

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Shemini

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Raizel *bas* Feivel HaKohen *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Silence – Not Always Golden

Understanding the events in this week's *parshah* that occurred with Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aharon Hakohein, is no simple matter. They did “something” and were burned to death (*Vayikra 10:2*). We are reminded, however, that these were individuals of tremendous spiritual stature. Remarking to his brother, Moshe Rabbeinu asserts that “they were greater than me and you” (*Rashi, ibid. v. 3*). There is much discussion concerning the exact nature of the misdeed that caused their demise. Whatever it was, the Medrash states further that this was the *only* sin they had ever committed (*Vayikra Rabbah 20:8*).

As such, it is important to bear in mind that this was no “ordinary” sin committed by “ordinary” people. As individuals of such pristine and elevated levels, it can only be understood as a very miniscule deed, one considered a flaw only for people whose greatness had reached such heights.

Biding Their Time?

Some idea as to the nature of the offense can be gleaned from the following Talmudic passage. It records a conversation that took place between the two brothers. At first glance, however, the sentiments they expressed don't seem to be on par with their supremely refined characters. The Gemara relates the following exchange that occurred in the midst of a procession:

וַיְבָרֵךְ הָיָו מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן מְהֵלְכֵי בְּדֶרֶךְ וַנְּדָב וְאַבְיָהוּא מְהֵלְכֵי אַחֲרֵיהֶן וְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל אַחֲרֵיהֶן . אָמַר לוֹ נְדָב לְאַבְיָהוּא: אֵימָתִי יָמוּתוּ שְׁנֵי זְקֵנִים הֵלְלוּ וְאַנִּי וְאַתָּה נִגְהֵיג אֶת הַדֹּר? אָמַר לָהֶן הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: הַנִּרְאָה מִי קוֹבֵר אֶת מִי.

“Moshe and Aharon were walking along the way, Nadav and Avihu walked behind them and all Yisrael behind them. Nadav said to Avihu: ‘When will these two elders die, and I and you will lead the generation?’ Hashem said to them: ‘Let us see who will bury whom’” (*Sanhedrin 52a*).

This certainly does not seem like the kind of talk one would expect from otherwise perfect *tzaddikim* (righteous men) who had never sinned in their lives! How could it be that they even harbored such seemingly callous and self-centered sentiments, let alone actually spoke with such apparent contempt about the righteous leaders Aharon (their father!) and Moshe?

It should be noted – as the Chida does (*Pesach Einayim, Sanhedrin ibid.*) – that, in truth, only one of the brothers did the *actual* speaking: “Nadav said to Avihu: ‘When will...’” In fact, this point helps to clarify another perplexing issue. The *passuk* in Iyov (37:1) states: “לִזְאוֹת יִתְרַד לְבִי” – “At this, my heart trembled.” The Medrash (*cf. Tanchuma, Parshas Acharei Mos*) identifies the event that occasioned this comment as the death of Aharon's two sons.

Why was Iyov so distraught over this occurrence? The Chida explains that it stemmed from his previous occupation as an advisor to Pharaoh. Chazal tell us (*Sotah 11a*) that it was Iyov's colleague Bilaam who suggested that B'nei Yisrael be enslaved; Iyov remained silent. He thought that in this way he would escape

punishment for conspiring against Hashem's people.

And so, when later learning of Nadav and Avihu's demise, Iyov was terrified. They had been taken to task for the unbecoming comments about Moshe and Aharon. But it was actually only Nadav who made the remarks – Avihu had merely listened! From the fact that *both* were punished, Iyov concluded that one is held accountable for keeping silent when the situation calls for protest. He feared and regretted his own silence regarding the plan against the Jews.

Laudable Intentions

It emerges, then, that the actual “perpetrator” was only one of the brothers. But this brother as well, as we have seen, was of an extremely elevated spiritual stature. These comments seem totally incongruous with his level, as well as that of his righteous brother, who seems to have been complicit in the sentiment. What could they have been thinking?

The commentators offer some eye-opening solutions, demonstrating that, of course, the brothers were the farthest thing from crass glory-seekers. The venerated R' Ephraim Zalman Margolis (known as the Beis Ephraim) explains their expressed yearning – headed by the term “*masai*” (when) – in line with another well-known phrase beginning in the same way. The Medrash (*Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabbah 23:1*) encourages every Jew to declare: *מתי יגיעו מעשיי למעשה אברהם יצחק ויאקוב?* “When will my deeds reach those of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov?” Such a declaration reveals an inner desire to grow spiritually and attain ever-greater closeness to the Almighty. This was the nature of the brothers' comments, as well. In stating *אימתי ימותו שני זקנים?* *הללו ואני ואתה ננהיג את הדור?* they were not eagerly anticipating the death of these two luminaries. Rather, they were expressing their esteem for Moshe and Aharon, reflecting the sentiment of the Tanna D'vei Eliyahu: “When,” they wondered aloud, “will our deeds approach theirs, such that we would even be worthy of succeeding their august leadership?” (*K'motzei Shalal Rav, Vayikra 10:2*).

Another possibility is that, rather than eager anticipation, Nadav and Avihu were actually expressing a sense of dread. Their sentiment was actually in keeping with the following brief but profound teaching from the Mishnah in *Avos (1:10)*:

שמעיה אומר... שפא את הרבנות.

“Shemayah says... (One should) despise (the prospect of holding) a position of authority.”

R' Yitzchak Aharon Rappaport, Maggid of Wilkomir thus explains the brothers' statement as emanating from worry. They knew that assuming the mantle of leadership would result in a severe curtailment of their own Torah studies and spiritual pursuits. As such, Moshe and Aharon's advancing age was a source of real concern to them (*K'motzei Shalal Rav, ibid.*).

Thus, their conversation speaks more of their elevated nature than of character blemish. Because of their great piety, they were held to extremely high standards, made responsible perhaps more for the appearance of impropriety than any inherent, deep flaw. And through them was fulfilled the dictum “Through those close to Me, I become sanctified” (*Vayikra 10:3*).