

The Difference between Communal Leaders and Public Servants

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Rabbi Yosie Levine

The Jewish Center

On our way back from our family trip to Israel this winter, I was reminded that – on Elal – the little numbers and letters that appear on your boarding pass telling you where to sit are treated more as rough suggestions than strict seat assignments. I think over the course of the flight, around 11 different people switched in and of the seat next to me. One of those people was an 8 year old girl named Shirley. She explained to me that she had been in Israel for two weeks to celebrate her brother's bar mitzvah. A tad on the precocious side, she began to ask me about my family and my trip.

“So what did you do while you were there,” she said. “Did you go surfing?”

“No,” I said.

“Well did you go ATV-ing?”

“No,” I said.

“Well did you go zip-lining?”

“No,” I said.

“So what did you all week,” she asked incredulously, “sit on the beach?”

One of the great mysteries in the Torah is the confounding episode we read in our parsha this morning. Nadav and Avihu bring an offering to the Temple and are summarily punished with death. Dozens of explanations have been propounded by the commentaries over the years to try to explain just what happened.

This morning, I want to share with you a radical reinterpretation of our parsha – an explanation that reshapes the very way we conceive of the entire Nadav and Avihu narrative. But it doesn't come from a radical source; it comes from Rashi.

You see, our parsha is not the first time that we're introduced to Nadav and Avihu as actors on the stage of Jewish history. They appear on the scene once before. It's at the end of פרשת משפטים. It's a flashback to Matan Torah. We know of course that Hashem tells Moshe to go up to the top of Har Sinai. And we know that the nation is commanded to remain at the foot of the mountain. What often gets less attention is the fact that there's a small middle group that's neither with Moshe nor with the people (Ex. 24:1-2):

ואל משה אמר עלה אל יקוק אתה ואהרן נדב ואביהוא ושבעים מזקני ישראל והשתחויתם מרחק:
ונגש משה לבדו אל יקוק והם לא יגשו והעם לא יעלו עמו:

Aharon, Nadav, Avihu and 70 elders accompany Moshe up the mountain, but at some point they part ways – Moshe continues and the group remains somewhere in the middle.

But something goes terribly wrong. The text is sparse and even cryptic: (24: 11)

(יא) ואל אצילי בני ישראל לא שלה ידו

Someone did something to warrant punishment, but the punishment isn't delivered.

Rashi, based on the Midrash, pieces it all together and tells us the ones in the wrong here were none other than Nadav and Avihu.

רש"י שמות פרק כד

נתחייבו מיתה, אלא שלא רצה הקב"ה לעררב שמחת התורה, והמתין לנדב ואביהוא עד יום חנוכת המשכן.

Nadav and Avihu incurred the death penalty at this moment. But God doesn't want to sully the celebration of the Torah by punishing them now, so he temporarily stays their execution.

The narrative we read this morning – the seemingly inexplicable death of Nadav and Avihu for an unspecified offense – is indeed inexplicable. Whatever minor infraction they commit certainly doesn't warrant such a severe penalty. Rashi is arguing that their sin of the fire pans is but a pretext to punish them for a violation that occurred many months earlier.

Divine justice, says Rashi, isn't always dispensed immediately. Sometimes it's deferred.

But if Rashi has solved one problem, he has created another. Let us accept the sin of Nadav and Avihu in our parsha is not as egregious as we had imagined. And we understand of course that in the end בקרובי אקדש means that these two great leaders are held to a higher standard and punished more harshly because of the stations they occupy. But just what was their mistake back at Har Sinai?

The Midrash fills in the gap:

אומרים עוד שני זקנים הללו מתים ואנו נוהגים שררה על הציבור. (ויקרא רבה כ.)

When they were singled out to join Aharon and Moshe and ascend that holy mountain, Nadav and Avihu noticed that Yehoshua, Elazar and Itamar were absent. Thus, they reasoned, it must surely be us who will take over the leadership of this nation when Moshe and Aharon pass on.

It was for this over-ambitious calculation that Nadav and Avihu are faulted and ultimately punished.

It's all a question of perspective. How does one react when he finds himself inserted into a position of power?

Who could put it better than Rabban Gamliel?

When he decided to place to the two great sages, ר' אלעזר חסמא and ר' יוחנן בן גודגדא at the head of the academy, they ran away – afraid of accepting a position that would accord them too much כבוד. At which point Rabban Gamliel told them (הוריות י.):

כמדומין אתם ששררה אני נותן לכם? עבדות אני נותן לכם.

“Do you think by leadership I mean to give you authority? I mean to give you servitude.”

It was on this point that Nadav and Avihu fell short.

Instead of looking down at the people from their perch on high, they should have been looking up at Hashem for guidance and inspiration. Instead of dreaming about their personal aspirations

to climb the ladder of national authority, they should have been envisioning ways to use their influence to serve the good of the Jewish people.

