבלותו ולא בכה ולא התאבל שכן כתיב ביחזקאל: "בן אדם, הנני לוקח ממך את מחמד עיניך במגפה וגו' האנק דום מתים אבל לא תעשה". אף כאן "וידום" ממה שהיה רוצה להתאבל ולבכות.

"And Aaron was silent" – out of grief; and he did not weep or mourn, for as it is written in Ezekiel: "Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes in a plague, etc., sigh in silence, make no

We will now analyze Moses' words: "Through they who are close to Me I will be sanctified, and before the entire nation I will be honored." Moses' consolation to Aaron consists of two elements:

"They who are close to Me"

The first element is that Nadav and Avihu are close to God ("They who are close to Me"⁶). The reason for their death was their great closeness to God, and not, as one might have assumed, because of their distance from Him.

"I will be sanctified"

The second element of consolation is the fact that Nadav and Avihu's death brought about a sanctification of God's name ("I will be sanctified") and honored Him before the entire nation. Thus, their death has had positive **effects**.

Not Sinners, but Close and Beloved

Moses' words are of great comfort to Aaron. First, he does not blame Aaron's sons for their death or insinuate that they sinned;⁷ in fact, Moses tells Aaron that they were close to God. The Sages relate a similar story:

כשמת בנו של רבן יוחנן בן זכאי נכנסו תלמידיו לנחמו... אמר לו: איוב היו לו בנים ובנות ומתו כולם ביום אחד וקבל עליהם תנחומין אף אתה קבל תנחומין... אמר לו: לא די לי שאני מצטער בעצמי אלא שהזכרת לי צערך של איוב... נכנס רבי אלעזר בן ערך... ואמר לו: אמשול לך משל, למה הדבר דומה? לאדם שהפקיד אצלו המלך פקדון. בכל יום ויום היה בוכה וצועק ואומר אוי לי אימתי אצא מן הפקדון הזה בשלום. אף אתה רבי היה לך בן, קרא תורה מקרא נביאים וכתובים משנה הלכות ואגדות ונפטר מן העולם בלא חטא, ויש לקבל עליך תנחומין כשהחזרת פקדונך שלם. אמר לו רבי אלעזר: בני, נחמתני כדרך שבני אדם מנחמין. אבות דרבי נתן, נוסחא א' פרק י"ד, ד"ה "כשמת בנו"

When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's son died, his students came in to comfort him... [A student] said to him: Job had sons and daughters, and they all died in one day, and he accepted consolation; so you, too, should accept consolation... He said to [the student]: Is it not enough that I am suffering? Why have you reminded me of Job's suffering as well?⁸... Rabbi Elazar ben

mourning for the dead" (Ez. 24:16-17). Here, too, he was silent although he wished to grieve and weep. (Rashbam on Lev. 10:3)

⁵ This interpretation found in *Sifra*:

כיון שידע אהרן שבניו ידועי המקום – שתק, וקיבל שכר על שתיקתו. מיכן אמרו: כל המקבל עליו ושותק סימן יפה לו.

Since Aaron knew that his sons were beloved by God – he was silent, and was rewarded for his silence. From here it is said: Anyone who is accepting and silent, it is a good sign for him. (*Sifra, Parashat Shemini, Mechilta DeMiluim*)

⁶ According to some commentators this phrase refers to Nadav and Avihu, but others have interpreted it differently (see Rashi and Rashbam on Lev. 10:3).

⁷ In fact, it is clear that Nadav and Avihu sinned. The Torah states that they brought a strange fire "which He did not command them." However, Moses chooses not to focus on this point.

⁸ Here the *midrash* goes on to describe others' attempts at consolation, each of which involves mentioning figures who mourned the death of their loved ones. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai rejects each of these attempts.

Arach entered...and said to him: I shall tell you a parable; to what is this [situation] likened? To a man with whom the king entrusted a deposit. Each day he would weep and cry out and say, "Woe is me, when will I give this deposit back safely?" You, too, Rabbi, had a child, who read Torah and Prophets and Writings, *Mishna* and laws and tales, and left this world without sin; and you must accept consolation, for you returned your deposit safely. Rabbi Yohanan said to him: My son, you have consoled me in the way of men. (*Avot DeRabbi Natan* 1:14, s.v. "k'shemet b'no")

True comfort lies in realizing that the deceased did good deeds during his life and left this world beloved by God.

Meaningful Death

Second, Moses points out that Aaron's sons' death has had considerable positive effects – it has caused a sanctification of God's name among the nation. Their death was not meaningless; rather, it served an important purpose. This, too, is greatly comforting.

At this difficult moment, Moses consoles Aaron with great sensitivity – "And Aaron was silent." This reflects not merely outward quiet, but inner peace and complete acceptance of God's will.⁹

"This is what God spoke"

Up to this point, we have read Moses' speech as his own words of consolation to Aaron. However, Moses states that these are not his words, but God's: "This is **what God spoke, saying**: 'Through they who are close to Me I will be sanctified.'"

What does this mean? How can Moses be repeating God's words if God Himself is not recorded speaking them first, or even mentioning this terrible event?

