

The Bravest and Most Vulnerable

This beginning of this week's *Haftarah* reading from the second Book of Samuel (6:1-7:17) has frightening resonance for us during this COVID-19 crisis.

2 Samuel 6: *David again assembled all the select men of Israel, thirty thousand strong. Then David and all the troops that were with him set out from Baalim of Judah to bring up from there the Ark of God to which the Name was attached, the name Adonai of Hosts Enthroned on the Cherubim. They loaded the Ark of God onto a new cart and conveyed it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Abinadab's sons, Uzza and Ahio, guided the new cart. They conveyed it from Abinadab's house on the hill, Uzzah walking alongside the Ark of God and Ahio walking in front of the Ark. Meanwhile, David and all the House of Israel danced before the Eternal to the sound of all kinds of cypress wood instruments, with lyres, harps, timbrels, sistrums, and cymbals. But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, **Uzzah reached out for the Ark of God and grasped it, for the oxen had stumbled.** The Eternal was angry at Uzzah and God struck him down on the spot for his indiscretion, and he died there beside the Ark of God. David was angry because the Eternal had inflicted a breach upon Uzzah; and that place was named Perez-uzzah, as it is still called.*

The pairing of this *Haftarah* reading with this week's Torah portion, *Shemini* (Leviticus 9:1- 11:47), is logical. In the Torah portion, Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu tragically die while offering an "alien" sacrificial offering without permission (10:1-3). Their deaths are not fully explained in the text though it is evident that they initiated a service without supervision, and that alcohol may have contributed to their mistakes is hinted in the fact that immediately after the tragedy, we find the following:

And the Eternal spoke to Aaron, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages. You must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean.

But how can we compare the two tragedies? While Nadav and Avihu intentionally erred and may, as some say, have been intoxicated, Uzzah perished in a selfless act while trying to save the Ark from tumbling over. Indeed, King David's reaction expressed the emotion of the moment. Just as the text (10:7) says that "The Eternal was angry at Uzzah (*Va'yichar af Adonai b'Uzah*)," so, too was David upset: "David was angry (*Vayichar l'David*)" because the Eternal had inflicted a breach upon Uzzah.

Uzzah died trying to stop a tragedy and by putting himself on the line, he was the one who suffered. His death reminds me of courageous men and women who put themselves at risk while trying to save us during this COVID-19 crisis. Those that work in the hospitals and clinics are face to face with this deadly virus. For all the gloves, masks and precautions, they are exposed and endangered. In turn, many of their loved ones are also endangered. The virus that afflicts the victims is not a curse from God. Rather, it is simply one of the many elements in our world that remind us of our vulnerability.

One subtle message of the *Haftarah* portion is that simply participating in a sacred or important job does not immunize a person from the inherent dangers. Doctors, nurses, medical staff, first responders and others who come face to face with COVID-19 are not rendered safe simply due to their brave and noble acts. No, they are quite at risk. And heroically they return day after day to save lives.

After Uzzah's death, David memorialized him. In time, we must make sure to faithfully remember and express our profound appreciation to those who risk everything trying to keep us alive.

B'vrakhah, With Blessing

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