

THE ANONYMOUS SONS OF AHARON: AN ANALYSIS OF VAYIKRA 10

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I

TRAGEDY

Our Parasha contains one of the two narratives which break up the flow of legalistic/covenantal material which comprises Sefer Vayyikra. Subsequent to being commanded regarding the various offerings to be brought in the Mishkan, God directed Mosheh as to the method of inauguration of the Kohanim into their positions as guardians of - and officiants in - the Mishkan. (Chapter 8 - this procedure, including the first seven-day Milu'im process, is known as Kiddush haKohanim).

On the eighth day of the Milu'im, the first day of the first month (Rosh Chodesh "Nisan"), the Mishkan was set to be dedicated and the Kohanim to be fully invested. Chapter 9 details the involvement of Mosheh, Aharon and Aharon's sons in that process. The many steps taken, including a sequence of personal and communal offerings brought by Aharon with the assistance of his sons, were intended to enshrine the Shekhinah in the Mishkan (hence the name Mishkan). At the end of Chapter 9, it seems as if that goal has been met:

And there came a fire out from before Hashem, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat; which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces.

With this crescendo of excitement and spiritual ecstasy, we fully expect something akin to the great Revelation at Sinai; some more intense experience of God's Presence as felt among the people. It is at this crucial moment, as the nation is bowing, awaiting the full "Hashra'at haSh'khinah" that we are abruptly and tragically pulled from the world of supernal life to immediate and shocking death:

And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, took each of them his censer, and put fire in it, and put incense on it, and offered strange fire before Hashem, which He commanded them not. And there went out fire from Hashem, and devoured them, and they died before Hashem.

What the Torah tells us is simple: Nadav and Avihu took fire-pans, put fire and incense in each and offered them before God. What the Torah does not tell us is what is wrong with this behavior - and why it carries with it such an immediate and terrifying (while awe-inspiring) death. In order to understand this, we need to see how the narrative unfolds; perhaps the context will be edifying and

enlightening.

II

CONSOLATION

We are not sure about the first reaction of Aharon, the man whose greatest day had finally arrived as he began service as the Kohen of Hashem; did he weep? did he continue his worship? This is unclear from the text, but we do know Mosheh's first words to Aharon, the stricken father:

Then Mosheh said to Aharon, This is what Hashem spoke, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come near to Me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aharon held his peace.

What are we to make of these words of Mosheh? First of all, when did God ever state *biK'rovai Ekadesh* ("I will be sanctified in them that come near to Me" - this translation is as poor as any other available one)?

In addition, we might ask what Mosheh's motivation was in uttering these words: Is he comforting Aharon? Is he, perhaps, chastising him?

Furthermore, the import of Mosheh's words is not at all clear (hence the problem with the translation). Does he mean that God's Presence can only become "enshrined" by the death of one of His chosen? Perhaps he means to say that God being exacting with His chosen ones is a method of generating a *Kiddush Hashem*; it is certainly not clear what these words mean.

It is plausible that the answers to these questions are mutually dependent - if we understand Mosheh's words as being motivated by a desire to comfort his brother, it is possible that he is "interpreting" previously stated words of God and applying them to this situation - and thereby enhancing the stature of Nadav and Avihu in their father's tear-filled eyes. If, on the other hand, Mosheh is "paraphrasing" an actual command of God (e.g. such as the boundaries established at Sinai - see *Sh'mot* 19:23), these words may be less "soothing" in tone and may mean that God became sanctified by virtue of the death of those who tried to come close. Again, an easy resolution to these words is not on our horizon - but we must attempt to decipher them to the best of our abilities.

Finally, how are we to understand Aharon's silence? Again, there are several parts to this question: First of all, was he suddenly silent (in reaction to Mosheh's words), did he remain silent (in spite of Mosheh's words), or did this silence precede Mosheh's words?

Is Aharon's silence an act of nobility? Does it demonstrate an overpowering sense of place and time, not allowing the tragedy to mar the celebration of the day? Or, conversely, does it indicate an inability to answer - a silence in the face of death? Was there anything that Aharon could have said at all?