A Divine Decree

Ramban explains that God never spoke these words to Moses. The phrase "this is what God spoke" means that this event was the result of a divine decree.¹⁰ God's decrees may not be questioned; we can

⁹ Naftali Herz Wessely (Wiesel) explains in *Biur*:

ויראה לי שאיננו לבד שתיקה מקול בכיה, אבל הוא עניין סבלנות ודממת הנפש... כמו "דום לה" והתחולל לו" (תהילים ל"ז, ז) ... וכן אהרן שקט לבו מהצער ודבקה נפשו בה'...

And it seems to me that this silence is not only the absence of the sound of weeping, but a matter of patience and peace of the soul...similar to: "Silence yourself before God and wait patiently for Him" (Ps. 37:7)... And so Aaron's heart was quieted from anguish, and his soul cleaved to God...

Naftali Herz Wessely was one of Moses Mendelssohn's partners in the latter's *Biur* project, for which Wessely wrote a commentary on Leviticus.

¹⁰ He writes:

...כי דבר השם גזרותיו ומחשבותיו וענין דרכיו, והדבור יאמר בכל אלה... והנה אמר משה, המקרה הזה הוא אשר גזר השם לאמר אל לבו, בקרובי אקדש, שלא יהרסו אל קדושתו, ועל פני כל העם אכבד, שיהיו נוהגים כבוד במשכני.

...For God's word [*davar*] [may refer to] His decrees and thoughts and the nature of His ways, and each one of these is referred to as 'speech' [*dibbur*]... And here Moses said, "This is what God decreed and said in His heart, 'Through they who are close to Me I will be sanctified,' so that they will not infringe upon My

only seek consolation in their purpose – teaching the nation that one must take great care to uphold the honor of the Temple. According to Ramban, Moses' words express acceptance of God's judgment and realization that everything comes from God. This, too, is an element of the consolation: Nadav and Avihu's death was divinely ordained and intended to teach the nation how to safeguard the honor of the Temple.

Similarly, the author of the commentary *Akedat Yitzhak* writes:

כי המעשה הנורא ההוא בעצמו הוא הדיבור הא-לוהי, אשר בו ידבר אל עמו ואל חסידיו...

עקדת יצחק, שער 59

For that terrible action itself is the divine communication, through which He speaks to His nation and His followers... (*Akedat Yitzhak* 59)

The *Akedat Yitzhak* disagrees with Ramban regarding how to interpret the phrase: "This is what God spoke." The *Akedat Yitzhak* understands this as referring not to God's will or thoughts, but to His direct communication with the nation. However, similarly to Ramban, he states that this communication was not verbal, but through the tragic incident of Nadav and Avihu's death. Moses did not receive a private communication from God beforehand; rather, this refers to God's message to the entire nation, which aimed to teach them to safeguard the honor of the Temple.

God's Word: "And it shall be sanctified by My honor"

However, other commentators interpret the verse differently. They explain that God did speak to Moses personally and mention what was to happen, but only indirectly. Inspired by a *midrash*, Rashi cites a verse that can be read as an allusion to this event:

"הוא אשר דבר וגו'" - היכן דיבר? "ונועדתי שמה לבני ישראל ונקדש בכבודי" (שמות כ"ט, מג); אל תקרי "בכבודי" אלא "במכובדי". אמר לו משה לאהרן: אהרן אחי, יודע הייתי שיתקדש הבית במיודעיו של מקום והייתי סבור או בי או בך, עכשיו רואה אני שהם גדולים ממני וממך.

רש"י ויקרא י', ג

"This is what God spoke" – Where did He speak [these words]? "And there I will meet with the Children of Israel; and [the Tent of Meeting] shall be sanctified by My honor" (Ex. 29:43). Do not read it as "My honor," but as "those honored by Me." Moses said to Aaron: "Aaron, my brother, I knew that the Temple would be sanctified by those beloved by God, and I had reasoned [that this

holiness, 'and before the entire nation I will be honored,' so that they will treat My sanctuary with honor." (Ramban on Lev. 10:3)

Ramban brings other examples which demonstrate that 'speech' does not always refer to literal, verbal speech, but may mean thought, will or decree: "I have spoken [i.e., thought] with my heart" (Ecc. 1:16); "And let her be a wife to the son of your master, as God has spoken [decreed]" (Gen. 24:51); "With his firstborn Abiram he laid its foundation, and with his youngest son Segub he set up its gates, according to the word of God, which He had spoken [decreed] by the hand of Joshua, son of Nun" (1 Kings 16:34).

would be done] through me or you. Now I see that they are greater than me and you. (Rashi on Lev. 10:3)

According to Rashi, God hinted at this incident to Moses when the *Mishkan* was inaugurated, in *Parashat Tetzaveh*. The words “and it will be sanctified by My honor” indicate that a few of those who were close to God and honored by Him would die on the day that the *Mishkan* was established. Now, Moses realizes the true meaning of this phrase and the identity of those who were fated to die.¹¹

God’s Words Were Omitted from the Torah

Ibn Ezra also explains that Moses was aware of the future tragedy. However, he states that God did tell Moses of this explicitly, but that God’s words were not recorded in the Torah:

“הוא אשר דבר ה' – כבר אמר לי ה' שהוא יראה קדושו בקרובים אליו, כטעם “רק אתכם ידעתי” (עמוס ג', ב), וכאשר אראה בם קדושתו אז אהיה נכבד, ועל פני כל העם אכבד וייראו ממני.

