



Moderating Enthusiasm for God:

Havdallah and Nadav and Avihu

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In Parashat Bemidbar, we see the critical importance of separation from the holy. This is directly connected to Havdallah, when we separate between the holy day of Shabbat and the rest of the week.

Three times in the *parashah*, God warns: “the stranger (זר) who draws near [to the Holy space or vessel] shall die” (Numbers 1:51; 3:10; 3:38). Citing one of these verses, Hillel taught: Even King David could not approach the holy.¹

This *parashah* also teaches us about the death of Aharon’s sons Nadav and Avihu, who approach the Holy space improperly with “strange fire” (אש זרה).² As a result of their unsanctioned approach to the holy space, they die. The *midrash* makes clear this link between Nadav and Avihu’s action to the general warning against approaching the holy:

¹ Talmud Bavli Shabbat 31a; Avot de-R. Natan B 29, ed. Schechter, p. 31a.

² This is one of four times in the Torah where their death is mentioned: Leviticus 10:1; 16:1; Numbers 3:4 and 26:61. See also I Chronicles 24:2. A *midrash* asks: Why is their death mentioned so often in the Torah? “This is to teach that the Omnipresent was troubled [over their death] because the children of Aharon were beloved [of God]” (Bemidbar Rabbah 2:23, ed. Mack, p. 73).



Midrash Tehillim 79:4, ed. Buber, p. 180b

“The stranger who draws near shall die.” Not just the stranger, but even the two holy sons of Aharon entered to make a sacrifice, and were burned.

מדרש תהלים (שומר טוב; בובר) מזמור עט, ד

"והזר הקרב יומת" (במדבר א, נא), ולא הזר בלבד, אלא שני בני אהרן הקדושים נכנסו להקריב ונשרפו.

We see a more detailed account of this story in Parashat Shemini (Leviticus 10:1-2). There, the Torah states that Nadav and Avihu brought the “strange fire” before God on the first day that the priests offered sacrifices in the newly dedicated *mishkan* (tabernacle), the physical structure meant to draw God and the Israelites closer together. Indeed, just one verse before Nadav and Avihu bring the strange fire, we read that a fire went out from God and consumed the sacrifice on the altar. The people reacted to this by shouting and prostrating their bodies (9:24). But Nadav and Avihu did not react that way. Instead, they rushed toward the altar with fire of their own. This was their undoing: the very same fire that consumed the sacrifices consumed them too.³

What led God to consume them with fire? Besides the phrase “strange fire,” the text is silent. By contrast, *midrashim* offer multiple possibilities of sins they committed that led to their death.⁴ However, one midrashic strand does not think that Nadav and Avihu sinned, *per se*. Rather, they were motivated by an overwhelming desire to draw near to God. But in their unbridled enthusiasm to connect to God, they crossed a line:

³ This similarity is drawn out in the parallel language the text uses to describe the consuming fire. In Leviticus 9:24, we read, “Fire came forth from before YHVH and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar...” Two verses later (Leviticus 10:2), we read: “Fire came forth from before YHVH and consumed them [Nadav and Avihu]...”

⁴ See generally Avigdor Shinan, “*Hata’eihem shel Nadav ve-Avihu be-Aggadat Hazal*,” *Tarbiz* 48 (1979), pp. 201-214.



Sifra Millu'im, section 1:32, ed. Weiss, p. 45b⁵

"The two sons of Aaron took..." (Leviticus 10:1). They were also in a state of joy [like the people]. When they saw the new fire [from God], they stood to add [their] love to [God's] love. "They took"—took means joy.

ספרא מסכתא דמילואים, פרשה א, לב

"ויקחו שני בני אהרן" - אף הם בשמחתם. כיון שראו אש חדשה... עמדו להוסיף אהבה על אהבה, "ויקחו" - אין קיחה אלא שמחה.

In this view, Nadav and Avihu were not sinners: they were simply unable to rein in their joy at experiencing God. As a result, they crossed into a holy space that they were forbidden to enter.⁶ R. Abraham Joshua Heschel described their fateful error as "their intense fervor and excessive love."⁷ The section in Vayikra that immediately follows this story of unrestrained enthusiasm for God's presence contains the command to separate holy and mundane:

Leviticus 10:10⁸

...for you must distinguish between the holy and the mundane, and between the unclean and the clean.

ויקרא י:

וְלִהְיוּ בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּבֵין הַחֹל וּבֵין הַטָּמֵא וּבֵין הַטָּהוֹר:

⁵ See also Vayikra Rabbah 12:2, ed Margiolith, pp. 256-7. For the positive view of Nadav and Avihu expressed in multiple places in Philo, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 634-635.

⁶ Entering the Holy of Holies is listed as a separate sin from that of bringing "strange fire." According to R. Yose Ha-Gelili, this was the fundamental sin that led to the death of Nadav and Avihu. See in Vayikra Rabbah 20:8, ed. Margolioth, p. 461 and Sifra Aḥarei Mot 2, ed. Weiss, p. 79b. This interpretation is based on Leviticus 16:1 ("בקרבתם לפני ה'" - when they drew close before God"). Menahem Haran claims that the Torah itself understood the holiest precinct as a place that only Aharon the High Priest, not even his children, could enter. See Menahem Haran, "Ketoret Maḥtot U-Ketoret Tamid," *Tarbiz* 26 (1957), p. 124.

