

Nadav and Avihu Sacrificed Their Lives in Place of Their Father Aharon Who Yearned to Atone for the Cheit HaEigel

In this week's parsha, parshas Acharei, we read (Vayikra 16, 1): "וידבר ה' אל משה אחרי מות שני בני אהרן בקרבם לפני ה' ויאמר ה': אל משה דבר אל אהרן אחיך, ואל יבוא בכל עת אל הקודש מבית לפרוכת אל פני הכפורת אשר על הארון ולא ימות כי בענן אראה על הכפורת. בזאת יבוא אהרן אל ה'—הקודש בפר בן בקר לחטאת ואיל לעולה" Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons, when they approached before Hashem, and they died. And Hashem said to Moshe: Speak to Aharon, your brother—he may not come at all times into the Sanctuary, within the "parochet" (curtain), in front of the "kaporet" (cover) that is upon the "aron," and he will not die; for with a cloud I appear upon the "kaporet." With this shall Aharon come into the Sanctuary—with a bull, a young male of cattle, for a "chatat" and a ram for an "olah."

Rashi comments on the juxtaposition of the death of Aharon's two sons and HKB"H's warning to Aharon: "ואל יבוא בכל עת אל הקודש מבית לפרוכת-- he may not come at all times into the Sanctuary, within the "parochet." Based on the Toras Kohanim, Rashi explains that Aharon was prohibited from entering the Kodesh HaKodashim throughout the year with the exception of Yom HaKippurim; so that he would not die as his two sons did—in their attempt to offer the "ketores" (incense) in the Kodesh HaKodashim. Here are the words of Rashi:

וידבר ה' אל משה אחרי מות שני בני אהרן וגו', מה תלמוד לומר, היה רבי אלעזר בן עזריה מושלו, משל לחולה שנכנס אצלו רופא, אמר לו אל תאכל צונן ואל תשכב בטחב, בא אחר ואמר לו, אל תאכל צונן, ואל תשכב בטחב, שלא תמות כדרך שמות פלוגי, זה זרזו יותר מן הראשון, לכך נאמר אחרי מות שני בני אהרן.

ויאמר ה' אל משה דבר אל אהרן אחיך ואל יבוא, שלא ימות כדרך שמות בניו, ולא ימות, שאם בא הוא מת. כי בענן אראה, כי תמיד אני נראה שם עם עמוד ענני, ולפי שגלוי שכינתי שם, יזהר שלא ירגיל לבוא. זהו פשוטו. ומדרשו לא יבוא כי אם בענן הקטרת ביום הכיפורים.

What is the Torah teaching us? Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah provides a parable. It is comparable to a sick person who is visited by a doctor. He instructs him not to eat cold food and not to lie in a damp, chilly place. Another doctor comes and says to him, "Do not eat cold food, and do not lie in a damp, chilly place, so that you will not die like so-and-so died." This

one roused him more than the first. Therefore, the passuk states: "After the death of Aharon's two sons."

"And Hashem said to Moshe: Speak to Aharon, your brother—he may not come . . ." so that he will not die the way that his sons died. For, if he comes, he will die. For, I always appear there with My pillar of cloud; and because the revelation of My Shechinah is there, he should take care not to come there regularly. This is the simple interpretation of the passuk. According to the Midrashic interpretation, the passuk informs us that he may not come into the Sanctuary except with the cloud of the "ketores" on Yom HaKippurim.

Let us present several perplexing issues which are worth reconciling. Why did HKB"H admonish Aharon not to enter the Kodesh HaKodashim, so that he would not die in the manner that his sons died? Most certainly, even if his sons hadn't died, Aharon—the holy and pure Kohen Gadol—would have heeded HKB"H's warning to the letter of the law: "ואל יבוא בכל עת אל הקודש"-- he may not come at all times into the Sanctuary. So, why was it necessary for HKB"H to add the fact that he shouldn't die like his sons did?

Additionally, the passuk states: "אחרי מות שני בני אהרן"—after the death of Aharon's two sons. It does not identify them as Nadav and Avihu. In fact, the Zohar hakadosh (Acharei 56b) notes this oddity: "אחרי מות שני בני אהרן, רבי יוסי אמר, אחרי מות נדב ואביהוא מבעי ליה, מאי טעמא"—the passuk should have mentioned their names; we know that Nadav and Avihu were his sons.

