

An Entire Nation of Brothers and Sisters

Shabbat Shemini 5780

I.

The tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu, on the very day of the inauguration of the Mishkan and the manifestation of Divine glory, on the very day of their elevation to the position of kohanim, on the very day of their father's assumption of the position of Kohen Gadol, expiated for his role in the sin of the Golden Calf, is as shocking and sobering a turn of events as anything we have in all of the Biblical narrative.

For the immediate members of the family, especially Aharon, and younger brothers Elazar and Itamar, the utter shock and horror of the loss of two sons and brothers, and on that day in particular, is compounded by the fact that they are unable to engage in any mourning whatsoever, due to the sanctity of the day of their inauguration. Moshe warns his brother and nephews that they may not rend their garments, and they may not even leave the Mishkan, to provide proper *kevod ha-met* by escorting their beloved departed ones from the sacred grounds. It is a tragedy within a tragedy.

II.

In these difficult, and often, dire days, with staggering losses all around us, we must not lose sight of the multilayered dimensions of this calamity. We must recognize not only the quantitative dimensions of the pandemic, but the human elements as well. I do not refer only to the loss of each person, which our Sages understood was the loss of an entire world, but just as much to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

For each one of us, when we privately contemplate our moments of tragic loss, we may often think of the meaning that we derived from being present in final weeks and days, of hands held, of songs sung, of meaning which we found in final conversations.

During this pandemic, almost none of this is possible.

For each one of us, when we privately contemplate our moment of tragic loss, we think of a shiva, of meaningful visits, of stories that were shared that touched us and made us realize that the people that were so dear and beloved to us were appreciated by others as well, and how this brought us no small measure of comfort.

During this pandemic, so much of this is not possible either.

These are the tragedies within the tragedy.

III.

Despite the immense challenges, we are not helpless. Even as he issues his warning to Aharon and his nephews, Elazar and Itamar, Moshe concludes his message with some of the most sublime words, in my opinion, in all of the Torah: ואחיכם כל בית ישראל יבכו את השרפה אשר ה' שרף ה', 'your brothers, the entire House of Israel, will cry for [those] consumed in the fire which the Lord burned.'

Moshe is signalling a critical shift in the paradigm of mourning which was necessary on this day. If the immediate family, the actual biological brothers, and father, for that matter, were stifled in their capacity to mourn the terrible tragedy, the notion of family itself must change. The entire Jewish people are defined as the "brothers" of the fallen, and they will cry and mourn for Nadav and Avihu, for, in this moment of tragedy, every single Jew is defined as a member of "the entire House of Israel." Our familial bonds enlarge and expand to enable the mourning to be transferred from the immediate, biological family to the national, covenantal community.

IV.

It seems to me that this is precisely the shift which we must all undergo. To be sure, there is little that any of us can do to alleviate the terrible pain and suffering of family members deprived of spending precious last moments with their loved ones, but in the absence of a classical shiva format, we must all rededicate ourselves to the notion that we are an entire nation of brothers and sisters, and mourn along with the families. In a practical sense, we must do what we can over the phone and Zoom, through letters and emails.

And yet, this sense of shared mourning must transcend the immediate and practical realm. When Moshe told Aharon and his sons that 'your brothers, the entire House of Israel' would weep for the terrible loss, he was signalling a shared sense of pain and suffering, a shared sense of loss and grief, a shared sense of the terrible shock of the loss of two men, destined for greatness, in the prime of their lives.

For those in our community who have lost their loved ones, this is perhaps the greatest solace we can provide. They must know that their loss is not theirs alone. We must endeavor to learn about those who have departed, and ensure that the families know that their loss is felt deeply. We must function, as we did on that most sacred yet tragic day, when the Mishkan was inaugurated but the sons of Aharon were consumed, as a cohesive and unified House of Israel, a nation of brothers and sisters.