III

DELEGATION

Subsequent to his short speech to Aharon, Mosheh turns to his nephews, commanding them to remove the corpses from the Mishkan:

And Mosheh called Misha'el and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aharon, and said to them, Come near, carry your brothers from before the sanctuary out of the camp. So they went near, and carried them in their coats out of the camp; as Mosheh had said.

In other words, neither Aharon nor his two "remaining" sons are to become defiled by participating in what is normally their familial obligation (at least as regards the brothers): burying their own.

Is this delegation of responsibility a response to Aharon's silence? Where are Elazar and Itamar (the two "remaining" brothers) at this time? We soon hear:

And Mosheh said to Aharon, and to Elazar and to Itamar, his sons, Uncover not your heads, nor tear your clothes; lest you die, and lest anger come upon all the people; but let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which Hashem has kindled. And you shall not go out from the door of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die; for the anointing oil of Hashem is upon you. And they did according to the word of Mosheh.

We now see that Aharon, Elazar and Itamar are standing by, watching as their sons/brothers are carried out of the Mishkan - and they are not allowed to demonstrate their grief in the traditional manners. That is not to say that their brothers' deaths will go without the proper Avelut. Their Avelut belongs to the entire "House of Yisra'el" - but what does that mean? Does it mean that all of B'nei Yisra'el are to behave as mourners for the entire week (at least) after this tragedy? That would seem to be self-defeating, if the reason for all of this delegation is to maintain the festive air of the day.

In addition, why are the B'nei Yisra'el appointed/delegated as mourners for Nadav and Avihu? What sort of relationship exists between the mourners (*Kol Beit Yisra'el*) and the two deceased sons of Aharon?

One final question on this series of verses: Why does the text point out that they did "according to the words of Mosheh" - if the intent was simply to indicate that they fulfilled these commands, the text could have tersely stated: Vaya'asu Khen - ("and they did thus"); what is added with this longer formula?

IV

COMMAND

Within the realm of legalistic text in the Torah, the most popular and familiar introductory phrase is: *vay'Daber Hashem el Mosheh leimor* - ("and Hashem spoke to Mosheh, sayingÖ"). Occasionally, we encounter an expansion which includes Aharon (e.g. *Sh'mot 12:1*),. The formula presented in the middle of our narrative - and which "interrupts" the flow of the story - is unique: *vay'Daber Hashem el Aharon leimor* ("and Hashem spoke to Aharon, sayingÖ"). This hapax legomenon is striking for several reasons. It stands in stark contrast to Aharon's silence, mentioned earlier. In addition, it is the first time that we hear about the "second" role of the Kohen - as teacher and instructor of the laws of Hashem. The specific directive prohibits worship by Aharon or his sons (what a painful word that is at this juncture) while intoxicated:

And Hashem spoke to Aharon, saying, Do not drink wine nor strong drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the Tent of Meeting, lest you die; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations; And that you may differentiate between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean; And that you may teach the people of Yisra'el all the statutes which Hashem has spoken to them by the hand of Mosheh.

Why is this particular prohibition (and its extension - instructing in Halakhah while intoxicated - see *MT Bi'at Mikdash 1:3* and our discussion in last year's shiur on Parashat Sh'mini, accessible on our website at torah.org/advanced/mikra) presented here, amid the dedication festivities and attendant tragedy? Why is Aharon singled out to receive only this command (all other commands regarding the special status of Kohanim were given through the familiar formula)?

V

EXCEPTION

After Aharon is given this "new" prohibition, Mosheh turns to his brother and nephews, directing them to continue in their worship-acts associated with the offerings already brought:

And Mosheh spoke to Aharon, and to Elazar and to Itamar, his sons, who were left, Take the meal offering that remains of the offerings of Hashem made by fire, and eat it without leaven beside the altar; for it is most holy; And you shall eat it in the holy place, because it is your due, and your sons' due, of the sacrifices of Hashem made by fire; for so I am commanded. And the waved breast and offered shoulder shall you eat in a clean place; you, and your sons, and your daughters with you; for they are your due, and your sons' due, which are given from the sacrifices of peace offerings by the people of Yisra'el. The offered shoulder and the waved breast shall they bring with the offerings made by fire of the fat, to wave it for a wave offering before Hashem; and it shall be yours, and your sons' with you, by a statute forever; as Hashem has commanded.