They Approached Hashem and Died a Sudden Painless Death

Let us begin our inquiry by presenting the commentary of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh regarding the words: "After the death of Aharon's two sons, when they approached before Hashem, and they died." He explains that they come to teach us that Aharon's two sons died, because they got too close to Hashem; their lives expired due to their extreme devotion, consistent with the notion

of (Shir HaShirim 5, 6): **“נפשי יצאה בדברו”—my soul departed at His decree!** Here are his holy words of inspiration:

“דיבר ה' למשה דרך מיתתו, שהיתה על זה האופן בקרבתם לפני ה', פירוש שנתקרב לפני אור העליון בחיבת הקודש ובה מותו, והוא סוד הנשיקה שבה מתים הצדיקים. והנה הם שווים למיתת כל הצדיקים, אלא שההפרש הוא, שהצדיקים הנשיקה מתקרבת להם, ואלו הם נתקרבו לה, והוא אומרו בקרבתם לפני ה'.

ואומרו 'וימותו' בתוספות וא', רמז הכתב הפלאת חיבת הצדיקים, שהגם שהיו מרגישים במיתתם, לא נמנעו מקרוב לדביקות נעימות עריבות ידידות חביבות חשיקות מתיקות עד כלות נפשם מהם והבן. ובחינה זו אין מכיר איכותה, והיא מושללת ההכרה, לא מפי מין האנושי ולא מפי כתבו, ולא תושג בהשערות מושכל הגשם.

He explains that this is the concept of the “divine kiss” by which the tzaddikim die—“misan neshikah.” There is one difference, however; in general, the kiss approaches them (the tzaddikim); in this instance, they approached Hashem, as indicated by the passuk.

The Ohr HaChaim teaches us an important principle regarding the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Not only did their lives expire due to their extreme closeness and devotion to Hashem, but they sacrificed their lives willingly for the sake of “kedushas Hashem.” We must endeavor to explain why Nadav and Avihu saw fit to sacrifice their lives for the purpose of sanctifying the holy name on the day of the inauguration of the Mishkan.

Furthermore, we must attempt to reconcile the Ohr HaChaim’s incredible explanation—that their lives expired by virtue of a “divine kiss”—with the Torah’s explicit statement that they died, because they offered an alien fire—“aish zarah”—without being instructed to do so. For, it states in parshas Shemini (Vayikra 10, 1): **“ויקחו בני אהרן נדב ואביהוא אש מחתתו ויתנו בהן אש ושימו עליה קטורת: ויקריבו לפני ה' אש זרה אשר לא צוה אותם, ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל אותם וימותו—the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire-pan (“machta”), they put fire in them and placed incense upon it; and they brought before Hashem an alien fire that He had not commanded them. A fire came forth from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem.**

Additionally, we find another dimension regarding the extreme kedushah of Nadav and Avihu. In parshas Shemini, immediately after their deaths, Moshe reveals to Aharon (ibid. 3): **“ויאמר משה אל אהרן הוא—Moshe said to Aharon: Of this did Hashem speak, saying: “I will be sanctified through those who are close to Me, and I will be honored before the entire people”; and Aharon fell silent.** Rashi comments:

“הוא אשר דיבר וגו', היכן דיבר, (שמות כט-מג) ונועדתי שמה לבני ישראל ונקדש בכבודי, אל תקרי בכבודי אלא בכבודי. אמר לו משה לאהרן, אהרן אחי יודע הייתי שיתקדש הבית במידועיו של מקום, והייתי סבור או כי או כך, עכשיו רואה אני שהם

גדולים ממני וממך... ועל פני כל העם אכבד, כשהקב"ה עושה דין בצדיקים מתיירא ומתעלה ומתקלס, אם כן באלו כל שכן ברשעים, וכן הוא אומר (תהלים סח-לו) גורא אלקים ממקדשיך, אל תקרא ממקדשיך אלא ממקודשיך.”