אבן עזרא, ויקרא י', ג

“This is what God spoke” – God had already told me that He would show His holiness through those close to Him, similar to: “Only you I have known” (Amos 3:2).¹² And when I show My holiness through them then I will be honored, and “before the entire nation I will be honored” and they will be in awe of Me. (Ibn Ezra on Lev. 10:3)

Moses’ Fear on the Eighth Day

According to Rashi and Ibn Ezra, Moses knew in advance that something terrible was to happen on the day the *Mishkan* was established. He did not know exactly what would happen, but throughout the day he was accompanied by a constant sense of apprehension.

The following *midrash* illustrates this feeling powerfully:

¹¹ However, Rashi agrees that this is not the simple understanding of the phrase “and it shall be sanctified by My honor,” as he explains in *Parashat Tetzaveh*:

“ונקדש” – המשכן; “בכבודי” – שתשרה שכינתי בו.

“And it shall be sanctified” – the *Mishkan*; “by My honor” – for My Presence will dwell within it. (Rashi on Ex. 29:43)

Still, this does not rule out the possibility that the words also hint at something else, as Rashi goes on to explain:

ומדרש אגדה: אל תקרי “בכבודי”, אלא “במכובדים שלי”; כאן רמז לו מיתת בני אהרן ביום הקמתו, והו שאמר משה (ויקרא, י' ג): “הוא אשר דבר ה' לאמר בקרובי אקדש”; והיכן דבר? “ונקדש בכבודי”.

And the *midrash* states: Do not read it as “My honor,” but as “those who are honored by Me”; here He hinted to [Moses] of the death of Aaron’s sons on the day [the *Mishkan*] would be established, and this is why Moses said: “This is what God spoke, saying: ‘Through they who are close to Me I will be sanctified’” (Lev. 10:3). (Rashi on Ex. 29:43)

¹² It is possible that Ibn Ezra’s comments refer to the latter part of this verse: “Therefore I will visit upon you all of your sins” (Amos 3:2): when God is exacting in His judgment of righteous people (or the entire nation), this highlights the importance of fearing Him. According to this explanation, God’s words to Moses may be interpreted as a general statement that through exacting payment from those close to Him, God’s name is sanctified and His creatures’ fear and awe of Him is strengthened.

זה שאמר הכתוב "שומר מצווה לא ידע דבר רע" (קהלת ח', ה); מי היה זה? אהרן, שנאמר: "ומפתח אהל מועד לא תצאו שבעת ימים, ופתח אהל מועד תשבו יומם ולילה". אמר להם משה לאהרן ולבניו: שמרו אבלות שבעת ימים עד שלא יגיע בכם... היו משמרים ולא היו יודעים על מה משמרים כמה שנאמר: "שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע".

"ועת ומשפט ידע לב חכם" (שם) - זה משה, שכבר אמר ליה הקב"ה "ונועדתי שמה לבני ישראל ונקדש בכבודי", מתקדש אני שם במכבדי. והיה משה משמש כל שבעת ימי המלואים והיה מתירא לומר שמה מדת הדין פוגעת בו, שנאמר "ונקדש בכבודי"... אמר לאהרן שמרו אבל שבעת ימים. א"ל: למה? א"ל: כך אמר לי הקב"ה, "כי כן צויתי". כיון ששמרו שבעת ימי האבל ובא יום השמיני נכנסו נדב ואביהוא להקריב, פגעה בהן מדת הדין ונשרפו, שנאמר "ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל אותם וימותו לפני ה'".

בא משה ואמר לאהרן: "הוא אשר דבר ה' לאמר בקרובי אקדש"; והיכן דבר? במדבר סיני "ונועדתי שמה לבני ישראל ונקדש בכבודי". וכן אמר משה לאהרן: בעת שאמר לי "בקרובי אקדש" חשבתי כי בי או בך יפגע ועכשיו אני יודע כי הם גדולים ממני וממך.

"יודים אהרן" - היה לו הדבר לנחמה, לכך נאמר "שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע".
 מדרש תנחומא [ורשא], פרשת שמיני, סימן א'

When the text states, "He who keeps a commandment shall know no evil"¹³ (Ecc. 8:5), who does this refer to? **Aaron**, as it is said: "And from the opening of the Tent of Meeting you shall not leave for seven days; and you shall sit at the opening of the tent day and night." Moses said to Aaron and his sons: Keep your mourning for seven days before (it??) reaches you... They kept it and they did not know why they were keeping it, as it is said: "He who keeps a commandment shall know no evil."

"And a wise man's heart discerns time and judgment" (Ecc. 8:5) – this is **Moses**, who had already been told by God: "And there I will meet with the Children of Israel; and [the Tent of Meeting] shall be sanctified by My honor" – I shall be sanctified through those honored by Me. And Moses served [in the *Mishkan*] all seven days of the consecration and was afraid to say anything lest the Attribute of Judgment strike him, as it was said: "And it shall be sanctified by My honor"... He said to Aaron: Keep your mourning for seven days. [Aaron] said to him: Why? [Moses] said to him: So God said to me, "For thus I have commanded." Once they had kept the seven days of mourning, and on the eighth day Nadav and Avihu brought in their sacrifice, the Attribute of Judgment struck them and they were burned, as it says: "And a fire came forth before God and devoured them, and they died before God."