Why does this directive need to be stated (or, perhaps, repeated) at this point? Don't Aharon and his sons already know the laws of the Kohanic consumption of the offerings (see *Vayyikra 6:9*)?

The simplest explanation of this interjection is that Aharon and his sons, being in a Halakhic state of mourning (*Aninut*) would have reasonably avoided partaking of any of the sacral foods (see BT Zevahim 101a for the source for this prohibition/disqualification). Hence, Mosheh must instruct them that that is not to be the case on this day. In spite of the death of their sons/brothers, Aharon and his two "remaining" sons are to continue the complete Avodah without interruption or deviation; this day of inauguration serves as an exception to the rule of the disqualification of Aninut.

If that is the sole reason for this exhortative directive, why does Mosheh add the information about the "wave offering" (*Shok haT'rumah v'Hazeh haT'nufah*)? Why add the information regarding the family's rights to the portions of the Sh'lamim (peace-offerings)?

VI

INQUIRY

Having commanded his brother and nephews regarding the completion of the "order of the day", Mosheh finds that they have burned the S'ir haHatat (goat of the sin offering), which the Gemara identifies as the S'ir Rosh Chodesh (sin-offering brought on the first day of the month as part of the Musaf Rosh Chodesh) - instead of eating it:

And Mosheh diligently sought the goat of the sin offering, and, behold, it was burned; and he was angry with Elazar and Itamar, the sons of Aharon, who were left alive, saying, Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the holy place, seeing it is most holy, and God has given it to you to bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before Hashem? Behold, its blood was not brought inside the holy place; you should indeed have eaten it in the holy place, as I commanded.

Why does Mosheh engage in the presentation of an argument as to why they should have eaten it? Isn't it enough for him to remind them - as he does at the end of his "angry" chastisement - that they should have eaten it "as I commanded"? What are we to make of his explanation?

VII

RESPONSE

We again find a unique interaction here. Instead of admitting to fault, Aharon speaks up (in spite of the fact that Mosheh had addressed his sons), defending their action - and Mosheh accepts their defense:

And Aharon said to Mosheh, Behold, this day have they offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before Hashem; and such things have befallen me; and if I had eaten the sin offering to day, should it have been accepted in the sight of Hashem? And when Mosheh heard that, he was

content.

Why didn't Aharon give this response earlier, when Mosheh had commanded him and his sons to partake of the Minchah and the Shok haT'rumah and HazeH haT'nufah? In addition, how could this argument have succeeded, if Mosheh had already commanded them to continue "as if nothing had happened" and to allow the rest of the B'nei Yisra'el to mourn for Nadav and Avihu? Either Aharon and his sons had the status of Onenim (mourners) or not - and, since Mosheh had already excepted them from that status, how could this argument succeed?

VIII

SUMMARY

In reading through Vayyikra Chapter 10, we have noted a significant number of difficulties. Here is a summary of the main questions, although some of them have ancillary inquiries which were raised above:

1) Did Nadav and Avihu err? If so, what was the nature of their error/sin? 2) How do we understand Mosheh's words to Aharon - and Aharon's silence? 3) Why are Aharon's remaining sons not considered mourners - such that the burial of their brothers is delegated to their cousins? What is the role of Kol Beit Yisra'el here - are they all mourners in the strict and complete sense of the word? 4) How should we understand the interjection of the command regarding entering the Mishkan while intoxicated - and that given directly to Aharon? 5) Why does Mosheh have to remind his kin about their obligations regarding the consumption of the offerings? 6) Why does Mosheh present an argument to Elazar and Itamar as to why they shouldn't have burnt the S'ir Rosh Chodesh? 7) How do we understand their successful defense - and why wasn't it stated earlier?