“Of this did Hashem speak . . .” Where did He speak? “I shall meet there with Bnei Yisrael, and it shall be sanctified through My honor.” Do not read this word as בכבודי—through My honor—but rather as במכובדי—through My honored ones. Moshe said to Aharon, “Aharon my brother, I knew that the House would become sanctified through those intimate with the Omnipresent. I was under the impression that it would be either through me or through you. Now I see that they are greater than me and you . . .” and I will be honored before the entire people”: When HKB”H carries out judgment against the tzaddikim, He is feared and exalted and lauded; if it is so with these, it is all the more so with the wicked. Thus it says: “G-d is feared from Your Sanctuary.” Do not read ממקדשיך—from Your Sanctuary—but rather ממקודשיך—from Your sanctified ones.

This teaches us an amazing fact. From the very onset, even before the Mishkan was erected, HKB”H chose Nadav and Avihu to sanctify His name via their deaths on that momentous occasion. Conveying this point, HKB”H said to Moshe: **“I shall meet there with Bnei Yisrael, and it shall be sanctified through My honor.”** In other words, on the day that My Shechinah descends upon the Mishkan, I will be sanctified through My honored ones—who will die for the sake of “kedushas Hashem.” Moshe Rabeinu thought that He was referring to himself or to Aharon. When he realized that HKB”H chose Nadav and Avihu for this purpose, he concluded: **“Now I see that they are greater than me and you.”**

Thus, we are presented with a confusing contradiction with regards to the characters of Nadav and Avihu. On the one hand, as attested to by Moshe Rabeinu, they were greater than Moshe and Aharon. After all, HKB”H chose them to sanctify His name. This coincides beautifully with the Ohr HaChaim’s notion that they died by means of a “divine kiss”: **“בקרבתם לפני ה' וימותו—as they drew near to Hashem, they died.** On the other hand, the Torah attests to the fact that they offered an alien fire without being commanded to do so by Hashem.

The Sons of Aharon Only Died because They Taught a Halachah in the Presence of Their Teacher Moshe

I would like to propose a solution to this perplexing riddle based on the divergent viewpoints we find in the Midrash concerning the sin of Nadav and Avihu, resulting in their unusual death. The divine

Tanna, Rabbi Eliezer the great, teaches us a tremendous chiddush. The only reason they died was because they taught a halachah in the presence of their teacher, Moshe—as we have learned in the Gemara (Yoma 53a): “רבי אליעזר אומר, לא מתו בני אהרן אלא על שהורו הלכה בפני משה רבן, מאי דרוש, (ויקרא א-ז) ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח, אף Rabbi Eliezer says: **The sons of Aharon died only because they rendered a legal decision (halachah) in the presence of Moshe, their teacher. What did they expound? It states: “The sons of Aharon shall place a fire on the mizbeiach.” They inferred from this passuk that even though the fire comes down from heaven, there is a mitzvah to bring fire from ordinary sources.** Rashi explains: **“Even though they pronounced the correct ruling, they were punished for not obtaining permission.”** According to Rashi, Nadav and Avihu ruled correctly; nevertheless, it was considered a sin, because they did so in the presence of their teacher, Moshe.

At this point, we should make one point clear to avoid a misconception. We should not think that every time they sacrificed korbanos fire came down from the heavens. The Torah teaches us that on the inaugural day of the Mishkan, in the times of Moshe, a fire descended from above onto the copper mizbeiach (Vayikra 9, 24): “ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל על המזבח את העולה ואת החלבים”—**a fire went forth from before Hashem and consumed upon the mizbeiach the olah and the fats.** That fire remained on the mizbeiach until the times of Shlomo HaMelech. Then the fire moved to the stone mizbeiach in the Beis HaMikdash. It remained there until Menasheh the King of Yehudah removed the fire.