Unchecked, this fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of leadership would have spelled disaster for the Jewish people. In their death, Nadav and Avihu serve as an eternal reminder: It's the responsibility of the Jewish leader to see the world through the lens of communal advancement rather than through the lens of personal ambition.

On Wednesday night, we'll celebrate Yom Haatzmaut – a day that came about because our people were blessed with leaders who appreciated this ancient Jewish value. The State of Israel came into being because of men and women whose watchwords were responsibility and opportunity.

How marvelous – that thanks to them – little girls without a care in the world – can visit the Jewish state in 2012 at the drop of a hat and talk about it as if it the reality had always been so.

Part of what we celebrate is not just Israel's declaration of independence, but the miraculous capacity for that independence - and for the state of Israel - to survive and thrive. There's an American chapter to the story which is so widely known among one generation that it may surprise us that it is decidedly unknown among the younger generation.

Recognizing that so many of our future leaders are sitting in the room, I share it with you this morning.

Eddie Jacobson was the son of impoverished Lithuanian Jewish immigrants who moved from the Lower East Side to Kansas City at the turn of the last century. He met Harry Truman when the two reported to basic training at Fort Sill, near Lawton, Oklahoma, with a unit of soldiers from the Kansas City area during World War I. After the war, they opened a haberdashery together and remained life-long friends.

Fast forward to 1948. Harry Truman has become President. And Jacobson had contacted his old friend to try to persuade Truman to meet with Chaim Weizmann, the president of the Jewish Agency for Palestine and the World Zionist Organization. But Truman wouldn't have it. As Truman once recounted to Yehuda Avner, he had no interest and was upset when Eddie barged unannounced into the Oval Office: "His Zionist friends had been badgering me to no end," Truman said. "Some were so disrespectful and mean to me I didn't want any more truck with them. Many chose to believe that their Zionist program was the same as my US Palestine policy. It was not."

He said, "My patience was being drawn so tight that I didn't want to see any more Zionist spokesmen. That's why I had put off seeing Dr. Weizmann. He had come to the States especially to meet me. Eddie was insistent I see him right away. I told him that if I saw Dr. Weizmann it would only result in more wrong interpretations of my Palestine policy. I'd had enough of that."

At some point in the course of their conversation, Eddie waved to a little statue of Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office and said, "Your hero is Andrew Jackson. I have a hero, too. He's one

of the greatest Jews alive. I'm talking about Chaim Weizmann. He's an old man and very sick and he's travelled thousands of miles to see you. And now you're putting him off. This isn't like you, Harry."

After looking out the window and back at Eddie, Truman said, "You win. I'll see him."

Dr. Weizmann met with the president for over an hour. He told him that the choice for the Jewish people was between statehood and extermination. Truman assured him of his support.

When Truman reflected back on May 14th, 1948, he said:

"I knew what I had to do. I had to handle those stripe-pants boys, the boys with Harvard accents. Those State Department fellows were always trying to put it over on me about Palestine, telling me that I really didn't understand what was going on there and that I ought to leave it to the experts. Some were anti-Semitic I'm sorry to say. Dealing with them was as rough as a cob. The last thing they wanted was instant American recognition of Jewish statehood. I had my own second thoughts and doubts, too. But I'd made my commitment to Dr. Weizmann. So on the day the Jewish state was declared, I gave those officials about thirty minutes notice what I intended to do, no more, so that they couldn't throw a spanner into the works. And then exactly eleven minutes after the proclamation of independence, I had my press secretary Charlie Ross issue the announcement that the United States recognized Israel. And that was that."

When one sees access to power – not as the path of personal ambition – but as the opportunity to advance the greater good, one can be an Eddie Jacobson. One can be a Harry Truman. And one person can change the course of history.

Today we're blessed to be celebrating Andrew's bar mitzvah. In our community, the Haberman name has been synonymous with leadership and generosity for generations. Andrew took his first step this morning by leading us with his flawless laining and it's our great hope that he will take many more steps toward becoming a great Jewish leader who sees every mitzvah as an opportunity to serve the Jewish people.

Most of us grew up thinking of America as the land of opportunity. But we have witnessed no greater miracle and experience no greater opportunity than מדינת ישראל.

להיות עם חפשי בארצינו

To be a free nation in our land is a blessing of incalculable magnitude. Every time put our own needs second to those of someone else – every time we step up and accept a burden of communal responsibility, we honor the legacy of every man, woman and child who helped transform an ethos into a mission and a 2000 year old dream into a state. In their merit, may Hashem continue to rain down blessing upon Israel and her people:

ונתת שלום בארץ ושמחת עולם ליושביה

And let us say Amen.