Under ideal circumstances, we would present a survey of the many brilliant and insightful approaches suggested by the Rishonim (they were all sensitive to these difficulties with the text, of course). Due to space limitations, we will have to confine ourselves to using several of their observations as points of departure for a different approach; one which is, I believe, consistent with and reflective of some of the perspectives raised by the Rishonim in their analyses of this difficult chapter.

IX

KEDUSHAT KEHUNAH

Any analysis of this chapter has to begin with the offering brought by Nadav and Avihu. What did they do to merit instantaneous death at the hands of Heaven?

A scan of the two previous chapters - Chapter 8, which details the inauguration ritual (*Milu'im*) and Chapter 9 which describes the events of that day of dedication, we see that the role of Aharon's sons is purely supportive in nature. Not once do we hear their names. They function solely as B'nei Aharon (Aharon's sons) throughout the entire narrative. Until this point, we read "Take Aharon and his sons with him"; only after several verses devoted to the inauguration of Aharon do we hear: "And Mosheh brought the sons of Aharon"; throughout the rest of the Milu'im ceremony, we only hear about Aharon, "his sons" or "Aharon and his sons".

On the day of dedication, we read "And the sons of Aaron brought the blood to him and the sons of Aharon presented to him the blood and they presented the burnt offering to him and the sons of Aharon presented to him the blood". Throughout the ceremony, designed to inaugurate Aharon and his sons into their positions as Kohanim, his sons present Aharon with the various items he needs in order to perform the service - but it is clearly his service to perform.

Just before we read about Nadav and Avihu's errant offering, we are told that:

And there came a fire out from before Hashem, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat; which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces.

The ultimate was achieved; God's heavenly fire consumed the offering, indicating His acceptance and readiness to enshrine the Shekhinah among the people.

Suddenly, we do not hear about the "anonymous" sons of Aharon; rather, we are introduced to Nadav and Avihu who are the (two of) the same B'nei Aharon who demonstrated a strong awareness of their position until this point:

And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, took each of them his censer, and put fire in it, and put incense on it, and offered strange fire before Hashem, which He commanded them not. And there went out fire from Hashem, and devoured them, and they died before Hashem.

The emphasis on "each his own fire-pan" indicates that this offering was not only bereft of the communal aspect which informed all of the offerings until this point - it was also a totally individualized and self-centered offering. Note the words of the Sifra at the beginning of Parashat Aharei-Mot:

B'nei Aharon - implying that they did not take counsel with Aharon; Nadav va'Avihu - implying that they did not take counsel from Mosheh [see BT Eruvin 63a]; Ish Mah'tato (each his own fire-pan) - implying that they did not take counsel from each other. (see also Vayyikra Rabbah 20:8)

The Torah uses two additional (and more explicit) terms to indicate their sin: strange fire and which He commanded them not.

Essentially, their sin was in considering that once they had been designated, inaugurated and sanctified, they had the latitude to present worship in their own manner - subverting their own roles

as assistants to their father. Far beyond this sin, however, was the underlying perspective which motivated their behavior: We can dictate how to worship. When we approach God, we may do so on our own terms and with our own offering. The Midrash's reading of their refusal to take counsel with Mosheh and Aharon before bringing their offering is indicative of this errant perspective.

What Nadav and Avihu evidently failed to understand was the metamorphosis which was effected through the Milu'im process. Whereas, until now, Nadav and Avihu were two individuals, sons of Aharon and nephews of Mosheh; now they were accorded the lofty - but limiting - status of B'nei Aharon. Pursuant to their sanctification, Aharon and his sons became the representatives of the entire nation - this great privilege carried with it the awesome responsibility of maintaining constant humility in the face of the Mishkan where that representation is realized.

