

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Shemini

Nadav and Avihu

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבֵי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם אֶכְבֵּד וַיִּדַּם אַהֲרֹן

Moshe said to Aharon: Of this Hashem spoke, saying: "Through those who are near Me I will be sanctified, and before the entire people I will be honored," and Aharon was silent. (10:3)

The opening section of our Parsha discusses the inaugural day of the Mishkan. This joyous and much-awaited occasion was marred by the tragic death of Nadav and Avihu, two of Aharon's sons, which the Torah refers to as "offering a foreign fire that He (Hashem) had not commanded them."¹

In terms of the sin as described in the pasuk, it does seem to have been that grave, and yet it was met with a punishment that was both harsh and decisive. The Meshech Chochmah explains that the deaths of Nadav and Avihu were very much connected with the background to that inaugural day and, to a certain degree, were even caused by it.

The presence of the Mishkan itself served as testimony that Hashem had forgiven Bnei Yisrael for the *Chet Ha'egel*.² Although initially, the people had faced a decree of annihilation for committing that sin; in response to their Teshuvah and Moshe Rabbeinu's prayers on their behalf, the decree had been averted. Additionally, through their generous and inspired contributions, the Mishkan was built, bringing about the return of the Clouds of Glory and the residing of the Divine Presence in their midst. This was the first time the people had been forgiven for one of their sins, something that was the cause of much joy and relief. However, it was also something that, if taken the wrong way, could potentially undermine and render meaningless their entire relationship with Hashem and with His Torah.

It was critically important that the people not confuse Hashem's forgiveness as a response to sincere and heartfelt Teshuvah with the idea that He doesn't hold people accountable for their actions in the first place. The entire concept of Torah and mitzvos is based on the principle that every deed – both positive and negative – has consequences. The potential

1 Pasuk 1.

2 See Rashi to *Shemos 38:21 s.v. mishkan*.

misunderstanding that could occur with regards to Teshuvah is that it doesn't so much work to undo those consequences, but rather reflects the idea that there never really are any. This is an unacceptable notion which could lead to dire consequences of its own. As the Gemara³ puts it, "כל האומר הקב"ה ותרן, יותרו חייו" – *Whoever says that the Holy One, Blessed is He, is disregarding (of sin), his life shall be disregarded.*"

Therefore, alongside the forgiveness the people had been granted for the Chet Ha'Egel, it was necessary to demonstrate that all wrongdoings must – and will – be accounted for. Thus, at a certain point on that day, the slightest of infractions was met with the harshest of reactions:⁴ "וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי ה'" – *A fire came forth from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem*". The exacting nature of this situation was underscored by the fact that all this occurred on the inaugural day of the Mishkan, a day referred to by Chazal as "יום שמחת לבו" – *The day of His (Hashem's) joy.*⁵ At a time of one's joy it is common for an atmosphere of magnanimity to prevail and for one to be more foregoing of infractions, especially minor ones. Moreover, the ones who were punished were among those few who had been found worthy of performing the avodah. In the event, none of the above factors mitigated against the severe response which met them for their wrongdoing.

All of this served to engrave indelibly within the people's consciousness the gravity of transgressing one of the Torah's prohibitions. In a sense, therefore, it was *this very episode* which allowed for their forgiveness over the *Chet Ha'Egel*. Once it was clear that Hashem's forgiveness would not be misconstrued or abused, it could be granted in full.

This is the meaning of Moshe's words to Aharon: *Of this Hashem spoke, saying: "Through those who are near Me I will be sanctified, and before the entire people I will be honored."* The syntactical relationship between these two phrases is that the fulfillment of the first idea is what enables the meaningful existence of the second. Once Hashem was "sanctified through those near to Him," by punishing Nadav and Avihu for their relatively minor sin, this "allowed" for Him to be "honored before the people" by restoring the Shechinah in their midst. Without the example set by Aharon's sons, the Shechinah may never have fully returned.

In light of this idea, we can now appreciate on a deeper level Aharon's response to Moshe's words as recorded by the pasuk, "וַיִּדַם אֶהְרִן" – *Aharon was silent.*" The acceptance reflected within this silence is cognizance of the fact that the death of Nadav and Avihu played a crucial role in the restoration of the Shechinah to Yisrael.

3 *Bava Kama 50a.*

4 Pasuk 2.

5 See *Taanis 26b.*

Moreover, this will also explain Moshe's ensuing instruction to Elazar and Itamar, Aharon's two surviving sons:⁶

וְאַחֵיכֶם כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל יִבְכוּ אֶת הַשְּׂרִפָּה אֲשֶׁר שָׂרַף ה'

And your brethren the entire House of Yisrael shall mourn the conflagration that Hashem ignited.

This is a most unusual command! In all other cases where the Torah records that someone was mourned upon their passing, it is on the initiative of the people. Nowhere do we find that the people are commanded to mourn! Indeed, if they do not themselves feel that they should mourn, what is the meaning of commanding them to do so?

However, on this occasion, Moshe is informing the people that they should mourn the death of Aharon's sons, even if they did not know them personally. The reason for this is that the people were in part responsible for that event. It was only as a result of the *Chet ha'Egel* committed by the people that it was necessary for Aharon's sons to be met with such harsh punishment. As such, Moshe informs the people, their passing is indeed cause for national mourning.⁷

6 Pasuk 6.

7 Indeed, this explanation of the Meshech Chochmah may give us added insight into the fact that the Torah reading for Yom Kippur begins with a reference to the death of Nadav and Avihu (Vayikra 16:1). Moreover, the Zohar exhorts us to mourn their loss at that juncture in the Torah reading. Perhaps we may suggest that the Torah introduces the Parsha of the Yom Kippur avodah in this way in order to caution Bnei Yisrael in future generations as well not to misconstrue or mishandle the idea of Teshuvah which is so central to the day. The atonement which is available – and assured – on Yom Kippur, is solely as the result of sincere Teshuvah. In order to underscore the idea that forgiveness will not simply occur through Hashem's disregard of our actions, we begin the Torah reading by reminding ourselves of the lesson we learned from Nadav and Avihu concerning this crucial point. By mourning the fact that their deaths were needed in order to reach us this lesson, it will hopefully serve to ensure that we do not ignore or neglect it ourselves.