The source for this information is found in the Gemara (Zevachim 61b): “אש שירדה מן השמים בימי משה, לא נסתלקה מעל מזבח הנחושת אלא בימי שלמה, ואש שירדה בימי שלמה לא נסתלקה עד שבא מנשה—**the fire that descended from heaven in the times of Moshe did not depart from the copper mizbeiach until the times of Shlomo; and the fire that descended in the times of Shlomo did not depart until Menasheh came and removed it.** Rashi explains: **“לא נסתלקה, שבשעת המסעות כופין עליו בסכר ומניחין אותה במקומה. אלא בימי שלמה, שנסתלקה משם למזבח אבנים שעשה שלמה”**—**“it did not depart”: During the journeys (in the midbar), they covered it with a copper pot and left it in its place. “Until the times of Shlomo”: It departed that location and moved to the stone mizbeiach that Shlomo built.**

Hence, Nadav and Avihu inferred from the passuk: “ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח”—that even though fire descended from heaven on the day of the inauguration of the Mishkan and remained their constantly; “מצוה להביא מן ההדיוט”—**it is a mitzvah to bring fire from ordinary sources.** From Rashi it is evident that Nadav

and Avihu inferred correctly. So, when the Torah states that they offered: “אש זרה אשר לא צוה אותם”—it means that they were not instructed by Moshe to bring that fire; rather, they rendered the ruling themselves in the presence of their teacher. Therefore, the Torah describes it as: “אש זרה”—**an alien fire.**

In fact, this explanation presents two difficulties. Firstly, there is the question posed by the Maharsha on Rabbi Eliezer's question in the Gemara (Eiruvim 63a). How can it be suggested that they rendered a halachic decision regarding an issue that is stated explicitly in the Torah: “ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח”—**the sons of Aharon shall place a fire on the mizbeiach.** Furthermore, according to the Gemara (Eiruvim 54a), Moshe Rabeinu taught Aharon and his sons the entire Torah several times. That being the case, how can we claim that they taught a halachah in the presence of Moshe, when they were merely fulfilling a directive stated explicitly in the Torah?

Secondly, there is the question posed by Tosafos (ibid.). The passuk in question: “ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח” is stated in relation to the korbanos sacrificed by the kohanim on the outer, copper mizbeiach. There the fire came down from heaven to consume the korbanos, as it states (Vayikra 9, 24): “ותצא אש מלפני ה' ותאכל על המזבח את העולה ואת החלבים ויראו כל העם וירגזו ויפלו על פניהם”—**a fire went forth from before Hashem and consumed upon the mizbeiach the olah and the fats; the people saw and they praised and fell upon their faces.** Regarding those offerings, it states that even though fire descended from above, it was still a mitzvah to bring fire from a human source.

Now, in Torat Kohanim, we are taught that Nadav and Avihu entered the Kodesh HaKodashim to burn the “ketores.” Hence, HKB”H warns Aharon in this week's parsha not to enter the Kodesh HaKodashim as his sons did throughout the year except on Yom HaKippurim. This fact can also be deduced from the statement in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 52a): “שני חוטין של אש יצאו מבית קודש הקדשים ונחלקו לארבע, ונכנסו שנים בחוטמו של זה ושנים בחוטמו של זה—**two strands of fire emerged from the chamber of the Kodesh HaKodashim and split into four; two entered this one's nostrils and two entered this one's nostrils; and they consumed them.**

So, how is it possible to claim that they entered the Kodesh HaKodashim to offer the “ketores,” because they expounded on the passuk: “ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח, אף על פי שהאש יורדת מן השמים, מצוה להביא מן ההדיוט”? This passuk and exposition do not pertain to the Kodesh HaKodashim; the heavenly fire only descended to consume the korbanos offered on the outer mizbeiach. These questions are left unanswered, requiring further investigation.

Nadav and Avihu Were Consumed as a Form of Inauguration of the Sacrificial Service

I was struck by a wonderful idea which I would like to offer up on the royal table. First, let us provide the simple interpretation of Moshe's statement to Aharon after the deaths of Nadav and Avihu: **הוא "of this did Hashem speak, saying: "I will be sanctified through those who are close to Me, and I will be honored before the entire people." As mentioned above, Rashi comments: "כשהקב"ה עושה דין בצדיקים מתיירא ומתעלה ומתקלס, "אם כן באלו כל שכן ברשעים" when HKB"H carries out judgment against the tzaddikim, He is feared and exalted and lauded; if it is so with these, it is all the more so with the wicked.** It behooves us to understand why HKB"H, the King of Kings, chose to sanctify His name in this dramatic fashion--"בקרובי אקדש", through those close to Him—specifically on the day of the inauguration of the Mishkan—the day on which He rested His Shechinah on the Mishkan.