Moses came and said to Aaron: "This is what God spoke, saying: 'Through they who are close to Me I will be sanctified'"; and where did He speak this? In the wilderness of Sinai: "And there I will meet with the Children of Israel; and [the Tent of Meeting] shall be sanctified by My honor." And so Moses said to Aaron: When he said to me, "Through those who are close to Me I will be sanctified," I thought he would strike me or you; and now I know that they are greater than me and you.

"And Aaron was silent" – this was a comfort for him, and therefore it was said: "He who keeps a commandment shall know no evil." (*Midrash Tanhuma* [Warsaw ed.], *Parashat Shemini* 1)

¹³ The continuation of the verse – "And a wise man's heart discerns time and judgment" – is explained later in the *midrash*.

The *midrash* describes Moses, aware that something is going to happen and fearing for his own life, **continuing the service normally**. Due to his fear he commands Aaron and his sons to keep seven days of mourning, thinking that perhaps this would save them all from the coming tragedy.¹⁴

Why must something terrible happen in order to sanctify the *Mishkan*? Did Nadav and Avihu die because they sinned, or because their death was a necessary component of the ceremony that would have had to occur even if they had not sinned? Moses' certainty with regard to the imminent disaster, as reflected in this *midrash*, seems to indicate that Nadav and Avihu's sin (or mistake) was inevitable.

“And it shall be sanctified by My honor”

The Divine Presence Dwelling Among Men

For the first time, man has built a “House of God,” a physical place which will house the Divine Presence. This is no simple task: how can a physical structure, with all its limitations, ever contain the presence of God? How can humans, flesh and blood, endure the awesome holiness of the Divine Presence within their camp?

Closeness to God Requires Extra Caution

Sanctification cannot be achieved easily. In an event of this magnitude, every detail is critical. The entire nation must be prepared to welcome the Divine Presence, but most importantly, the priests, responsible for the holy service in the *Mishkan*, must be attentive to every detail. When God's presence is so near, even a tiny mistake can be fatal; there is no room for human initiative.

Particularly Exacting with Those Close to Him

Therefore, the people closest to God are the ones in the most danger:

“וסביביו נשערה מאד” (תהילים נ', ג) – מדת בשר ודם, מוראו על הרחוקים יותר מקרובים; אבל הקב"ה אינו כן, אלא מוראו על הקרובים יותר מעל הרחוקים, שנאמר: “בקרובי אקדש”.

ילקוט שמעוני, תהילים, רמז תשס

“And around him it storms mightily” (Ps. 50:3) – the way of flesh and blood is that those who are distant from [a powerful person] are more in awe of him than those close to him; but the Holy One, Blessed be He, is not so. Rather, awe of Him is greater in those close to Him than those

¹⁴ Keeping seven days of mourning may not have been an attempt to save Aaron and his family from disaster. The phrase used by the *midrash*, “before (it??) reaches you,” could be understood to mean that Moses was certain that a tragedy would occur that would require Aaron and his sons to mourn. Therefore, he instructed them to begin keeping the customs of mourning immediately. However, Moses was mistaken with regard to two things: (1) He thought either he himself or Aaron would be the ‘target.’ (2) He thought the disaster would strike during the seven days of consecration. Aaron, on the other hand, was completely unaware of this aspect of Moses' instructions and accepted them without question. For this reason he is called “he who keeps a commandment.” Moses' mistake with regard to the timing of the death may have been the reason that the *midrash* quotes this specific verse to describe him: “A wise man's heart discerns **time** and judgment.”

distant from Him, as it is said: “Through those close to Me I will be sanctified.” (*Yalkut Shimoni* on Psalms, 760)

But it is not only God’s exacting judgment of those close to Him that might result in tragedy; the event itself seems to be inherently fraught with danger. Not all human beings are necessarily able to cope with the force of God’s immediate presence. Therefore, sin, whether intentional or unwitting, is practically an inherent component of the day.¹⁵

B. How to Proceed?

The Service must Continue

Moses and Aaron speak three times following Nadav and Avihu’s death. In their first conversation, discussed above, Moses consoles Aaron by pointing out that his sons were close to God, and that their death taught the nation how to behave when the Divine Presence rests among them.

A Commandment Not to Mourn

The second conversation includes a commandment:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְלְאֶלְעָזָר וְלִיאִתְמָר בְּנֵי רָאשֵׁיכֶם אַל תִּפְרְעוּ וּבְגְדֵיכֶם לֹא תִפְרְמוּ וְלֹא תִמְתּוּ וְעַל כָּל הָעֵדָה יִקְצֹף וְאַחֲיֵיכֶם כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל יִבְכוּ אֵת הַשְּׂרֵפָה אֲשֶׁר שָׂרַף ה': וּמִפֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא תֵצְאוּ פֶן תִּמְתּוּ כִּי שָׁמֶן מִשְׁחַת ה' עֲלֵיכֶם וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כְדַבַּר מֹשֶׁה. וַיִּקְרָא י', ו-ו

And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Elazar and Itamar: “Do not loosen the hair of your heads nor rend your clothes, and you shall not die and He shall not be angry with the entire congregation; and your brothers, the entire House of Israel, shall weep over the burning that God has burned.” (Lev. 10:6-7)

