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| *Dvar Torah for Parshat Shemini* |

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| **Nadav and Avihu:In Memoriam** |

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|  Zohar Atkins '05 | BronfmanTorah | Shemini 2016 |

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| Dr. Zohar Atkins (‘05) is a 2nd year Rabbinical student at JTS and a Wexner Graduate Fellow. He teaches Torah, poetry, and ecstatic dance in New York and Jerusalem. |

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| **A picture containing map  Description automatically generated***Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Brueghel |

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| א  וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי-אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מַחְתָּתוֹ, וַיִּתְּנוּבָהֵן אֵשׁ, וַיָּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ, קְטֹרֶת; וַיַּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה, אֵשׁ זָרָה--אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה, אֹתָם. | 1 And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. |
| ב  וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה, וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם; וַיָּמֻתוּ, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה. | 2 And there came forth fire from before the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. |
| ג  וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, הוּא אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה לֵאמֹר בִּקְרֹבַי אֶקָּדֵשׁ, וְעַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָעָם, אֶכָּבֵד; וַיִּדֹּם, אַהֲרֹן. | 3 Then Moses said unto Aaron: 'This is it that the LORD spoke, saying: Through them that are nigh unto Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.' And Aaron fell silent. |

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|  This week’s Torah portion, parshat Shmini (Leviticus 9-11:47), contains one of the most heartbreaking and enigmatic stories in our yearly-cycle: the untimely death of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, recounted in just two spare verses. Shmini begins benignly enough, with Moses giving Aaron, his sons, and the elders, collective instructions to offer a spectacular sacrifice in front of the whole people, because “today is the day that God will appear to you” כִּי הַיּוֹם ה’ נִרְאָה אֲלֵיכֶם. But as in the story of young Icarus, whose wings melt when he flies too close to the sun, a day of anticipated intimacy and glory soon turns into a day of horror and tragedy when Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, bring their own offering before God and are swallowed up by God’s unwieldy, boundary-crossing fire. What a strange inversion of the Akeidah story in Genesis! There, where it was not yet clear that human sacrifice was wrong, Isaac had to be saved at the last minute by a ram.  But here, in Vayikra, a book in which animal sacrifice is considered de rigueur for forming a relationship with God, and human sacrifice is no longer considered “cool,” the human being suddenly appears as a kind of “scape-man” for the animal.Meanwhile, Aaron is forced into silence (*“vayidom Aharon”*), shelving his own grief and shock in order to continue functioning in his public role as high priest. (Unless, to be modern about it, Aaron is using his “responsibility” as a convenient excuse for avoiding the trauma he has just witnessed.) Aaron’s silence is either a sign of ultimate resignation and isolation, a sign of being reduced to private language, or it is the final gesture of defiance left to him, a “hidden transcript” of resistance (in anthropologist James Scott’s terms) for those who know how to hear it. As Scott paraphrases the ancient maxim, “When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows low and farts silently.”Commentators are deeply divided on how to interpret the various motivations and psychological dynamics in this short and elliptical episode. It’s as if the text itself shares Aaron’s silence.  Or it’s as if the text wants to say: Nadav and Avihu came too close to the holy, but you, my dear reader, keep at a distance; do not even come too close to Nadav and Avihu lest you also die.  Yesterday I was at Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust Museum, where I had the privilege of learning from tour guide and educator Dr. Rachel Korazim.  Staring out at a transport car leading off a cliff into the Jerusalem sky, Rachel read to us from Dan Pagis’ poem, “Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car,” a poem I first encountered as a Bronfman Fellow in 2005 with Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld: |

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| *Written in pencil in the sealed railway car*here in this carloadi am evewith abel my sonif you see my other soncain son of mantell him that i |