It is well-known that the purpose of building the Mishkan was so that Yisrael could offer korbanos there, as the Rambam writes (Hilchos Beis HaBechirah 1, 1): **"מזות עשה לעשות בית לה' מוכן להיות (שמות כה-ח) ועשו לי מקריבים בו הקרבנות, וחוגגין אליו שלוש פעמים בשנה שנאמר (שמות כה-ח) ועשו לי מקדש, וכבר נתפרש בתורה משכן שעשה משה רבינו והיה לפי שעה."**

Furthermore, we are familiar with the Ramban's opinion (Vayikra 1, 9) that the reason HKB"H commanded the sinner to bring a korban as his form of atonement was: **"כדי שיחשוב אדם בעשותו כל חטא לאלקיו בגופו ובנפשו, וראוי לו שישפך דמו וישרף גופו, לולא חסד הבורא שלקח ממנו תמורה, וכיפר הקרבן שיהא דמו תחת דמו, נפש תחת נפש, וראשי אברי הקרבן כנגד ראשי אבריו."** While doing all of these things, the person should recognize that he has sinned against his G-d in body and soul, and it would have been fitting for his blood to have been spilled and his body to have been burned—were it not for the chesed of the Creator, Who accepted a substitute from him. The korban provides atonement by providing its blood in place of his blood, its life in place of his life and the sacrificial animal's major limbs in place of his major limbs.

According to this understanding, HKB"H willingly accepts the sinner's offering only on the condition that he performs teshuvah for his transgressions. He must truly believe that he deserved to have his own blood spilled, were it not for HKB"H's mercy and kindness to accept the sacrificial animal as his substitute. David HaMelech expresses this fact as follows (Tehillim 51, 18): **"כי לא תחפוץ זבח ואתנה—for You do not desire a sacrifice, else I would give it; an olah You do not want. The sacrifices G-d desires are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O G-d, You will not despise."**

We can now appreciate why HKB"H chose to sanctify His name specifically on the inaugural day of the Mishkan with the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, as an example of: **"בקרובי אקדש ועל פני כל העם "אכבד".** He did not want Yisrael to erroneously think that now that the Mishkan was erected, they need not fear punishment from HKB"H for their transgressions any longer; for, they could now bring a korban to atone for their sins. Therefore, HKB"H arranged to have His name sanctified by exacting judgment from tzaddikim, such as Nadav and Avihu. In this manner, Yisrael would learn that: **"If it is so with these, it is all the more so with the wicked."**

Aharon Yearned to Sacrifice His Life to Atone for the Cheit HaEigel

Continuing on along this exalted path, let us endeavor to explain the deaths of Nadav and Avihu in greater depth. We know that Aharon HaKohen chose to make the eigel for the people rather than sacrificing his life for kedushas Hashem. Chur had already been killed for refusing their request to make the eigel. Aharon figured that if Yisrael killed him as well, there would be no hope of saving Yisrael or remedying their transgressions. This is explained by the Gemara (Sanhedrin 7a) elucidating the passuk (Shemos 32, 5):

"וירא אהרן ויבן מזבח לפניו, מה ראה. אמר רבי בנימין בר יפת אמר רבי אלעזר, ראה חור שזבוח לפניו, אמר אי לא שמענא להו, השתא עבדו לי כדעבדו בחור, ומיכיים בי (איכה ב-כ) אם יהרג במקדש ה' כהן ונביא, ולא הויה להו תקנתא לעולם, מוטב דליעבדו לעגל אפשר הויה להו תקנתא בתשובה."

"Aharon saw and built a mizbeiach before him." What did he see? Rabbi Binyamin the son of Yefes said in the name of Rabbi Elazar: He saw Chur slaughtered before him. He figured: If I do not do as they wish, they will now do to me what they did to Chur, and they will fulfill through me the words of the passuk (Eichah 2, 20): **"Should a kohen and a navi be killed in the Sanctuary of Hashem."** As a consequence, there will never be a remedy for them; therefore, it is preferable that they make an eigel—leaving open the possibility that they will have a remedy by means of teshuvah.

