A MOMENT OF DRAMA

The seven-day dedication of the Sanctuary was over, and despite the expectations of the Children of Israel, the Divine Presence had not become manifest. Even after the sacrifices were offered on the eighth day, the hopes of the people had not been fulfilled.1

Aware of the people’s disappointment, Moshe and Aharon entered the Sanctuary and prayed, and then “HASHEEM’s glory was revealed to all the people. Fire came forth from before HASHEM and consumed the burnt offering.”2 In grateful acknowledgment, “the people saw this and raised their voices in praise.”3

Then two individuals sought an even deeper bond with G-d. “Aharon’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his firepan, and placed fire and then incense upon it, and offered it before HASHEM. It was strange fire which [HASHEM] had not commanded [them to offer]. Fire came forth from before HASHEM and consumed them, and they died before HASHEM.”4

Moshe praised them in their death, telling Aharon: “This is [the meaning of] what HASHEM said: ‘I will be sanctified by those close to Me and I will glorified before the entire nation.’5 Rashi6 explains that Moshe told Aharon: “I knew that the Sanctuary would be consecrated by those in communion with HASHEM. I surmised that this would be either me or you. Now I see that they are greater than we are.”

INSATIABLE YEARNING

The passage is paradoxical. On one hand, the conduct of Aharon’s sons appears undesirable, as obvious from the punishment they received and as reflected in our Sages’7 discussion of “the sin of Aharon’s sons.”

But it also appears that there was a positive dimension to their efforts. For Nadav and Avihu had been designated for unique Divine service, and Moshe himself stated8 that they were greater than he and Aharon, and that it was through their sacrifice that the Sanctuary was consecrated.

This difficulty can be resolved based on the commentary of the Or HaChayim, who explains the death of Nadav and Avihu as follows:9
They came close to a sublime light with holy love, and died because of it. This is the mystic secret of 
“[HASHEM’s] kiss” through which the righteous die. Their death was equivalent to the death of the 
righteous, [but] there was one distinction: it is the kiss which approaches the righteous, while in their 
instance, it was they who approached it …. Although they understood that they would die, they did 
not hold back from coming close, and clinging [to HASHEM] in a sweet [bond] of love... to the extent 
that their souls departed.

Chassidic thought 10 develops this concept, stating that our love for HASHEM must involve two 
phases: ratzu, a powerful yearning for connection with Him, and shuv, a commitment to return and 
express HASHEM’s will by making this world a dwelling for Him. 11

As the Or HaChayim explains, Aharon’s sons had reached an all-encompassing level of ratzu, a longing 
to cleave to HASHEM. This should have been followed by a turn toward shuv, expressing this bond in 
their lives. 12 Their sin 13 was not the closeness they established with HASHEM, but the fact that the 
connection did not bear fruit; they died without having expressed this bond in the realm of ordinary 
experience. 14 For HASHEM’s intention is that the deepest levels of love for Him be demonstrated in an 
appreciation for the Divine that inhabits every element of creation, and in serious efforts to enable this 
Divine essence to become manifest.

The positive dimension of Nadav’s and Avihu’s striving is alluded to in the phrase “a strange fire which 
[HASHEM] had not commanded [them to offer].” Their Divine service was “strange” and on such a 
high level that HASHEM could not command the Children of Israel to seek such a rung.

The closeness to HASHEM which resulted from this Divine service “dedicated the sanctuary,” 15 endowing it with the potential to inspire others to similar heights. For this reason, 
our Torah reading begins by mentioning “the death of the two sons of Aharon, when they drew close 
to HASHEM.” The Torah reading focuses on the Divine service of Yom Kippur, the day on 
which everyone “draws close to HASHEM.” As an introduction, the Torah cites the closeness achieved 
by Aharon’s sons, for their act opened a channel enabling all Israel to connect to HASHEM with such 
intensity.

**TWO LESSONS, TWO NAMES**

In retrospect, the Divine service of Aharon’s sons provides us with two lessons: a) a positive one that 
everyone has the potential to draw as close to HASHEM as they did; and b) a negative one that such 
service alone lacks the vital element of shuv, application within the context of our world.

There are some who refer to this Torah reading as Acharei and others who call it Acharei Mot. 16 It is 
possible to say that the use of one name or the other depends on which of the dimensions is chosen 
for emphasis.