Moses commands Aaron not to mourn for his deceased sons. While this is an extremely difficult request, it is made in the context of Moses’ residual fear of death – whether his own or his relatives’ – during the establishment of the *Mishkan*. While one tragedy has already occurred, he continues to be anxious. As long as the Divine Presence remains powerfully nearby, no one can allow themselves to be distracted from the service in the *Mishkan* – even to mourn.¹⁶ Human frailty has no place here; the service must be completed perfectly, down to the last detail, in order to prevent further disasters. Such close proximity

¹⁵ This aspect of their sin is parallel to the sins in the “*Bereshit*” narratives (Adam, Noah’s generation, and the generation that built the Tower of Babel), which resulted from man’s inability to live in a perfect world. This is also reflected in the Israelites’ sin of the Golden Calf following their encounter with God at Sinai. These events demonstrate that man is, by nature, unable to survive exceptionally powerful spiritual encounters; therefore, such encounters are always followed by sin. We will return to this point later on, in the discussion of Uzzah’s sin.

¹⁶ Rashi comments: “But you, do not disturb the joy of God” (Rashi on Lev. 10:6).

to God requires complete subjugation of one's own needs and feelings and total dedication to serving Him.¹⁷

Burning the Sin-Offering

Aaron and his sons accept Moses' words without question and follow his instructions. Therefore, the next conversation between Moses and Aaron is somewhat surprising:

וְאֵת שְׂעִיר הַחַטָּאת דָּרַשׁ דָּרַשׁ מִשֵּׁה וְהִנֵּה שָׂרָף וַיִּקְצֹף עַל אֱלֻעֶזֶר וְעַל אִיתָמָר בְּנֵי אֶהֱרֹן הַנּוֹתָרִים לֵאמֹר: מִדּוּעַ לֹא אָכַלְתֶּם אֶת הַחַטָּאת בְּמִקְוֹם הַקֹּדֶשׁ כִּי קֹדֶשׁ קְדוֹשִׁים הוּא וְאַתֶּה נָתַן לָכֶם לִשְׂאֵת אֶת עוֹן הָעֵדָה לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם לְפָנַי ה': הֵן לֹא הוּבָא אֶת דְּמָה אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ כְּפִימָה אֲכֹל תֹּאכְלוּ אֹתָהּ בְּקֹדֶשׁ כְּאֲשֶׁר צֻוִּיתִי.

שם, טז-יח

And Moses diligently inquired regarding the goat for the sin-offering, and behold, it was burnt; and he was angry with Elazar and Itamar, Aaron's remaining sons, saying: "Why have you not eaten the sin-offering in the place of the sanctuary, for it is the Holy of Holies, and He has given it to you to bear the sin of the congregation, to atone for them before God?"¹⁸ Behold, its blood was not brought into the sanctuary within;¹⁹ you should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded. (Lev 10:16-18)

¹⁷ Moses words may also be interpreted in another way: Were Aaron to stop and mourn his sons' death, this would not only pose a technical hurdle to his performing the service in the *Mishkan* – it would render him inherently unfit to do so. Pausing in his service of God to mourn his sons would be an expression of doubt regarding God's plan and would harm his ability to serve in the *Mishkan*. *Hizkuni* writes:

אם תנהגו אבלות, הקב"ה יקצוף על כל העדה, כיצד – לא יקבל ברצון את הקרבנות שהקרבתם בעד העדה.

If you mourn, God will act in fury towards the entire nation. How so? He will not willingly accept the sacrifices that you bring on behalf of the nation. (*Hizkuni* on Lev. 10:6)

Were Aaron to focus on his own personal tragedy, he would no longer be able to dedicate himself completely to serving God. Therefore, Moses limits the scope of his mourning.

¹⁸ The Sages learned from this verse that the priest's eating from a sin-offering is itself a part of the process of atonement:

מנין שאכילת קדשים כפרה לישראל? ת"ל "וְאֹתָהּ נָתַן לָכֶם לִשְׂאֵת אֶת עוֹן הָעֵדָה לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְפָנַי ה'". הא כיצד? כוהנים אוכלים ובעלים מתכפרים.

(ספרא, שמיני, פרשה א, ד"ה פרק ב').

From where [do we learn] that eating from the holy [sacrifices] brings atonement for Israel? As it says: "And He has given it to you to bear the sin of the congregation, to atone for them before God" (Lev. 10:17). How so? The priests eat from it, and the owners achieve atonement. (*Sifra, Parashat Shemini 1, s.v. ??*)

¹⁹ There are two types of sin-offerings. One is brought into the inner sanctum, where its blood is sprinkled on the gold altar and its flesh is burned entirely. The other type is brought in the outer courtyard, where its blood is sprinkled on the copper altar and its meat is eaten by the priests:

הִפְהֵן הַמִּחְטָא אֹתָהּ יֹאכְלֶנָה בְּמִקְוֹם קֹדֶשׁ תֹּאכַל בְּחֶצֶר אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד...

וְכָל חַטָּאת אֲשֶׁר יוּבָא מִדְּמָה אֶל אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לְכַפֵּר בְּקֹדֶשׁ לֹא תֹאכַל בְּאֵשׁ תִּשְׂרָף.

The priest who offers it for a sin-offering shall eat it; in a holy place it shall be eaten, in the court of the Tent of Meeting...

And every sin-offering, the blood of which is brought to the Tent of Meeting to make atonement in the sanctum, shall be eaten; it shall be burnt with fire. (Lev. 6:19-23)

The goat brought as a sin-offering for the entire nation is of the second type; therefore, the priests eat its meat.

