



# Entry and Entitlement

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## Parashat Aharei Mot

This week's *parashah* describes the ceremonial procedure of the first Yom Kippur in the *mishkan*. Although we think of Yom Kippur as a yearly day of atonement, in the Torah, Yom Kippur is framed as a reaction to a very specific incident, the sin and death of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's eldest sons. The death of Nadav and Avihu is not only tragic, but also mystifying. Why is God so enraged by their offering of a **strange fire**?<sup>1</sup> Why does the fact that it was not requested make it so loathed? Were they not trying to come close to God? Is this not a gift?! The death of Nadav and Avihu is also deeply personal for us. We want to feel that we can be religiously creative, that we can bring God more than what God asks. When Nadav and Avihu die as a result of this attitude, it is terrifying because we identify with them. Nadav and Avihu are us. Not only that, but we identify them with the most religious version of ourselves, who we are when we want to meet God with genuine enthusiasm. Their death is both haunting and destabilizing.

Yet, Nadav and Avihu's sin also corresponds to the worst part of ourselves. They do not only reflect our virtuous desire to give; they also mirror our selfish desire to possess what is not rightly ours. A closer examination of their sin yields that Nadav and Avihu were not being thoughtful at all—just the opposite: they were thoughtless, careless, and disrespectful. Their action demonstrated that they thought of everything as theirs to give, which just barely masks their understanding that everything is also theirs to take. In their approach the world and everything in it belongs to them.

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<sup>1</sup> VaYikra 10:1.



In order to understand where Nadav and Avihu went wrong, we need to look at how the first Yom Kippur ceremony is designed to address and correct their misguided approach. In the very introduction to the laws of Yom Kippur we see Aharon atoning for the transgression of his two sons:

#### ויקרא טז:א-ב

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וַיִּמָּוֶתוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ וְאֵל יֵבֹא בְּכָל עֵת אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִבֵּית לְפָרֹכֶת אֶל פְּנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל הָאֹרֶן וְלֹא יָמוּת כִּי בְעֵנָן אֶרְאֶה עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת:

#### VaYikra 16:1-2

God spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons who died in their approaching before God. God said to Moshe, "Speak to your brother Aharon that he may not come at any time into the Holy, inside the divider, facing the cover of the Aron and he will not die; except for when I appear in a cloud on the cover."

God explains to Moshe that Aharon may only come into the Holy at a designated time. Only when God signifies through His cloud that Aharon is welcome may Aharon cross the divider. We can infer from this remedy that Nadav and Avihu's transgression was not the bringing of a strange fire mentioned in Parashat Shemini, but rather the fact that they entered the Holy of Holies uninvited in order to bring it. They did not respect God's space and the boundaries that He put into place. They felt that they could enter whenever they pleased. When Aharon only enters at the time that God designates and is respectful of that boundary, he shows that he is unlike his children. Aharon recognizes what they did wrong and will not, himself, repeat it. This does not explain, however, why Nadav and Avihu transgressed the way they did. Why was it not obvious to them that they could not enter the Holy whenever they so desired?

According to VaYikra Rabbah, the violation that Nadav and Avihu committed was not an isolated incident. It was part of a pattern that Nadav and Avihu had of not respecting God which began much earlier, at the revelation of Har Sinai. At the end of Parashat Mishpatim, God summons Moshe up the mountain to receive the *luhot*, the tablets inscribed with the law. Moshe was accompanied part of the way up by his brother Aharon, some of the elders of the people, and notably his nephews, Nadav and Avihu:

#### שמות כד:ט-יא

וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן נָדָב וְאַבִּיהוּא וְשִׁבְעִים מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבָנֹת הַסִּפִּיר וַיִּכְעֲצֻם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר: וְאֵל אֲצִילִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא שְׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיַּחֲזִזוּ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ:

**Shemot 24:9-11**

Moshe and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu and seventy of the elders of Israel ascended. They saw the God of Israel and beneath His feet was something made like a sapphire brick as blue as the sky itself. But He did not send forth His hand to the dignitaries of the children of Israel. They gazed at God and they ate and drank.

The *midrash* below identifies the unnamed dignitaries in verse 11, who were unharmed by seeing God, as Nadav and Avihu, who scaled the mountain in verse 9. And the *midrash* further explains that the reason why the Torah says that God did *not* send forth His hand to harm them is because they were, in fact, *deserving* of divine retribution. It is only because they were liable for the death penalty that it is noteworthy that God chose *not* to kill them. The *midrash* understands the conclusion of verse 11, where **they gazed at God and then ate and drank** as the reason why Nadav and Avihu deserved such a drastic punishment:

**ויקרא רבה (וילנא) פרשת אחרי מות פרשה כ**

ועוד מן הדא ואל אצילי בני ישראל [לא שלח את ידו] (שמות כד:יא). א"ר פנחס: מכאן שהיו ראויין להשלחת יד... ויחזו את האלהים כאדם שמביט בחבירו מתוך מאכל ומשתה... א"ר תנחומא: מלמד שפרעו את ראשיהן וגיסו לבם וזנו עיניהם מן השכינה.

