

**OK Boomer**  
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**April 17, 2020**

“Ok Boomer” was a phrase much discussed before the coronavirus took over the news cycle. It expressed the frustration and impatience of the younger generations, millennials and gen x-ers, with the baby boomers who seemed to dominate their lives while being so out of touch. The words were dismissive and condescending—not an invitation to dialogue. They expressed real frustration with those who seemed to hold all the power and wealth, and to be unwilling to make changes.

Baby boomers in turn expressed their own frustrations, seeing the younger generations as coddled, unwilling to work hard, always asking for some concession. On line, there was sometimes a political tinge to the argument, with younger people holding the older generation responsible for the lack of action on climate change, and for the present politics, while boomers remembered their own generation gap with their parents and for some, their activism to change the world. Maybe you even experienced some of this yourself—on either side of the divide.

We might think of this generational friction as something fairly modern—after all, there was no real sense of adolescence or teenagers until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—but I wonder if there wasn’t tension between students and teachers, apprentices and masters, going back to ancient times, as the rabbis of the Talmud found generational conflict in this week’s Torah portion.

The portion begins with an eight-day dedication ceremony celebrating the completion of the *Mishkan*, the portable sanctuary. On the eighth day, Moses and Aaron come forward in pomp and ceremony, and with a great public flourish, God's presence fills the tabernacle. Shortly thereafter two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, enter the tabernacle and make their own, alien fire, resulting in their deaths.

Other than the use of this word, alien, the Torah doesn't explain to us, what Nadab and Abihu did to cause such harsh and immediate punishment. The story is followed by rules prohibiting the use of alcohol by priests while serving in the tabernacle, and that is one clue that commentators have grabbed onto. But in the Talmud, Sanhedrin 52a, we find a different explanation in the context of a discussion of burning as a form of the death penalty:

Apropos the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, an aggadic midrash on this subject is quoted: And it had already happened that Moses and Aaron were walking on their way, and Nadav and Avihu were walking behind them, and the entire Jewish people were walking behind them. Nadav said to Avihu: When will it happen that these two old men will die and you and I will lead the generation, as we are their heirs?

These words were so shocking that in a discussion of this midrash in Vayikah Rabbah, Rav Yudin says in the name of Rabbi Ayvo: Did they really say this aloud? And Rabbi Pinchas responds: No, they murmured it in their hearts.

The coronavirus has changed the discourse on generational issues. One pundit noted, we have gone from “OK Boomer” to “Boomer, are you OK?” The recognition that the virus is much more dangerous as you get older, and especially among those over 70 or over 80, has led to some very sweet moments as younger people have stepped forward to protect their elders. Being on the older side of the equation, though, there is something unsettling in being yelled at by my children if I am not, in their view, appropriately careful, but there is also something very tender in their concern. We saw that same kind of concern this year in zoom Passover seders, in the calls people are making to older family and friends, and in the loud objection to the idea of sacrificing grandparents for the economy. Generational conflict hasn’t precluded love and genuine caring.

Each of the seven weeks of the counting of the Omer has a special quality according to the mystics, and the quality of this week is *chesed*. It’s a hard word to translate. Sometimes you will see it in English as loving-kindness, mercy, or even loyalty. In the Bible it is God’s attitude toward us, which includes not giving up on us even when we humans are wayward. It is not about deservedness or reciprocity; that is why kindness towards the dead is called *chesed shel emet*, true *chesed*, because there can be no expectation of any benefit to ourselves. We see the word *chesed* in *gemilut chasadim*, the acts of kindness we do for other people, not for some transactional reward, but in fulfillment of the commandment to act lovingly toward our neighbors. It is this quality of *chesed* that I am seeing in the many compassionate acts today toward family and toward strangers.

When this is over, perhaps the generational divide will again be front page news, but for right now it is the kindness and appreciation shown one for the other that captures my attention.