This is explained at greater length in the Midrash (V.R. 10, 3). It was for this reason that HKB"H chose to hand over the position of Kohen Gadol to Aharon. The Midrash elucidates the following passuk (Tehillim 45, 8): **"אהבת צדק ותשנא רשע על כן משחך אלקים אלקיך—You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore, Elokim, your G-d, has anointed you with oil of joy from among your peers."**

"בשעה שעשו ישראל אותו מעשה, בתחילה הלכו אצל חור אמרו לו (שמות לב-א) קום עשה לנו אלהים, כיון שלא שמע להן עמדו עליהם והרגוהו... ואחר כך הלכו אצל אהרן אמרו לו קום עשה לנו אלהים, כיון ששמע אהרן כן מיד נתיירא... אמר אהרן מה אעשה, הרי הרגו את חור שהיה נביא, עכשיו אם הורגים אותי שאני כהן, מתקיים עליהם המקרא שכתוב (איכה ב-כ) אם יהרג במקדש ה' כהן ונביא, ומיד הם גולין... אמר אהרן אם בניין

הן [את העגל] אותו הסירחון נתלה בהן, מוטב שיתלה הסירחון בי ולא בישראל... אמר לו הקב"ה לאהרן, אהבת צדק, לצדק את בני ושנאת מלחייבן, על כן משחך אלקים אלקיך, אמר לו, חייך שמכל שבטו של לוי לא נבחר לכהונה גדולה אלא אתה".

When Yisrael performed that ignoble deed, they originally approached Chur. When he refused their request, they attacked him and killed him. Next, they approached Aharon, asking him to make them a god. Hearing their request, Aharon became filled with fear. He deliberated as to how to proceed. They had already killed Chur, who was a prophet. If they now killed him, a kohen, they would in effect be fulfilling the passuk (Eichah 2, 20): **"Should a kohen and a prophet be slain in the sanctuary of Hashem,"** they would be exiled immediately. If they build the "eigel," they will be held accountable for this despicable act; it is preferable that I be held accountable and not Yisrael. HKB"H said to Aharon: For attempting to vindicate My children (**loving righteousness**) and not wishing to hold them accountable (**hating wickedness**), **your G-d anointed you**. From the entire tribe of Levi, only you will be chosen to fill the position of Kohen Gadol.

Thus, we have an explicit source indicating that Aharon was indeed ready and willing to be slain for the sake of kedushas Hashem, as Chur was. Yet, he prevented himself from doing so, in order to save Yisrael from extermination, even though it meant making the eigel. Now, in the aftermath of the cheit ha'eigel, Moshe Rabeinu came down from the mountain and gathered together all of shevet Levi. They took up their swords and killed every person that had sinned with the eigel. Then Moshe prevailed upon Yisrael to perform "teshuvah sheleimah"—total, sincere teshuvah. It is reasonable to conjecture, with the utmost fear and love, that at that point, Aharon yearned to sacrifice himself for the sake of kedushas Hashem, to atone for his part in the cheit ha'eigel. For, although his intent was l'shem shamayim—to spare Yisrael from annihilation—nevertheless, his actions resulted in a tremendous "chilul Hashem." Furthermore, the Gemara states (Yoma 86a) that there is no atonement for "chilul Hashem" until the day one dies.

This then is the significance of the passuk in parshas Shemini (Vayikra 9, 7): **"ויאמר משה אל אהרן קרב אל המזבח ועשה את חטאתך ואת מִזְבֵּיֶיךָ וְעֹלֶתְךָ וּכְפָר בְּעֶדְךָ וּבְעֵד הָעָם—Moshe said to Aharon: Approach the mizbeiach and offer your chatas and your olah and provide atonement for yourself and for the people.** Rashi comments: Moshe instructs him to approach the mizbeiach, **because Aharon was embarrassed and afraid to approach. Moshe said to him, "Why are you embarrassed? This is what you were selected for."** The Ramban explains that he was embarrassed and afraid to approach, because his participation contributed to the making of the eigel. We can suggest that this is the message Moshe was conveying to Aharon: **"למה אתה בוש לכך נבחרת?—Why are you embarrassed? This**

is what you were selected for:" On the contrary, precisely because you sacrificed yourself in order to save Yisrael from annihilation, you were chosen to be the Kohen Gadol and to atone for Yisrael.