X

RESPONSES

We can now review our questions and answer each, following the explanation presented in the previous section:

- 1) Did Nadav and Avihu err? If so, what was the nature of their error/sin? They certainly sinned - in taking worship into their own hands. They not only overstepped their role as B'nei Aharon, they also, thereby, violated the trust of the B'nei Yisra'el.
- 2) How do we understand Mosheh's words to Aharon - and Aharon's silence? Mosheh told Aharon *biK'rovai Ekadesh* - meaning that I am only sanctified through the actions of those who I have brought close. In other words, Mosheh was telling Aharon that Nadav and Avihu erred in thinking that because they had been sanctified as B'nei Aharon, that they were now fit to effect the sanctification of the Mishkan on their own. Who can sanctify God? Who can bring His Shekhinah into the presence of the people? Only someone selected by God Himself. Aharon's silence is easily understood - what could he say? He certainly couldn't disagree, claiming that Nadav and Avihu had been sufficiently close to God. On the other hand, agreeing to that statement implied that he, Aharon, is sufficiently close. Humility prevented him from answering - so he was silent.
- 3) Why are Aharon's remaining sons not considered mourners - such that the burial of their brothers is delegated to their cousins? What is the role of Kol Beit Yisra'el here - are they all mourners in the strict and complete sense of the word? This is the lesson of the entire chapter: B'nei Aharon do not "belong to themselves". They are both *Sh'luchei Didan* (our agents) as well as *Sh'luchei d'Rach'mana* (agents of God - see BT Kiddushin 23b) - with all of the privileges and responsibilities thereof. Although the Rishonim are divided as to whether Elazar and Itamar would have been obligated to bury their brothers if it were not for this special occasion, what is clear is that, at the very least, as the Mishkan is being dedicated, the Kohanim are getting the clear message that their role as communal

representatives overrides their full participation in family life. The "upside" of that is that their family is much larger - all of B'nei Yisra'el are considered their family, such that the mourning for their brothers will be shared among the entire nation.

4) How should we understand the interjection of the command regarding entering the Mishkan while intoxicated - and that given directly to Aharon? Mosheh has just explained the death of Nadav and Avihu to Aharon - they miscalculated, thinking that anyone who is part of the designated family may sanctify. Mosheh's response - that only one whom God brings close may sanctify - could still leave Aharon wondering: "How do I know - or anyone else, for that matter - that I am sufficiently close to God? Perhaps my role in the sin of the golden calf has marred that closeness, if it ever existed?" To assuage that concern, God gave Aharon the greatest sign of closeness - by speaking directly to him (and only him). God "focusing" His command to Aharon is a sure sign of Aharon being worthy to sanctify the Mishkan. As far as the command itself, we may posit as follows: The sin of Nadav and Avihu was taking matters into their own hands (figuratively as well as literally). The zealousness which accompanies celebration and can, if unchecked, lead to such errant and dangerous behavior, is most easily exemplified by intoxication. A person is so carried away with the ecstasy of the nearness to God that he desires to break down all boundaries - including those which are necessary to maintain an environment of Kedushah. The additional role of Kohanim mentioned at the end of this command serves to strengthen the message of the chapter - that Kohanim's role is not only representative but also instructive and, as such, have a great responsibility towards B'nei Yisra'el. 5) Why does Mosheh have to remind his kin about their obligations regarding the consumption of the offerings? Again, the basic message - these gifts are given to you not by dint of who you are - but rather because God has chosen you to represent His people in the Mishkan. These gifts are given to God - who grants them to the family of Aharon miShulhan Gavohah.

6) Why does Mosheh present an argument to Elazar and Itamar as to why they shouldn't have burnt the S'ir Rosh Chodesh? Mosheh is explaining their role to the sons of Aharon - it is your job to complete this service in order to repair the relationship between God and the people. You must rise above your personal tragedy in order to act for the people. 7) How do we understand their successful defense - and why wasn't it stated earlier?

As mentioned above, the Gemara identifies this offering as the Musaf Rosh Chodesh; unlike the other offerings (which Mosheh had addressed earlier), this was an ongoing offering, to be brought every month. Whereas the suspension of personal grief for the celebration of dedication would be in accord with Mosheh's command, this offering is of a different nature. Aharon's successful defense of his sons' behavior demonstrates the difference between the celebration of dedication and ongoing worship - but proper analysis of that topic is beyond the scope of this shiur.

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