Aaron had apparently accepted God's judgment wholeheartedly and appreciated that he would need to set his own feelings aside in order to complete the services correctly. However, it now seems that he and his sons made an independent decision to change something, greatly upsetting Moses. Moses' anger is understandable in the context of his constant feelings of apprehension during the establishment of the *Mishkan*. He realizes that any change could be fatal, especially after two priests died following their initiative to change a part of the service. Rabbi Moshe Alsheich writes:

קצף על בניו הנותרים, להיות כאודים מוצלים מאש, היה ראוי להם להיזהר כל ייכשלו בעניין עבודה כאחיהם, כי כאשר נכווה האדם מאש ראוי לו להיזהר ביותר.

He was angry at his remaining sons, for since they were as embers saved from a fire it would be incumbent upon them to take great care, lest they fail in their service as their brothers did. For when one has been burned, it behooves him to act with the greatest caution. (Rabbi Moshe Alsheich on Lev. 10:16)

“Would it have been good in God's eyes?!”

Aaron's Response

While Aaron silently accepted Moses' words during their previous interactions, here he speaks at last:

וַיִּדְבֹר אֶהָרִן אֶל מֹשֶׁה הֵן הַיּוֹם הִקְרִיבוּ אֶת תְּשׁוּבָתָם וְאֶת עֹלֹתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וְתִקְרָאנָה אֹתִי כְּאֵלֶּה וְאָכַלְתִּי תְשׁוּבַת הַיּוֹם הַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינֵי ה'. ויקרא י', יט

And Aaron spoke to Moses: “Behold, this day they have offered their sin-offering and their burnt-offering before God, and such things have happened to me; and had I eaten the sin-offering today, would it have been good in God's eyes?” (Lev. 10:19)

How does Aaron respond to Moses?

A Legal Debate – Partaking of a Sacrifice while in *Aninut*²⁰

According to Rashi, Moses and Aaron's discussion is a legal one – may one eat from a sin-offering while in *aninut*? In Moses' opinion, the regular service in the *Mishkan* must continue despite Aaron's *aninut*. Aaron, on the other hand, argues that only the special services performed in honor of the establishment of the *Mishkan* must continue, while the sin-offering in question – sacrificed on the first of each month as a permanent ritual – should not be eaten by one in *aninut*.

Eating a Minimum Amount

²⁰ *Aninut* is the legal status of one whose relative has died but has not yet been buried.

According to one of the interpretations²¹ quoted by Ibn Ezra, Aaron and his sons ate only a minimal portion of the sacrifice and burned the rest. Moses was not aware that they had eaten from it at all until Aaron told him that they had eaten an amount that God would approve of.²²

Would it have been good in God's eyes?

Yet even Ibn Ezra does not fully accept this interpretation, as it does not seem to match the “tone” of the text. Aaron's words do not read as though he is taking part in a legal debate. He does not respond to Moses with a confident, well-reasoned explanation as to why he did not eat from the sin-offering. Instead, he describes the sequence of events and ends with a question: “And had I eaten the sin-offering today, would it have been good in God's eyes?”

This question reflects Aaron's feeling that God would not prefer that business continue as usual. Although the service did continue, and Aaron and his sons refrained from keeping the customs of mourning, Aaron feels that it would be inappropriate for the sin-offering to be eaten under these circumstances. Why?

The Punishment Reflects the Failing

Shmuel David Luzzatto explains:

“הן היום הקריבו” – אני וארבעה בני הקרבנו את חטאתנו ועולתנו, לכפר בעדנו, ואף על פי כן קרו אותי כאלה, שמתו שני בני. אם כן, הרי אין אנחנו רצויים לפני המקום... היתכן שנכפר אנחנו על העדה בהיותנו אנחנו נזופים למקום? ואם בכל זאת היינו אוכלים אותה והיינו מתברכים בליבנו שעדיין אנו רצויים לפניו וכדאים לכפר על העם, “הייטב בעיני ה'?” – הלא יותר תבער בנו חמתו על זדון לבנו זה.

“Behold, this day they have offered” – I and my four sons brought our sin-offerings and burnt-offerings to atone for ourselves, and even so these things happened to me – my two sons died. In that case, clearly we are not wanted by God... Could we possibly atone for the nation while we ourselves are the objects of His anger? And if we had nevertheless partaken of it, and considered ourselves still wanted by God and worthy of atoning for the nation, “Would it have been good in God's eyes?” Would His anger at us not be that much stronger for this intentional sin in our hearts?

According to this interpretation, Aaron felt that the death of his sons reflected a fault of his which caused their sacrifice to be rejected. Therefore, he felt unworthy to eat from the sin-offering and atone for the nation's sins. **The Sacrifices May only be Eaten Joyfully**

²¹ Ibn Ezra refers to this as the opinion of the “*medakdekim*” [referring to those who are exacting in their interpretation of a text, especially in legal debates], as opposed to the opinion of the “*ma'atikim*” (apparently referring to the bearers of the tradition, i.e., the Sages).

²² According to this interpretation, the word *hayitav*, translated above as “would it have been good,” should actually be translated as: “this would be good.” Ibn Ezra supports this interpretation by noting that the *nikkud* (vocalization) of the letter ה in the word *hayitav* [הֵיטַב] is consistent with its being the definite article.