Nadav and Avihu Sacrificed Their Lives in Place of Their Father Aharon

Now, let us accept the challenge and reconcile the difficulties presented earlier. The Tanna Rabbi Eliezer said: **"לא מתו בני אהרן אלא על שהורו הלכה בפני משה רבן, מאי דרוש, ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח, אף על פי מצוה להביא מן השמים, מצוה להביא מן ההדיוט"** **The sons of Aharon died only because they rendered a legal decision in the presence of Moshe, their teacher. What did they expound? It states: "The sons of Aharon shall place a fire on the mizbeiach."** They inferred from this passuk that even though the fire comes down from heaven, there is a mitzvah to bring fire from ordinary sources. Recall that the Maharsha asks what halachah did they render in the presence of their teacher, Moshe? The passuk specifically states that the sons of Aharon must bring fire. We also presented the question posed by the Tosafists. They note that the passuk in question deals with the korbanos offered on the outer mizbeiach and not with the burning of the incense in the Kodesh HaKodashim.

Based on what we have just discussed, let us propose an explanation. Nadav and Avihu—who were as great as Moshe and Aharon, according to Moshe Rabeinu's own testimony—perceived that their father Aharon yearned to sacrifice himself for the sake of kedushas Hashem, in order to atone for his part in the making of the eigel. They also perceived, as a result of their extreme kedushah, that HKB"H did not wish him to actually sacrifice his life; He wanted Aharon to serve Hashem with his entire being while alive in the capacity of Kohen Gadol to atone for Yisrael. Therefore, they decided to sacrifice their own lives in place of their father's; they entered the Kodesh HaKodashim to burn the ketores, even though they realized that doing so was accompanied by great peril.

Yet, from where did they know that they were permitted to take their father's place and sacrifice their own lives in Aharon's stead? This is the allusion Rabbi Eliezer cleverly provides us with: **"לא מתו בני אהרן אלא על שהורו הלכה בפני משה רבן"**—in other words, they rendered a halachah in the presence of their teacher, Moshe; they deduced something that Moshe had not revealed to them.

Rabbi Eliezer goes on to explain that they revealed that they were entitled to sacrifice their own lives in place of Aharon's: **"מאי דרוש, מצוה להביא מן השמים, ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח, אף על פי שהאש יורדת מן השמים, מצוה להביא מן ההדיוט"** In other words, Nadav and Avihu ascertained through their immense kedushah that when HKB"H said to Moshe: **"ונתנו בני אהרן—the sons of Aharon shall place a fire on the mizbeiach—HKB"H was actually alluding to the fact that the sons of**

Aharon themselves should sacrifice their own lives in place of Aharon; they should be consumed by fire in order to sanctify Hashem.

This, in fact, was their elucidation: “אף על פי שהאש יורדת מן השמים”—even though fire descends from the heavens to consume the korbanos on the mizbeich; “מצוה להביא מן ההדיוט”—nevertheless, they should also sacrifice themselves on the fire to be consumed as atonement for the cheit ha’eigel. Seeing as they ascertained this interpretation on their own—i.e. they did not receive this interpretation from their teacher, Moshe—it was considered as if they rendered a halachah in the presence of their teacher.

