A TURN TO CHANNEL TIME

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Imagine being at the wedding of the son of a close friend. It's the simcha of the year. Everyone who is anyone is there, and you feel so grateful to be part of the whole event. Your friend is beaming, and you think to yourself, "I'll never forget this day."

Finally, after much waiting, the chason comes out and gracefully walks to the chupah. Tears well up in your eyes from the joy as you watch the kallah's procession make its way to the chupah; you sense that even the heavenly angels have come down to be part of this joyful event.

There is silence, and the rabbi begins the service to eternally bind this young man and young woman together. What could go wrong now?

All of a sudden, just as the chason finishes placing the ring on his wife's finger, one of the people under the chupah gasps and reaching for his chest falls to the ground. A crowd of people surround him, as doctors who had been there as guests rush up onto the podium. "Everyone stand back," they yell with urgency.

Within moments, the eerie sound of an ambulance cuts through the evening air as it approaches from the distance; it comes to a stop right by the chupah. Paramedics jump out and run to the heart attack victim. An oxygen mask is strapped over the face of the father of the chason, who is then rushed off to the hospital, his fate uncertain. Nobody says a word, except for a silent prayer. There is only shock. Within seconds an unforgettable simcha had become an unforgettable nightmare. The contrast between the two is surreal.

G-d forbid anyone should ever know such a tragedy, but the Jewish people, as nation, once did, and this is the topic of this week's parsha.

At the zenith of mankind's greatest achievement, the successful construction of a dwelling place for G-d-the Mishkan-and at the height of the celebration of that success, a most unforgettable tragedy occurred: on the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishkan (10:1), Nadav and Avihu, two sons of Aharon HaKohen, and the nephews of Moshe, in their exuberance to add to the joy of the day, brought before G-d an "unauthorized fire," and for doing so, died on the spot (a fire went out from the Holy of Holies, and "burned out" the souls of the two of them). Right before the nation, and while the smiles were still on their faces and the song still in their mouths, two of the greatest men of that generation died and caused a period of great mourning at a moment meant to be suffused with

eternal joy.

The contrast was surreal.

How could it happen?

Well, to begin with, the Torah states that they had brought an "unauthorized fire." In fact, the midrash says that neither consulted with each other, but rather, simultaneously, each had the same idea to offer an incense offering in the Holy of Holies. And neither bothered to ask Moshe his opinion in the matter, either. According to Rebi Eliezer, it was this that caused their deaths, for, as the Talmud states, "one that teaches law before his rebi is fitting to be killed" (Eiruvin 63a).

The truth be known, the seeds for this act of insurrection had been planted before the fateful day itself. For, as the Talmud points, Nadav and Avihu used to walk behind Moshe and Aharon and ask, "When will these two elders die, so that we can become the leaders of the nation?" G-d's answer to their question: "We will see who buries whom!" (Sanhedrin 52:1)

According to Rebi Yishmael, the source of Nadav's and Avihu's error was their intoxication. This is why, according to Rebi Yishmael, the Torah admonishes the kohanim not to perform the Temple service while intoxicated right after this episode. However, Rashi mentions two other reasons why Nadav and Avihu were killed. Firstly, when Nadav and Avihu had been up on Mt. Sinai with Moshe and Aharon and the Seventy Elders and G-d revealed His Presence, Nadav and Avihu gazed long than the should have and enjoyed it more than they were permitted to. For that alone they could have been killed right then, but, so as to not ruin the spirit of receiving the Torah, G-d had mercy and held off punishing them until this week's parsha (Shemos 24:11).

The only question is, what about the spirit of **this** day? Why couldn't G-d have waited until after the celebration was over, before exacting Divine retribution?

Furthermore, says Rashi in this week's parsha, in truth, **all** of Aharon's sons deserved to die, because of the incident of the golden calf. However, Moshe had prayed to G-d to avert the decree, and was successful in at least saving two of Aharon's four sons (Shemos 10:12; Rashi). Hence, for this reason as well, two of Aharon's sons were destined to die (though not necessarily Nadav and Avihu).

The question is, which is the **real** reason for the death of Aharon's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, and why are so many reasons given for their deaths, when the Torah explicitly states that they had transgressed by altering the Divine service? And what does Moshe mean when he says after their deaths,

"Aharon, my brother ... I knew that this house was to be sanctified by those whom G-d loves, and I thought that meant you or me! Now I see that they were greater than you and I!" (Shemos 10:3; Rashi)

Was Moshe just trying to console Aharon his brother, or did he really mean that Nadav and Avihu, at least on some level, were greater than Aharon and himself? What greatness, if any, can there be in

violating the word of G-d? The answer to all of these questions is in understanding the role of the Mishkan, and its history.

