

KIDDUSH HASHEM 2.0

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

This is what Hashem had spoken, saying, "I will be sanctified through those close to Me. Before the entire nation I will be honored."

Meshech Chochmah: Does Hashem seek or achieve "honor" through the death of those whom He values as close to Him? Certainly not. It is not so difficult, however, to piece together the state of mind of the nation at the time, and to quickly understand how in fact the long-term honor of Hashem hinged upon His quick punishment of Nadav and Avihu.

Man's ability to relate to Hashem is wondrous – and complex. Where others grasp at straws in finding ways to come closer to Him, He paved a clear path for us to move ourselves forward towards Him, through the system of the mitzvos – a practical program of Divine service. It is a program that is demanding, and fraught with opportunities for failure. In His wisdom and compassion, He accounted for human frailty by allowing for repentance, and by dealing with us with more *rachamim* than *din*.

Early in their history as a nation, *Klal Yisrael* experienced spiritual defeat. The sin of the golden calf was a major failing. Yet, as they arrived at this point in time, the eighth day of the consecration of the *mishkan*, they could look back in recent time and note triumph built upon the devastation wrought by their transgression. Moshe had interceded on their behalf in the aftermath of the *egel*. They had enthusiastically put together the materials for the *mishkan*, and saw the project through to completion. The Clouds of Glory, which had departed after the *chet ha-egel*, had returned. The *Shechinah* itself had taken up residence in their midst, showing itself in a fire that descended from Heaven. They had established a system of *kohanim* and *levi'im* to take charge on behalf of the nation of an order of *mishkan*-service that would keep the Divine presence in their midst.

This is wonderful and inspiring for us to behold, but people easily could have reached a dangerous conclusion. They might conclude that HKBH is not particularly zealous about adherence to His demands; that He would routinely look the other way upon human sin and failings. Just think about how deeply *Klal Yisroel* had disappointed Him – and how easily He was appeased!

Had people come to this conclusion, consciously or otherwise, the entire human enterprise would have been put in danger. We are indeed vouchsafed Hashem's *rachamim*, but there is also Divine justice. Hashem meticulously weighs when to show forbearance and compassion, and when to show that what He asks of us is not arbitrary. Sin is toxic, and it leaves consequences. If sin becomes

in the human mind just a small bump in the road rather than a monstrous problem, people will not and cannot progress the way He intended them to.

The deaths of Nadav and Avihu demonstrated the other side of the coin – Divine seriousness about *chet*, and Hashem's strictness in managing it. On the day of great joy at the inauguration of the *mishkan*, Nadav and Avihu were nonetheless cut down by Hashem for deviating ever so slightly from what they had been commanded. The impact upon the people was enormous. The incident served as an effective counterforce to the impression that they did not have to be so exacting about listening to His instructions.

Aharon understood this. In fact, this realization allowed him to bear his personal tragedy in silence. He comprehended just how important the lesson of the deaths of his sons would be on the future of the entire people. He also understood that he was not to bear the tragedy in solitude. Nadav and Avihu needed to provide an object lesson to the people only because that people had failed so miserably with the *chet ha-egel*. Had they not built the *egel*, nothing in the next months of their journey would have suggested to them that Divine justice was more relaxed than it is. Aharon understood that the *chet ha-egel* necessitated the death of his two sons, and it was therefore a matter of national responsibility to mourn for them, not his personal pain to be borne alone. For this reason the word went out, "And your brothers – all of *Bnei Yisrael* – will mourn the destruction that Hashem destroyed."