*Acharei* means “after.” The height of connection reached by Aharon’s sons generated the potential for 
similar closeness in the Children of Israel “afterwards”. *Acharei Mot* (“after the death of”), by contrast, 
places the accent on the negative outcome that resulted from the failure to complement closeness to 
HASHEM with a commitment to develop an awareness of Him in this material world. 17
A SINGLE-MINDED BOND

Lubavitch custom is to call the Torah reading Acharei, highlighting the closeness with HASHEM that can be achieved by everyone. For the core of every soul is at one with HASHEM, inseparably linked. This bond surpasses that established through the observance of mitzvot, for although mitzvot create a bond between the commanded and the Commander, the two remain separate entities. In essence, however, the Children of Israel and HASHEM are absolutely at one, and this is the level of consciousness which surfaces on Yom Kippur.18

On this plane, a Israelite’s obedience to HASHEM is not a matter of choice for which there is reward or punishment but a purely natural response, a simple expression of the inner self. As Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev would say, it is not a commitment to observance which prevents us from eating on Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, which of us wants to eat?! And from Yom Kippur, this connection can be continued Acharei, “afterwards,” shifting the entire spectrum of observance to a higher level. The inner connection between ourselves and HASHEM can suffuse every aspect of life. When it does, the struggle of day-to-day existence cannot threaten dedication to the Eternal, for in this state, a mortal is continuously connected to HASHEM, with no possibility of separation.

Mankind as a whole will experience such continuous connection in the Era of the Redemption, when the Divine which permeates the world will be revealed: “The world will be filled with the knowledge of HASHEM, like the waters that cover the ocean bed.”19 Surrounded by manifest Divinity, mankind will naturally, and spontaneously choose to obey His voice.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Rashi, commenting on Leviticus 9:23.


3. Ibid.


5. Ibid.: 3.

6. In his commentary to this verse, based on Toras Kohanim, commenting on Leviticus9:24; Midrash Tanchuma, Shemini, sec. 1, et al.

7. Toras Kohanim, commenting on Leviticus 10:1; Vayikra Rabbah 12:1, 20:6,8,9, et al.

8. Moshe represented the embodiment of the attribute of truth (Midrash Tanchuma, Shmos, sec. 28). As such, he did not make this statement out of humility, but rather, as an honest appreciation of the spiritual level of Aharon’s sons.

9. One of the interpretations he offers to Leviticus 16:1.

10. See the maamar entitled Acharei, Sefer HaMaamarim 5649, p. 237ff and Likkutei Sichos, Vol. III, p. 987ff. See


12. On this basis, we can understand our Sages' statement (Avos 4:22): “Against your will, you live.” The natural desire of a Jew's soul is to abandon material existence and cling to G-d. Living in this world is thus “against your will” contrary to this desire. The soul remains within the body only out of a commitment to fulfill G-d’s will. See the commentary to this mishnah in In the Paths of Our Fathers p. 141 (Kehot, N.Y., 1994).

13. The Hebrew word for sin, chet, can also be rendered as “lack.” (See I Kings 1:21.)

14. The Or HaChayim explains that this concept is underscored by the opening verse of our Torah reading (Leviticus 16:1): “And G-d spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon, when they drew close to G-d and died.” Why does the verse say “and died”? To emphasize the negative dimension of their service. The closeness they achieved was desirable, but “they died” without advancing G-d’s purpose in creation.

15. In this context, the death of Aharon’s sons can be compared to a sacrifice, for they gave up their lives to cling to HASHEM.

16. See the names of the Torah readings in the Rambam’s Seder Tefilot L’kol HaShanah, at the conclusion of Sefer Ahavah.

17. Within this context, the connection can be drawn between the mention of Aharon’s sons and the description of the sacrificial service of Yom Kippur in the remainder of the Torah reading. On Yom Kippur, the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies, drawing close to the Divine Presence. He must remember the importance, not only of entering the Holy of Holies, but of departing, and drawing this spiritual closeness into everyday life.

18. This level of connection transcends ratzu and shuv, uniting one with HASHEM in a simple and constant bond. See the essay entitled “A Time to Take Stock,” Timeless Patterns in Time, Vol. II, p. 147ff.


Adapted from
Likkutei Sichot, Vol. XXXII, p. 98ff;
Sefer HaSichot 5750, p. 428ff