

United We Stand

Written By Yehuda Dov Reiss, Talmid of Gruss Kollel (YU Israel)

April 6, 2024

Parshas Shemini

26th of Adar Bet 5784

The Parsha's Path

And it was on the eighth day... (9:1).

This week's Parsha records the devastating deaths of Nadav and Avihu, two of Aharon's sons, on what was supposed to be the happiest day in Jewish history - the day the Mishkan was inaugurated and the Divine Presence descended upon it. After bringing an alien fire which they were not commanded to bring, a heavenly fire descended and consumed them, leaving their parents and the nation in mourning.

Rabbeinu Bachya cites a sobering *midrash*, which references the verse in Tehillim (75:5): *"I said to the revelers, do not revel!"* The midrash explains that whoever is happy today may not be tomorrow, and whoever is depressed today may not be depressed tomorrow. It goes on to quote verses describing how G-d was joyous, as it were, at the completion of Creation, only to regret making it. Avraham was prosperous and had a son in his old age, but in the end, he was asked to sacrifice him, and while he didn't have to in the end, he came home to find his wife had died and he had to pay an exorbitant price to bury her. Yitzchak was also extremely blessed, but then his eyes darkened. Yaakov was called the firstborn of G-d, yet he had to flee from his brother, be subjected to the trickery of Lavan, had his daughter kidnapped and violated, and mourned for his son whom he thought was dead. Yehoshua led the nation in conquering the Land of Israel and anyone who defied him was killed by G-d, yet he died childless. Eli was the Kohen Gadol, the Av Beis Din, and the King, and yet he died suddenly upon hearing the news of the Ark's capture and the deaths of his two sons. The most blessed person known in history, Elisheva bas Aminadav, was married to Aharon the Kohen Gadol, her brother-in-law was Moshe, her brother was the head of all the tribal princes, and her sons were the assistants to the Kohen Gadol, but on that devastating day, her two children were snatched from her. Thus, the verse in Tehillim, and thus did King Shlomo say in Koheles (2:2), *To merriment I've said, "it is mad!"*

What is the point of the midrash? Are we supposed to live with dread and fear? Are we supposed to never be happy, simply because something terrible could happen at any moment, G-d forbid? Is it not sad enough to read with horror the silence of Aharon as he accepts the tragic fate of his sons?

I do not believe that the midrash is telling us not to be happy; on the contrary, perhaps the midrash is instructing us *how* to be happy. To understand this, we have to appreciate why Nadav and Avihu sinned. Why did these two men, part of only a handful of people who merited to accompany Moshe as he ascended Har Sinai and chosen to be vice-Kohen Gadols, defy the word of G-d? The answer that seems most compelling and is perhaps what underlies the midrash's different explanations of what their sin was, is that they weren't trying to defy G-d; on the contrary, they were trying to draw closer to Him. Nadav and Avihu knew what it meant to be intimate, to an extent, with the Divine, but they also knew they could get closer. On this momentous day, which resembled a kind of Har Sinai experience on Earth, when G-d's Presence descended upon the Mishkan, Nadav and Avihu felt they had a chance to embrace the Divine as they never could have before.

But they were not commanded to do so.

In a romantic relationship, there is a desire to get closer, to understand the other, to merge with them and become one. But there are also boundaries. Usually, there are differences that are too substantial to allow for complete unity, and a spouse will have a part of themselves that they cannot share. To intrude on that part of themselves, to violate those boundaries, may seem to be an attempt to draw closer to the other, but it really does just the opposite. Violating those boundaries means one takes the relationship for granted and that they're entitled to do with it as they please, without respect for the other. While the cause for the violation was love, the violation simultaneously perverts it into a selfish kind of self-love. The flames of the relationship ultimately, tragically, consumes itself.

In the case of the relationship between Man and G-d, G-d is Infinite, and man is finite. As close as Man can come to G-d, he cannot fully cling to Him, for the finite ceases to exist when attached to the infinite. Nadav and Avihu were so intoxicated with joy, with the ecstatic revelation of Divinity, that they ignored those boundaries G-d had set to try to cling to the Divine, and in doing so, betrayed Him. True love is tempered out of love.

This attitude was embodied by Aharon. When approaching the altar for the first time to perform the *avodah*, he hesitated. His brother, Moshe, had erected the Mishkan, and appeared much worthier than him. Furthermore, he was tainted by his involvement in the Sin of the Golden Calf. Who was he to perform this sacred

service? Moshe approached him and said, "Why are you embarrassed? It is for this reason you were chosen." (Rashi on 9:7). I believe it was the Kotzker Rebbe who explained that Moshe was telling Aharon, "It's because you're embarrassed that you were chosen." Even at this peak of spiritual heights, Aharon was mindful not to take it for granted, and approached the situation with "joy and trembling." Likewise, when Aharon was confronted by his sons' deaths, while he was undoubtedly deeply affected, he did not allow himself to indulge in despair and self-pity. "And Aharon was silent." He accepted his situation, with grief but with faith. He did not allow his emotions to overtake him, as strong and deep as they were.

In this way, Aharon's emotions were actually more genuine and more profound than if he would have fully indulged them. One who fully indulges his emotions succumbs to the feeling that they will never change, and that he must pander them for all they're worth. They become, in a sense, a form of idolatry, an end in and of themselves. This applies as much to depression and anger as much as it applies to love and joy. But as soon as this shift in perspective happens, rather than intensifying the emotion, it dulls it. For one who believes things will never change takes his lot for granted, for better or for worse. The happy person feels his happiness his right, while the depressed person feels depression is his destiny. In the end, the happy person is left with pride, the depressed person is left with despair, and the loving person is left with lust. The most pristine of emotions can only be maintained when one recognizes that it is subservient to the Divine will and entirely dependent on it. In a second, it can be taken away. This thought enables one to never take his current situation for granted and appreciate it properly, for better or for worse. It is the very tempering of emotion with the knowledge that everything can change in a second that allows one to fully appreciate it.

The message of Nadav and Avihu's deaths is crucial for having a healthy outlook on life and the world at large. The world of populist politics teach us that we have a slew of rights which are constantly being attacked and violated; the world of social media tells us we have no hope for having the wonderful lives of our peers. We are constantly beset, on the one hand, by messaging that the world belongs to us, and on the other, by messaging that we're helplessly doomed. Everyone is consumed by their own world, without being able to see how anything can be different. The result is a society where people riot when they don't get their way, where depression rates are through the roof, and where open communication and meaningful discussion is nonexistent. Nadav and Avihu teach us that nothing can be taken for granted, that everything wonderful can turn tragic, G-d forbid, and that

everything tragic can turn wonderful. With this humbling perspective, we will be ennobled to experience life in a deeper, more genuine way, and with the humility necessary to look beyond our emotions at what is noble and right. May all the tragedies of this past year give way to everlasting joy, *bimheira viyameinu*.

Goal of the week

Thoroughly research a counter-perspective on a controversial issue you feel strongly about - not that you'll agree, but so you can gain a deeper perspective and understanding.

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Tziviah Leah, Bracha bas Shoshanah, Reuven ben Golda, Yitzchok Moshe haKohen ben Miriam, Ephraim Melech ben Teilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

To Sponsor, Subscribe, give feedback, or if interested in helping distribute, please contact unityparsha@gmail.com

OUR MISSION

To Bring The Third Beis - Hamikdash By Facilitating Jewish Unity Through Torah