After the sin of the golden calf, Moshe ascended for another 40 days to atone for the Jewish people below. However, even that was not enough, so grave is the sin of idol worship, and Moshe spent a third period of 40 days up on top of the mountain, pleading with G-d to save the remainder of the Jewish people. In the meantime, in the camp below, the people waited anxiously to find out their fate. On the tenth day of Tishrei, 120 days after the Ten Commandments had first been given, on the day that would become Yom Kippur for all subsequent generations, a radiant Moshe came down the mountain with good news of atonement, grasping two new tablets, and instructions for the construction of the Mishkan.

Over the next three months, miracles occurred until the Mishkan was completed on the 25th day of Kislev (the future day of Chanukah in the time of the second Temple). However, though the people waited for the erection of the Mishkan, which, with G-d's help, had been completed faster than could have occurred naturally, G-d did not command its assembly. Instead, days passed, and then weeks, until finally the scoffers of the generation taunted saying, "What's the matter? Did we fail? Is G-d disappointed with what we built?"

The real reason for the delay, says the midrash, was to have it built in the month within which Yitzchak, our Forefather, was born. After all, it was Yitzchak who was prepared to sacrifice himself on the altar to G-d; what would be more fitting than to make the altar active in the month of his birth? Hence, seven days in advance of Nissan, the Mishkan was erected, its vessels were anointed, the kohanim were inaugurated, and the long wait for the arrival of the Divine Presence had come to an end. The mouths of the scoffers had been closed.

However, according to Rabbi Yissacher Frand, another reason for the wait was to atone for the golden calf as well. After all, what caused the golden calf in the first place? Impatience and independence. As Rashi explains, it was Moshe's slight delay, or at least what the people took to be his delay, that caused them to panic and demand a substitute.

Furthermore, did they consult their elders regarding their decision? Did they ask Aharon for his opinion in the matter? When Chur, Aharon's brother-in-law tried to speak his mind, the mob stoned him to death! But, as the Talmud states, anyone who pushes the moment, the moment will push him. (Brochos 64a). In the end, Moshe did return, caught the perpetrators in the midst of their sedition, and punished them accordingly.

Thus, the golden calf was an idol to the god of impatience and too much self-confidence, and it was for **this** that the Mishkan atoned as well, not so much in the service that was to take place inside, but in its timetable for assembly and activation. By holding off on erecting the Mishkan until Nissan, a wait of three months, G-d was telling the Jewish people that, when it comes to the service of G-d, patience, and respect for higher authority is a must!

We can apply this idea to Nadav and Avihu, and understand why at such a climactic moment in history, G-d would choose to dampen the spirits of the Jewish people by taking the lives of Nadav and Avihu.

It is true that Nadav and Avihu had been inspired, exceptionally inspired, and that inspiration had impressed Moshe to that point that he could call them "great." On the other hand, inspiration, as great and as central as it may be in serving G-d and accomplishing good, it is only holy when it is channeled and harnessed by the word of G-d and those who represent Him according to the Torah and tradition.

Furthermore, independence of thought is equally important if a person is to grow spiritually; it took tremendous independence for Moshe to break the first set of Tablets after seeing the golden calf in the camp below, though G-d didn't tell him to do so, and though Aharon and the Elders had argued against it.

However, when Moshe fought against Aharon and the Elders to break the Tablets, it was not out of a lack of respect for either; rather, after having been up on the mountain with G-d, and after having learned Torah from G-d Himself, the only authority higher than Moshe was G-d Himself, and Moshe acted with what he understood to be the support of his "rebi." And, as the last Rashi of Sefer Devarim points out, he had been 100% right!

However, this was not the case for Nadav and Avihu. Their inspiration and independence blinded them to the fact that, as long as Moshe and Aharon walked the face of the earth, there were people **greater** and **wiser** than them. Nadav and Avihu may have felt more inspired, and quite independent, but their time had not yet come, and they "pushed" the moment, and, as a result, the moment pushed them off.