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah As Refracted through the Generations*, trans. Gordon Tucker (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 194 (original text, vol. 1, p. 157). Tucker summarizes Heschel's view of this tradition: "an excess of enthusiasm, welling over from the enthusiasm of the people for the consecration of the Sanctuary." See p. 194, n. [7]. In one *midrash*, God says that Aharon's sons drew closer than anyone else, although they paid with their lives for this achievement. "I brought them inside all the separations, even closer than Moshe." Pesikta Rabbati 47, ed. Friedmann, p. 189b.

⁸ The previous sentence is a command from God to Aharon not to allow intoxicants near the Sanctuary. This gives rise to a midrashic tradition that claims that Nadav and Avihu were drunk when they brought their strange fire. See Vayikra Rabbah 20:9, ed. Margolioth, p. 463. Indeed, wine blurs boundaries, which is the opposite of the separation we are striving for around the holy.



This is the verse that serves as the source for our blessing in Havdallah:⁹

Blessed are You, YHVH, our God, king of the universe, ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם המבדיל בין
who separates between holy and mundane.¹⁰ קודש לחול...

Indeed, the separation between holy and mundane is the essence of the Havdallah blessing, appearing at the beginning and end of the short prayer. It is even reported (in Bavli Pesahim 103b) that R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi would recite only this line (without other separations, as in our current practice) as his Havdallah. This was the core of the ritual of separation after Shabbat.¹¹

How might we understand our Havdallah prayer in light of the reference to the story of Nadav and Avihu, and the commandment that follows asking Aharon to distinguish between holy and mundane? In my understanding, this could be read as a warning about the temptation to blur lines in the pursuit of connection with God. At its core, prayer is a quest for connection with God.¹² Oftentimes, our quest is thwarted. But sometimes we do experience an intense connection with the Divine in prayer settings. Havdallah is teaching us: this connection must be navigated with the utmost care; we cannot get carried away into a religious fervor that leads us to blur lines between holy and mundane. Nadav and Avihu lost sight of this

⁹ This link was recognized by a number of authorities, including: Rashi to Bavli Pesahim 104a, s.v. *ve-hoteim be-seder Bereishit*; *Siddur Rabbeinu Shlomo Mi-Germaiza*, ed. Moshe Hershtler (Jerusalem: Hemed, 1972), p. 185-6; *Abudraham Ha-Shalem*, p. 183; *Perushei Siddur Ha-Tefillah La-Rokei'ah*, vol. 2, p. 588. Compare also R. Yohanan's association of this verse with Havdallah in Bavli Shevuot 18b.

¹⁰ This text is already mentioned in Bavli Pesahim 103b. For the broader textual history of Havdallah, see Elie Kaunfer, "[Interpreting Jewish Liturgy: The Literary Intertext Method](https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/prayer-about-coming-closer)," D.H.L. diss. (New York: JTS, 2014), p. 114ff.

¹¹ This link to Leviticus 10:10 is strengthened by other versions of Havdallah that also include a separation between pure and impure, referenced in the end of the verse. For this version of Havdallah, see Bavli Pesahim 104a.

¹² See my previous essay on Parashat VaYigash, "Prayer is About Coming Closer," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/prayer-about-coming-closer>.



all-important distinction; instead of prostrating before God's presence, they rushed toward it, and were not careful about the fire they brought forth.¹³

The temptation to rush toward the holy must have been very strong in a world with God's presence beckoning from the *mishkan*, devouring offerings. What about today, in a reality without the *mishkan* or the Temple? In my experience, Shabbat can serve as that temptation. Shabbat is the time when we are brought closer to God, imitating the very rest that God enacted in the first week of creation. Shabbat prayer can feel more intense, and our connection to God may peak.¹⁴ Shabbat is a time of blurred boundaries, when things that seem distinct during the week can melt into a one-ness not otherwise experienced in daily life.

And yet, Shabbat cannot be our eternal state. We have to draw distinctions, and emerge from the closer connection of the seventh day back into the days of the week (literally: "mundane days - ימי חול").¹⁵ Havdallah is a blessing that marks this transition, and reminds us of these boundaries. We are not meant to be like Nadav and Avihu, so drawn to God that we can't see straight. We might experience aspects of that feeling, but we are meant to limit it, to draw boundaries.

This is a hard task. I certainly don't want to end an experience in which I feel closer to God. I long for those moments of nearness to God, and they are hard to come away from. And yet,

¹³ Moshe also demonstrates this desire to come closer, but is stopped by God. See Bereishit Rabbah 55:6, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 589.

¹⁴ See my previous essay on VaYakhel-Pekudei, "'Moshe Rejoiced': Shabbat, Prayer, and Intimacy with God" available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/moshe-rejoiced#source-12856>.

¹⁵ The separation of holiness and mundane in Leviticus 10:10 is not limited to space. Ibn Ezra ad loc argues that it can also be understood as referring to time: "תבדיל בין מקום הקדש ובין החול ... גם יתכן בין יום קדש לחול" - You should separate between the holy and mundane **space**... it is also possible: 'between a holy and mundane **day**.'



living in this world means separating from the intensity of those moments, and coming back to a more regulated connection; our lives are not meant to be lived entirely in the holy.

Havdallah is a moment of transition from the holy time with God to the more mundane experience of the rest of the week. And while this is a difficult transition to make, it is a necessary one. Nadav and Avihu's desire to connect to God without boundaries or borders was their downfall. We can learn from their error, and strive for a balanced relationship with high points of drawing close, as well as a return to the mundane.