Building on the *pasuk* "A good name is better than good oil,"^[2] a midrash^[3] compares Chananya, Mishael and Azaryah favorably to Nadav and Avihu. The Kiddush Hashem brought about by Daniel's three friends who willingly faced the fires of Nevuchadnetzar's furnace, Chazal tell us, was greater than that generated by Nadav and Avihu, who had recently been sanctified through the good anointing oil. Nevuchadnetzar reacted with genuine humility, reverence and awe at the sight of Chananya, Mishael and Azaryah emerging alive and unscathed from the raging fires of the furnace. Chazal teach^[4] that he was brought to such ecstasy regarding Hashem and His power, that had it not been for the intervention of an angel, Nevuchadnetzar would have composed songs of praise to Hashem that would have put Dovid's Tehillim to shame! (The *malach* was that of human lust – the same one the Chazal see as overcoming Yehudah when he chanced upon Tamar on the road. ^[5] His inclination was to avoid her, by crossing to the other side, until the angel of *taavah* ignited in him an unusually strong attraction. In the case of Nevuchadnetzar, some form of *taavah* quickly distracted him, marring the supernal spirituality of the moment, and ensuring that he could not distill the experience into words of everlasting worth beyond his original reaction.)

The difference between the two incidents follows from our discussion above. The deaths of Nadav and Avihu served as a corrective to a misimpression about Divine justice. The harsh punishment of two spiritual giants termed "close" by Hashem restored a sense of proper fear of punishment to the people. But a more important form of *yir'ah* is *yir'as ha-Romemus*, reverence for Hashem's greatness. That *yir'ah* was communicated by Chananya, Mishael and Azaryah at the furnace.

We can appreciate the superiority of Chananya, Mishaël and Azaryah's sanctification of Hashem by way of a *mashal*. Both a mother and a wet-nurse eat, and provide nutrients to the baby they sustain. The wet-nurse, conscious of her service to the baby, nonetheless enjoys her food. She will, at times, eat things that are not particularly helpful to the baby if they appeal to her, and avoid foods that are beneficial to the baby if they do not appeal. The mother, on the other hand, eats selflessly, seeing herself as a mere conduit of benefit to the beloved child.

At the giving of the Torah, Nadav and Avihu were among the privileged few to ascend upon the mountain itself, while the people waited below. The Torah tells us^[6] that "they beheld G-d, and ate and drank." The Targum renders this "they rejoiced as if they ate or drank." In other words, they found personal enjoyment in being treated to a clearer understanding of Hashem's nature for the purpose of sharing that experience with the rest of the people. They acted like the wet-nurse, happy to sustain the child she nurtures, but leaving room for her own needs. Had Nadav and Avihu seen themselves simply as conduits of information from Hashem to the people, they would not have personalized the experience. There would have been no room for their own egos in a selfless experience, akin to the role of the mother nursing the child.

For people of their stature, this was a fatal flaw. They should have been punished on the spot, Chazal tell us,^[7] but Hashem did not want to mar the occasion of *matan Torah*. He waited till the inauguration of the *mishkan* to mete out His punishment. They died, albeit in a manner that taught a lesson about His strictness concerning observance of the Law.

Their death proved to be a massive *kiddush Hashem*. It strongly contrasts with that of Chananya, Mishaël and Azaryah, and why Chazal saw theirs as superior. Daniel's three friends provided the Kiddush Hashem and remained alive! Their self-sacrifice was fuller than that of Nadav and Avihu. They could have avoided the confrontation with the idolaters by fleeing in advance.^[8] They consciously chose to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the community, to inspire the community to tenaciously cling to their beliefs. They acted like the mother, not like the wet-nurse.

By leaving room for their own selves and needs at Har Sinai, apart from the needs of the *tzibbur*, Nadav and Avihu's Kiddush Hashem demanded that they continue to stay apart from the community. They died. Chananya, Mishaël and Azaryah, however, determined to make themselves part of the *tzibbur* when their personal concerns would have led them to abstract themselves from the community. Because they chose to align themselves with the *tzibbur*, risking their lives to do so, their Kiddush Hashem allowed them to emerge alive and rejoin the people.

^[1] Based on Meshech Chochmah, Vayikra 10:3

^[2] Koheles 7:1

^[3] Shemos Rabbah 48:1

^[4] Sanhedrin 92B

[\[5\]](#) Bereishis 40:16

[\[6\]](#) Shemos 24:11

[\[7\]](#) Vayikra Rabbah 20:10

[\[8\]](#) Tosafos Pesachim 53B s.v. *mah ra'u*