Now, when the passuk states: “ויקריבו לפני ה' אש זרה אשר לא צוה” **and they brought before Hashem an alien fire that He had not commanded them** explicitly to bring. For, in general, HKB”H does not desire human sacrifice; He desires that we bring korbanos from animals. Yet, they performed this deed in the category of “eino mitzveh v’oseh”—one who performs a mitzvah without being commanded to do so. For, they perceived that this was the will of HKB”H, as alluded to by His statement: “ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן אש על המזבח” **the sons of Aharon shall place a fire on the mizbeich.**

According to this interpretation, it turns out that from the perspective of the entire nation of Yisrael, it appeared as if they had rendered a halachic decision in the presence of their teacher—when they burned incense in the Kodesh HaKodashim. Because fire emanated from Hashem and consumed them, the name of Heaven was sanctified due to their act, a fulfillment of the words: “בקרובי אקדש”—**through those close to Me, I will be sanctified.** This stirred Yisrael and made them realize that if the tall and mighty are punished so severely how much more so would HKB”H punish them if they transgressed his precepts. In truth, however, Nadav and Avihu were holy and pure men who sacrificed their lives for the sake of kedushas Hashem, in place of their father Aharon. This enabled Aharon to dedicate the rest of his life to sanctifying Hashem in the capacity of the Kohen Gadol.

All of Yisrael Will Mourn the Conflagration because They Caused It with the Cheit HaEigel

Based on what we have learned, we can now appreciate the significance of Moshe’s declaration regarding the deaths of Nadav and Avihu (Vayikra 10, 6): “כל בית ישראל יבכו את השרפה אשר שרף ה'”—**the entire House of Yisrael will lament the conflagration that Hashem ignited.** As explained, Nadav and Avihu were consumed by fire, because they sacrificed their lives for the sake of kedushas Hashem in place of their father Aharon; this enabled him to serve as Kohen Gadol. Therefore, the entire nation of Yisrael that forced

Aharon to make the eigel, and thereby ultimately caused the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, mourned the conflagration ignited by Hashem.

This now sheds light for us on the following pesukim in this week’s parsha: “וידבר ה' אל משה אחרי מות שני בני אהרן”; here HKB”H refers to them specifically as: “שני בני אהרן”—**Aharon’s two sons**—rather than by their two names. He is teaching us that they died, because they sacrificed their lives in place of their father, Aharon. In this manner, they revealed their devotion to their father’s honor as “בני אהרן”. HKB”H goes on to prove that they willingly sacrificed their own lives in place of Aharon: “בקרבתם לפני ה' וימותו”—for they merited a gentle death by “divine kiss” due to their closeness to Hashem—as explained by the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh.

Therefore, HKB”H sees fit to warn Aharon: “ויאמר ה' אל משה דבר אל אהרן אחיך, ואל יבוא בכל עת אל הקודש מבית לפרוכת אל פני הכפורת אשר על הארון”—not to enter the Kodesh HaKodashim at any time he so desired, so that he would not die. HKB”H was not warning Aharon not to enter the Kodesh HaKodashim, so that he would not be punished as his sons were; for, Aharon would have obeyed the will of Hashem even without the threat or fear of punishment. Rather, HKB”H was admonishing Aharon not to follow in the footsteps of his sons—not to sacrifice his life for the sake of kedushas Hashem by entering the Kodesh HaKodashim as they did. For, HKB”H did not want him to die for the sake of kedushas Hashem; He wanted Aharon to remain alive and serve Him as the Kohen Gadol.

According to this interpretation, HKB”H’s statement: “ולא ימות”—**and he will not die**—is inseparable from His request that Aharon not die in the manner that his sons died. For this reason, HKB”H adds the following: “בזאת יבוא אהרן אל הקודש בפר בן בקר לחטאת”—if Aharon truly desires to sacrifice his life, he should do so by means of the sacrificial service. He should have in mind that everything being done to the korban should in fact be done to him; however, he should not actually sacrifice his own life.

Thus, we can conclude that Nadav and Avihu were truly holy and pure men, who sacrificed their lives for the sake of kedushas Hashem in place of their father, Aharon. It was not for naught that Moshe described them as being greater than him and Aharon. Due to their immense kedushah, they merited a special death; their lives expired with a “divine kiss,” as the Ohr HaChaim explains regarding the passuk: “בקרבתם לפני ה' וימותו”. As to the statement that they offered an alien fire which they were not commanded to bring, this refers to the fact that they sacrificed themselves of their own free will as those who are not commanded to perform a mitzvah but choose to do so nonetheless.

Donated by Family Madeb for the Refuah Shelimah of Lea bat Virgini

To receive the mamarim by email: mamarim@shvileipinches.com