Rashbam suggests another explanation for Aaron's refusal to eat from the sin-offering:

...ובתוך הגדולה הזאת באה לנו צרה גדולה, "ותקראנה אותי כאלה", והיאך אוכל חטאת של קדשי דורות ביום הזה שנתקלקלה

ונתערבה שמחתנו?

רשב"ם, שם

...And during this majestic encounter a great tragedy befell us, "And such things have happened to me," and how could I eat from the sin-offering on this day, when our happiness was marred? (Rashbam on Lev. 10:19)

Aaron might feel that his emotional state would not allow him to achieve the proper frame of mind for eating the sacrifices – they must be eaten joyfully, and Aaron is incapable of doing so at this point. While he continues with his regular service and does not actively mourn his sons, he cannot participate in this festive act.

Nechama Leibowitz writes:

הקורא את הפסוקים כפי שנאמרו, לא יראה בהם כפי פשוטם משא ומתן של הלכה... כי אם כהצטרפות הנאמרת מתוך הרגשת ליבו באותו יום מר... אם כי קיבל עליו אהרון את האיסור המיוחד (לא להתאבל) והצדיק את הדין, הרי לא נצטווה אהרון ולא נדרש ממנו שיתמלא שמחה. משום כך אמר לו ליבו שאינו צריך לכפות על עצמו אכילת חטאת, כי אין הקרבן פעולה מאגית... אלא סמל הוא למחשבתו הטהורה של מביאה ושל עושיה. משום כך אמר לו ליבו שאינו צריך לכפות על עצמו אכילת החטאת אשר צריכה להיעשות בשמחה גדולה.

עיונים חדשים בספר ויקרא, פרשת שמיני, "הייטב בעיני ה'", עמ' 115-116

One who reads the verses as they were written will not understand them as a legal debate...but as an explanation of his deepest emotions on that bitter day... Although Aaron complied with the unique prohibition against mourning and accepted God's judgment, he was not commanded to be filled with joy. Therefore, his instinct told him not to force himself to eat the sin-offering, for the sacrifice is not a mystical ritual...but a symbol for the pure intentions of the owner and the one who sacrifices it. For this reason, his instinct told him not to force himself to eat the sin-offering, which must be brought with great joy. (*Iyyunim Chadashim BeSefer Vayikra, Parashat Shemini*, s.v. "Hayitav be'einei Hashem," p. 115-116)

Would it have been good in God's eyes to ignore death?

Perhaps, beyond feeling he is **unable** to eat the sin-offering joyfully, Aaron believes that it would actually be contrary to God's will. Would God want Aaron to completely ignore his sons' deaths – deaths which held enormous national significance? Ignoring his own grief completely and continuing his service as usual would actually be **a distortion of God's plan**.

Rambam writes that when tragedy strikes the nation, one must not ignore it, but instead attempt to understand why it occurred in order to repent. Aaron says as much to Moses: God would not want him to completely ignore the death of his sons – it was meant to unsettle them and instruct them regarding

the proper way to behave in the *Mishkan*. Ignoring it would mean ignoring the message God sought to send through this event.²³

Moses accepts Aaron's argument,²⁴ which demonstrates his greatness – “And Moses heard, and it was good in his eyes.”²⁵

C. “The Striking of Uzzah” – From Moses to David

Bringing the Ark to Jerusalem and the Death of Uzzah

The *haftara* recounts another event, similar to the incident described in the *parasha*: David decides to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. The journey commences joyfully, until tragedy suddenly strikes:

וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד גֵּרֹן נָכוֹן וַיִּשְׁלַח עֲזָא אֶל אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֵּאחֲזוּ בוֹ כִּי שָׁמְטוּ הַבָּקָר: וַיַּחַר אֶף ה' בְּעֲזָה וַיִּכְהוּ שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הַשָּׁל וַיִּמָּת שָׁם עִם אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים: וַיַּחַר לְדָוִד עַל אֲשֶׁר פָּרַץ ה' פָּרֹץ בְּעֲזָה וַיִּקְרָא לַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא פָּרֹץ עֲזָה עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: וַיָּרָא דָוִד אֶת ה' בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיֹּאמֶר אֵיךְ יָבֹוא אֵלֵי אֲרוֹן ה': וְלֹא אָבָה דָוִד לְהִסִּיר אֵלָיו אֶת אֲרוֹן ה' עַל עֵיר דָּוִד וַיִּטְהוּ דָוִד בֵּית עֶבְדֹּם אֲדוֹם הַגִּתִּיתִי. שְׂמוּאֵל ב' ו', ו-י

And they came to the threshing-floor of Nacon, and Uzzah put forth his hand to the Ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen had stumbled. And the anger of God was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error, and he died there by the Ark of God. And David was displeased because God had broken forth and struck Uzzah; and he called that place Perez-Uzzah [lit. “The Striking of Uzzah”] until this day. And David was afraid of God that day, and he said, “How will the Ark of God come to me?” And David did not agree to remove the Ark of God to him, to the city of David; and David carried it aside into the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. (II Sam. 6:6-10)

This story also takes place during a special event related to the *Mishkan* – here the *Mishkan* is renewed by the return of the Ark. Here, too, someone devoted to God dies as a result of coming too close to Him.

