

FOUR MENTIONS OF DEATH

Acharei Mot 5779

I.

Our *parashah* this morning began by placing the laws that follow – regarding the Kohen Gadol and the *avodah*, the service, on Yom Kippur – in the moments following the death of Aharon's sons. But it's not just a quirk of the *parashah* here because, in total, the Torah references the deaths of Nadav and Avihu four times: twice in *Sefer Vayikra* and twice in *Sefer Bamidbar*. And I believe that each reference bears a message for us in this dark time. A time when we are reeling from another shooting in a *shul*, unable to process the news we saw as Yom Tov ended; and also the Shabbat in between Yom Hashoa, one of the days we mourn those murdered in the Holocaust, and Yom Hazikaron, the day we mourn those who died defending the State of Israel and those murdered because of their life in – and love for – Israel.

I want to begin with the deaths of Nadav and Avihu recorded in the 10th chapter of *Vayikra*. Following their deaths, we read what, for me, is one of the most powerful and moving verses in the Torah:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן הֲוֵאֲ אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה | לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל-פָּנָי כָּל-הָעָם
אֶכְבֵּד וַיִּדָּם אַהֲרֹן:

Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD meant when He said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.” And Aaron was silent (Lev. 10:3).

It's not exactly clear what Moshe is trying to do here. Is he explaining God's actions? Is he trying to comfort Aharon by appealing to a unique holiness in Nadav and Avihu? Either way, Aharon's response is clear: *vayyiddom Aharon*, “he was silent.”

There is an urge when evil confronts us to explain it. To try and give it meaning. That's what Moshe is doing. The natural, human response to evil. But there's a problem. Because, unlike all of us, Moshe has a direct line to God. He can understand God's ways and simply ask Him to explain things. He's a prophet. We are not. Aharon is like us, a priest. The Torah refers to all of us as a *mamlechet kohanim*, “a kingdom of priests,” and not a *mamlechet nevi'im*, “a kingdom of prophets,” and so it is the actions of the first priest, Aharon, that is our model: silence. There is nothing we can

say – there is nothing we should say – in response to the horrors this past Shabbat. Confronted by evil before his eyes, Aharon was silent, *vayyiddom Aharon*.

II.

But even though there is nothing to say, there is something to do. As Rav Soloveitchik put it perfectly in *Kol Dodi Dofek* – his 1956 Yom Haatzmaut address which grapples with evil – and Lord Sacks articulates in friendlier English:

The oldest question in religion is: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” But there are two ways of asking this question. The first is, “Why has God done this to me?” Never ask this question, because we will never know the answer. ... But there is another way of asking the question. ... How is [God] calling on me to respond?” Asking it this way involves looking forward, not back. “Why did God do this?” is the wrong question. The right one is: “How shall I live my life differently because this has happened?” (*Letters to the Next Generation*, 31)

Evil spurs us to act. This is the lesson of the second mention of the death of Nadav and Avihu, the one we read this morning. Aharon must dedicate himself to his service, to the *mishkan*. He has nothing to say and he knows no reason why, but he knows what he must do. And Aharon’s action this week was echoed by Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, the heroic rabbi of the Chabad of Poway, who wrote in an op-ed in *The New York Times*:

From here on in I am going to be more brazen. I am going to be even more proud about walking down the street wearing my *tzitzit* and *kippah*, acknowledging God’s presence. And I’m going to use my voice until I am hoarse to urge my fellow Jews to do Jewish. To light candles before Shabbat. To put up *mezuzas* on their doorposts. To do acts of kindness. And to show up in synagogue – especially this coming Shabbat.

Just like Aharon, we must double our efforts in the wake of evil towards our *mikdash me’at*, our miniature Temple – this *shul* – and the *mitzvot*.

III.

The third mention of Nadav and Avihu's deaths, in *sefer Bamidbar*, is found in a census and its results. And so, when listing the line of Aharon, we read the following verses:

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן | נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא אֶלְעָזָר וְאַיִתְמָר: אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן
הַכֹּהֲנִים הַמְשֻׁחִים אֲשֶׁר-מִלֵּא יָדָם לְכַהֵן: וַיָּמָת נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא לְפָנֵי יְהוָה בְּהִקְרֹבם אֲשֶׁר
זָרָה לְפָנֵי יְהוָה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי וּבָנִים לֹא-הָיוּ לָהֶם וַיְכַהֵן אֶלְעָזָר וְאַיִתְמָר עַל-פְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן
אֲבִיהֶם:

These were the names of Aaron's sons: Nadab, the first-born, and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar; those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests who were ordained for priesthood. But Nadab and Abihu died by the will of the LORD, when they offered alien fire before the LORD in the wilderness of Sinai; and they left no sons. So it was Eleazar and Ithamar who served as priests in the lifetime of their father Aaron (Num. 3:2-4).

Not only is the context different but also the tone. Time has passed and some processing has begun. And so, the Torah calmly restates the dramatic and panic-stricken events that follow the deaths of Nadav and Avihu: that Elazar and Ittamar, Aharon's other sons, become priests in the stead of their brothers. In other words, things must continue. Others must take the place of those who have been lost.

This applies to both the horror of this past week and *yemei Hashoa ve-hazikaron*: others must step into the place of those who were lost. The commitment of Lori Gilbert Kaye, *hashem yikom damah*, to her shul must be met with our own commitment. The vibrancy of European Jewry now lost must be replaced by a greater vibrancy in other Jewish communities throughout the world. And the love of the State of Israel lost through the deaths of war and terror must burn brighter in our own hearts.

IV.

The final mention of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu occurs at the back-end of *Sefer Bamidbar*. Here, they are once again mentioned on a census. Only, this time, it is the new generation of the Jewish people preparing to enter the Land of Israel following their almost-forty year wandering in the wilderness. Once again, the names of Nadav and Avihu appear. Why?

It teaches us something most strongly about the Holocaust, an event now three generations ago: the memories of those lost must be carried by the people wherever they go. There are less and less people around with memories of what happened. The typical Yom Hashoa service now contains a speaker who was a small child during the Holocaust. And so, the task is upon us to preserve those memories. To keep them alive. To remind ourselves what happens when hate is allowed to run free. The silence of Aharon is our response to last week, but our response to last century must be more vocal than ever before.

As I stood last Shabbat making a *kel maleh* for those murdered in the Holocaust and the service-people of *Tzahal* and victims of terror, further hate was only a few hours away on the other side of the country.

Hashem yikkom damam – may God avenge the spilled blood of all those who have died for being Jewish.