**VaYikra Rabbah Aharei Mot 20:10**

And more from this verse, **But He did not send forth his hand to [harm] the dignitaries of the children of Israel** (Shemot 24:10). R. Pinḥas said: From here you know that they deserved [to be harmed]... **They gazed at God** (24:11) like a person who gazes at their friend while eating and drinking... R. Tanḥuma says: This teaches that they uncovered their heads and they allowed themselves to behave coarsely and satisfied their eyes with God's presence.

According to this *midrash*, Nadav and Avihu were not at fault for the fire that they brought at the dedication ceremony, but for the inappropriate and invasive attitude that they had, of which barging into the Holy of Holies was a continuation. Their sin was a product of their arrogance and sense of entitlement. They couldn't comprehend that there are things that they shouldn't know, that not everything is appropriate for them to see. Although God does invite them up the mountain and does reveal Himself to them, they should have piously averted their eyes.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The *midrash* continues to say that this is, in fact, what Moshe does when he encounters God's presence at the burning bush in Shemot 3. Moshe averts his eyes rather than gaze at God directly.



Nadav and Avihu's attitude of arrogance and privilege not only manifested itself as rudeness towards God; it was also expressed in a shockingly proprietary approach that they took towards other people. In Parashat BeMidbar, the Torah recounts the descendants of Aharon and includes Nadav and Avihu along with the fact that they did not have any children.<sup>3</sup> This *midrash* then suggests that their not having had children is another possible explanation for their sin:

### מדרש תנחומא (בובר) פרשת אחרי מות

...ועל ידי שלא היו להם בנים, וכתוב בו מיתה, שנאמר וימת נדב ואביהוא וגו' ובנים לא היו להם (במדבר ג:ד). אבא חנן אומר על ידי שלא היו להם נשים, וכתוב וכפר בעדו ובעד ביתו (ויקרא טז:ו). אמר ר' לוי שחצים היו הרבה, והיו אומרים איזו אשה הוגנת לנו, הרבה נשים היו יושבות עגונות<sup>4</sup> וממתינות להם, והיו אומרים אחי אבינו מלך, אבינו כהן גדול, אחי אמנו נשיא, אנחנו סגני כהונה, איזו אשה הוגנת לנו... ועוד מן הדא ואל משה אמר עלה אל ה' אתה ואהרן נדב ואביהוא (שמות כד:א), מלמד שהיו משה ואהרן מהלכין תחילה, ונדב ואביהוא הולכין אחריהם, והיו אומרים עוד ימותו שני זקנים אלו, ואנו נוהגים בשררה על הצבור תחתיהם...

### Tanhumah (Buber) Aharei Mot

"Because they did not have children," which is written next to [their deaths]<sup>5</sup> as it says, **Nadav and Avihu died... and they did not have any children** (BeMidbar 3:4). Abba Shaul says: Because they did not have wives, as it says [the Kohen] **will atone for himself and his household** (VaYikra 16:6, and because they were unmarried they would not have a household of their own—DW). R. Levi said: They were very pompous and they would say, "What woman is appropriate for us?!" And many women were sitting "chained" and waiting for them. And [Nadav and Avihu] would say, "Our father's brother is the king, our father is the High Priest, our mother's brother is a prince, we are high-ranking *kohanim*<sup>6</sup>—which woman is appropriate for us?"... And further from this verse: **He said to Moshe, "Come up to God, you and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu"** (Shemot 24:1). This comes to teach that Moshe and Aharon were walking first and Nadav and Avihu were walking behind them and they were saying, "Eventually these old men will die and we will be the authorities over the people in their stead."

Nadav and Avihu were the most eligible bachelors of the Jewish people at the time and they were quite aware of that status. So obsessed were they with their own pedigree that they could not imagine that any woman would be good enough for them. But this attitude also had a real damaging effect on others. The *midrash* describes the women of the generation as

<sup>3</sup> BeMidbar 3:4.

<sup>4</sup> In the version of this *midrash* in Pesikta deRav Kahana 6, the term here is עגומות meaning sad or depressed.

<sup>5</sup> It is also possible to read this as a rhetorical question, "Is it possible that since they didn't have children, death was written regarding them?!"

<sup>6</sup> The term *seganei kehunah* refers to their being first in line for the High Priesthood should Aharon die.

“*agunot*,” women who are “chained” and unable to marry anyone else. The word that the *midrash* uses to describe Nadav and Avihu’s arrogance, *shehatzim*, can also mean that they acted in an obscene way. They weren’t content to inappropriately satisfy themselves spiritually; they also felt at liberty to satisfy themselves physically at the expense of the freedom and happiness of the young women of Israel. These women were either legally<sup>7</sup> or socially bound to Nadav and Avihu, who ostensibly promised them that they would be their wives, but in fact did not have any such intentions. They acted in a proprietary way towards these women without any consideration for the reputation of these women, the feelings of these women, or their future.