²³ One might even say that while Aaron is required to inhibit his feelings of grief to some degree while working in the *Mishkan*, he cannot and should not suppress them completely. Even when one stands before God, he should not negate his human emotions entirely.

²⁴ Just as Aaron was willing to accept Moses' words. The greatness of both Moses and Aaron and the special relationship between them are reflected in **their willingness to accept each other's words**, as demonstrated in their exchanges in this *parasha*. They also reveal their willingness to cooperate in establishing the *Mishkan* and bringing the Divine Presence into the camp.

²⁵ Several phrases are noticeably repeated in Moses and Aaron's conversations:

Moses warns Aaron against mourning for his sons for fear that God will “**be angry** with the entire congregation.”

When Aaron and his sons do observe customs of mourning by refusing to eat from the sin-offering, it is Moses who is angered: “**And he was angry** with Elazar and Itamar, Aaron's remaining sons.”

Afterwards, Aaron asks Moses whether what he did “**would...have been good in God's eyes.**” Moses does not answer for God, but for himself: “And Moses heard, and **it was good in his eyes.**”

Here Moses realizes that his fears are founded not upon God's reaction, but upon his own. Moses fears the appearance of human limitations during the establishment of the *Mishkan*, while Aaron helps him realize that there is nothing wrong with the expression of emotions, provided that they are based in the desire to do God's will and not one's own.

A closer examination of this narrative in the context of the story of Nadav and Avihu highlights a number of important points:

Did Uzzah Sin?

First, Nadav and Avihu's actions were described by the Torah as a sin – “And they offered strange fire before God, which He had not commanded them.” This demonstrates that approaching the Divine Presence must be done through total submission to God's will and His commandments, without changing a single detail. At first glance, Uzzah does not seem to have sinned in this manner – he merely tried to keep the Ark from falling. Yet this still angered God, and Uzzah died. Why?²⁶

Transporting the Ark in an Inappropriate Manner

Reading the story more closely, it becomes clear that while the Ark was brought to Jerusalem with great joy and enthusiasm, certain details were overlooked: the Ark must be carried only by Levites, and only on their shoulders (Num. 7:6-9). Here, however, the Ark is not lifted by Levites: it is transported by oxen in a carriage. These two significant missteps reflect a fundamental flaw in the way the nation relates to the holiness of the Ark. When the Ark begins to slip out of the carriage and Uzzah attempts to catch it, this is the inevitable result of the nation's prior mistakes: had the Ark been carried on the men's shoulders, it would not have slipped; and had it been carried by Levites, they would have been permitted to touch the Ark if the need arose.

Uzzah died not only because he accidentally touched the Ark, but because of the nation's inappropriate treatment of the Ark, which led to him accidentally touching it.

Guidelines for Approaching the Divine Presence

Like the story of Nadav and Avihu, this incident also teaches us that when approaching the Divine Presence, one must follow very specific guidelines. One who neglects to do so may die from the sheer intensity of God's almighty presence.

An additional difference between the narratives lies in the reactions of the surrounding people:

Moses and Aaron – Acceptance and Continued Service

Moses and Aaron (the relatives of those who died) accept God's judgment with understanding and equanimity. They continue with their service in the *Mishkan* as though nothing had happened (apart from Aaron's refusal to eat his full measure of the sin-offering).

David – Refusal to Transport the Ark

David refuses to accept God's judgment: “And David was displeased because God had broken forth and struck Uzzah” (II Sam. 6:8). Following this incident, he is fearful and unwilling to continue bringing the

²⁶ The commentators (Rashi, Radak, *Metzudat Tzion* and *Metzudat David*, quoting the *midrash* in *Bamidbar Rabba* 4:20) state that Uzzah's sin was that he did not realize that the Ark could not fall, as it carried itself independently.

Ark to Jerusalem; instead, he leaves the Ark in the house of Obed-Edom. The fear of additional deaths prevents David from continuing his journey to Jerusalem with the Ark.

David's reaction is understandable: if such closeness to God requires such a high level of care, and mistakes may be deadly, then presumably one should approach it with great caution. Any misstep should raise questions regarding whether or not the current generation is worthy of such close proximity to God.

Pursuing Closeness despite the Risk

Moses, however, expresses another view: Moses knew ahead of time that closeness to God would cause deaths. Yet he did not avoid establishing the *Mishkan*, and even served there himself. Even after Nadav and Avihu's deaths he does not halt the service; rather, he demands that it continue with even greater caution.²⁷

Moses teaches us that while closeness to God is dangerous, we must not avoid it. Instead, we must do our utmost to approach God and achieve closeness with Him in the proper way. In fact, it is the very intensity and power of this experience that bring the potential for danger. But since God commanded the nation to build the *Mishkan*, the nation is clearly capable of rising to this challenge and worthy of having His presence dwell among them.

God's Will – Proper Closeness

One who approaches God in the proper way, according to the guidelines He set out, will gradually grow in holiness. One of God's purposes in creating the world and commanding the nation to build the *Mishkan* was to allow human beings to become close to Him in accordance with His will. Forging a connection between the physical and the wholly spiritual is no simple task; it requires close adherence to a special set of rules. Deviating from these rules is dangerous, but approaching God in the proper way fulfills His will and grants man the ability to achieve strength, holiness and completion.

²⁷ David ultimately comes to this realization as well and later brings the Ark to Jerusalem.