This was the strange fire they offered ... an unbridled spirit, which was drawn out of them by G-d's fire, leaving their bodies intact! And it was **this** that "forced" G-d to punish them at the special inauguration service of the Mishkan, for their very service was an oxymoron; they had committed the very kind of act the Mishkan had come to prevent. There was no better way, and no better time to teach the purpose of the Mishkan and the attitude it came to counteract than by taking the lives of Nadav and Avihu at that time.

This is a good introduction into this week's special haftarah, Parashas HaChodesh, which deals with the first mitzvah given to us in Egypt, the mitzvah to sanctify the new moon (see the parsha sheet on Parashas Bo).

There are many factors that distinguish one person from another, some making a person more productive than his neighbor, while others inhibit his growth altogether. However, one factor that is unique that seems to play one of the most important roles in terms of human productivity and spiritual growth is a person's relationship to time.

For some, time is an inconvenience to be worked around. It is, for many, one of the most important shortcomings of being human. For such people, the "fountain of eternal youth" remains to be one of the most promising gates to freedom known to mankind.

It is not for no reason that Egypt is compared to a frolicsome calf, or that the Jewish people at their lowest point sought to construct a golden calf. For, if the calf symbolizes playful youth, and gold represents eternity, then a golden calf symbolizes eternal youth, and one's commitment to it. Without a constant awareness of the reality of death, and without a fear of leaving this world before we have the time to complete our earthly task, we can live with the impression that there will always be a "tomorrow" to fix things up.

Why be responsible today when you can always be responsible tomorrow? That is the underlying premise of any materialistically-based society, and the "Egypt" referred to in the Haggadah, when it says that "everyone must look at himself as if he too left Egypt." After all, Egypt may have been a nation, but "Mitzrayim" is a Torah-concept, one that resurfaces wherever and whenever time becomes less relevant to man than it is to G-d.

When G-d showed Moshe the new moon in Egypt, and told him that, for now on, the Jewish people were going to keep track of time, of the days, of the months, and of the years, He was in fact telling us that leaving Egypt means changing our perspective of time. Leaving Egypt means appreciating that G-d has an agenda for history, and that there is no moment that is random, or without purpose (Pirke Avos). Our job is to cherish each moment for its spiritual opportunity, and to get out of a moment what it has to offer us. It is not for us to try to put into the moment what we want to offer it!

They tell the story of an important rabbi who was once officiating a wedding ceremony, which, like most Jewish weddings, took place at night under the stars. As Divine Providence would have it, just at the crucial moment that the chason was to place the ring on the kallah's finger and make everything official, the ring dropped from the chason's hand into the grass below.

Now, everyone knows that anything that falls onto grass does not remains in the place that it fell, especially when it comes to a wedding ring. It was not long before the entire wedding party was combing through the grass looking for that ring. Of course, the bystanders couldn't help wonder if all of this was a Divine sign that the wedding about to take place was not meant to be. Perhaps, many guests must have thought to themselves, the ring should be left where it is, and another shidduch be made ...

The rav, sensing the tension and knowing how the minds of people work, pre-empted the unspoken rumors. He told everyone there,

"You know ... 'Many are the thoughts of the heart of man, but it is the will of G-d that is done in the end.' A person plans a wedding months in advance, and makes many preparations. The couple decides where to get married, and just when it should occur, and then work their hardest to make it all come out just so ... just the way they had intended it to be. And G-d? What does **He** think? What

are **His** plans? Perhaps the chason and the kallah wish to be eternally bound together at 6:30 p.m. on the first of Nissan, but for reasons know only to the Creator Himself, 6:42 is the ideal time ... "

And just at that moment, a voice went out, "I found it! I found the ring!"

Needless to say, the ceremony continued, the chason and kallah were married to each other, and no one again questioned the virtue of the shidduch.

We can't always know what a moment holds. In fact, we barely ever do. However, living with the knowledge that G-d does, and that to **him** each moment is precious and has a special opportunity, enhances our own spiritual sensitivity and relationship to time. It doesn't bind us to time, but rather, it frees us from time, for, it is this respect for G-D's time that channels our inspiration and independence in a positive and productive direction. According to Kabballah, this is precisely what Yitzchak represents-the ability to exercise restraint, in order to channel spiritual energy, which, of course, was the goal of thel Mishkan.

As we approach the month of Nissan, the month in which the Mishkan was assembled, and the month in which Pesach occurs, and the time of chametz-annihilation, we should experience new found inspiration and great self-confidence as we ready ourselves for Seder night, and **positively** channel our energies, especially in areas pertaining to Shalom Bayis.

Have a great Shabbos,

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