Nadav and Avihu did, however, think about their own future and were salivating over the moment when their father and uncle would die, and they would take over their positions. As they are walking up the mountain about to see God’s presence, they are not humbled by the experience; to the contrary they are emboldened by the experience. They have the audacity to compare themselves to Aharon and Moshe and assume nonchalantly that this greatness would eventually be theirs. Of course, because they were so certain that this leadership and honor would obviously become theirs, they ended up not inheriting positions of authority.

The Talmud in Nedarim notices that this phenomenon is actually quite common. More often than not, the Rabbis found that they too had sons who should have inherited Rabbinic leadership, but did not, and they question why that is the case. Their answer might help us to further unpack Nadav and Avihu’s error and begin to lead us to a corrective:

#### תלמוד בבלי נדרים פא.

ומפני מה אין מצויין ת"ח לצאת ת"ח מבניהן? אמר רב יוסף- שלא יאמרו תורה ירושה היא להם. רב ששת בריה דרב אידי אומר- כדי שלא יתגדרו על הצבור. מר זוטרא אומר- מפני שהן מתגברין על הצבור. רב אשי אומר- משום דקרו לאינשי חמרי. רבינא אומר- שאין מברכין בתורה תחלה...

#### Talmud Bavli Nedarim 81a

And why do we not find that Torah scholars produce more Torah scholars from among their children? Rav Yosef said—So that they will not say [the Torah] is an inheritance to them. Rav Sheshet the son of R. Iddi says—So that they will not act presumptuous towards the community. Mar Zutra says—Because they arrogate power to themselves over the community. Rav Ashi said—Because they call people donkeys. Ravina says—Because they do not make the initial blessing over learning Torah...

<sup>7</sup> If they were in fact sexually intimate with these women, that could effect *kiddushin* and make the women exclusive to them.



According to the various opinions in the Talmud, the children of Torah scholars don't themselves become Torah scholars because they are arrogant, they think of the Torah as their inalienable right, and they don't appreciate it. This lack of appreciation is expressed beautifully in the opinion of Ravina who says that they do not make blessings over the study of the Torah. Blessings are, according to Massekhet Berakhot, the key to looking at God's whole world, every single day, as being a gift from God and not something that we deserve:

### תלמוד בבלי ברכות לה

ת"ר אסור לו לאדם שיהנה מן העוה"ז בלא ברכה. וכל הנהנה מן העוה"ז בלא ברכה- מעל... ר' לוי רמי-  
כתיב לה' הארץ ומלואה (תהילים כד:א) וכתיב השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם (תהילים  
קטו:טז)! לא קשיא- כאן קודם ברכה כאן לאחר ברכה.

### Talmud Bavli Berakhot 35a-b

Our Rabbis taught: It is forbidden for a person to benefit from this world without making a blessing and anyone who does so has misappropriated Temple property... R. Levi juxtaposed [two verses]. It is written, **to God is the earth and its fullness** (Tehillim 24:1) and it is also written, **the heavens are God's heavens and the earth was given to human beings** (Tehillim 115:16). [And he answers:] There is no contradiction here. [The first verse] is before one makes a *berakhah* and [the second verse] is after one makes a *berakhah*.

According to this *baraita* in Berakhot, the world does not belong to us, everything is God's. The whole world is His holy property and His place. Therefore when we take from the world without appreciating it, that is *me'ilah*, misuse of sanctified property which belongs to God. And R. Levi explains that the world is fundamentally God's, but that we can be granted it through understanding that it doesn't belong to us. By making a blessing and acknowledging that the world is not owed to us, then we are allowed to use it. Nadav and Avihu did not make this blessing, they did not have the approach that blessing—making expresses and reinforces. When they brought their gift to God, they did so in a way that was reflective of their generally arrogant, possessive, and unappreciative way of being in the world. They stole from God and then tried to regift it back to Him.

Unfortunately, the way that Nadav and Avihu acted in the *mishkan* and the attitude that they displayed there is not an attitude that is unique to them. They do, in fact, mirror us and the way that we often act in and interact with the world. The comparison is not flattering. We need to learn from their negative example to be grateful for the physical world and to treat ourselves as its custodians. We need to learn that we do not belong everywhere and not everything belongs to us. We also need to be careful not to act presumptuously towards other

people. Sometimes a paternalistic and proprietary approach can manifest as generosity and good intentions, but it needs to occur to us that we and our offerings might not be welcome. We need to knock before entering and tread gently, being respectful of the wishes of others and the wishes of God. We need to adopt the understanding that our presence, our opinions, even our help and good advice are not always appropriate. We need to step back and ask, “is this a gift for the recipient or am I burdening them with what I want to bestow?”

The world and everything in it belongs to God and is given to us through His love and grace. When we understand that, we bless Him and when we bless Him, we grow in our understanding of all that we do not own. We need to be attuned to how to behave appropriately towards God and towards one another, respecting Divine and interpersonal boundaries. When we act as entitled owners, we misunderstand our place in God’s world. The lesson of Nadav and Avihu is designed to heal us of that sense of ownership and replace it with a sense of gratitude.

Wishing you a Shabbat of respect and appreciation.