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|  Rachel offered a novel Midrashic reading of this poem. The poem seems to end mid-sentence. Classical interpretation suggests this is either because eve has by now been led out of the car to her death, or because the poem is meant to be read as an unending circle: “tell him that i...am eve...tell him that i...am eve…” Rachel suggested in the name of one of her students, however, that eve does finish her letter to “cain, son of man,” but that the poet giving the account is protecting us, the readers, from coming any closer to her experience, lest we, too, find ourselves inside of that sealed railway car.  The poem functions as a kind of curtain separating us from the Holy of Holies beyond our view.Thus, the lack of detail in the Nadav and Avihu story bespeaks something as wondrous and miraculous as Sinai or the burning bush, or something as unspeakable and ghastly as the Shoah.  (I recently learned from Ziva Hassenfeld that we as readers never learn directly what happened to Joseph in the pit, even though the story of the pit is twice recounted later on by his brothers, as if to say that what the brothers did to Joseph was so bad that nobody can actually remember it).As a result of the lacuna in our story--or we might say “black-out”--some commentators argue that Nadav and Avihu were punished, or “made an example of,” while others argue that Nadav and Avihu are spiritual heroes, martyrs whose desire for closeness with God is rewarded with fiery embrace, a position interestingly and perhaps tellingly favored by Christian and Hasidic commentators.  What is certain is that Nadav and Avihu brought something that was “foreign” (*zarah*) and something that “God did not command” (*asher lo tzivah*),  But the open question which the text itself cannot resolve is a normative one: are these terms which connote something totally bad and transgressive, or do they connote something brave and commendable? This interpretive impasse reflects our own lived experience that one person’s hero is another person’s villain.  Leadership is an ambiguous adventure, not a science.  Vayikra is replete with instructions to do “that which God commands” (*asher tzivah Hashem*), but often in our lives the most significant moments are those moments where we go off script and make ourselves vulnerable, doing that which is not and cannot be commanded. We risk everything; we bring our frying pans and our incense.  We do not show up at the appointed time. Perhaps we even show up drunk, totally off balance (as Rashi and the Midrash suggest were Nadav and Avihu’s downfall).  But we show up.  Maybe Nadav and Avihu were the ones who told their boss a hard truth that got them fired. Or maybe they were righteous gentiles, who died by Nazi firing squad.  Maybe they were traditional Jews who were debarred from leading services after including *Imahot*in their repetition of the Amidah.  Or maybe they were anti-vaccers, or climate-change deniers, who decided they knew better than the scientific, peer-reviewed establishment as their ozone melted in the eyes of their God.In his book *On Sacrifice*, Moshe Halbertal offers a beautiful teaching about God’s rejection of Cain’s sacrifice. Halbertal says that Cain’s sacrifice was not rejected because it was a bad one, but because it was the first one. Cain invented sacrifice! Abel, his younger brother, the one whose sacrifice God accepts, is the copy-cat.  But Cain’s sacrifice is rejected in order to teach us as readers that sacrifice doesn’t always work. It isn’t a science, or a magical act in which we force God’s hand. Sacrifice: *mincha*, placing before, and *kurban*, drawing near, are about risking an intimacy we cannot control and guarantee.  Sacrifice is about placing ourselves in the gap separating us from God. Were God to accept Cain’s sacrifice it would send the message that sacrifice is a game we play in order to get what we want. This would take away both the anxiety and the meaning of such a vulnerable act.  Perhaps, then, a good sacrifice is not one that God accepts, but one that we put forward even as we know that it may be no good.  It’s the persistence of our showing up, our patience, even after having been rejected or misunderstood or ignored, that makes sacrifice something delightful to God.  Similarly, prayer, which derives from sacrifice, is ultimately not about what tunes we sing or what words we say, but about how we show up. Of course it may also require that we consider these things, just as Leviticus gives us lists and lists of procedures regarding what animals to sacrifice when and how. But these rules are part of the scaffolding for connection, not its heart.Coming back to the issue of Nadav and Avihu’s motivation, Sforno and Shadal both think that Aaron’s boys are being punished for their pride, their desire to do something new, as signalled by the words “*aysh zarah*” (foreign fire). Shadal teaches that they brought their unsolicited offering because they felt excluded. Their pride was less the pride of arrogance than a defense mechanism against feeling irrelevant.  They wanted to be on the same level as Aaron, their father, “a high priest” and not just trade priests. On this interpretation, their foreign flame was born of a spirit of jealousy and competition, hearkening back to the story of Cain and Abel, but now with an Oedipal twist.  Or perhaps Nadav and Avihu’s rivalry with their father can be read as a parallel with Korach’s challenge to Moses. Both sets of characters’ actions signal a challenge to the firm social hierarchy meant to mediate God’s relationship to the people.  Were Nadav and Avihu Bundists, anti-Zionist Yiddish speakers from the youth group “Zukunft”? Bernie Bros chanting “Tax the 1%!?”Coming out of Purim, I have been thinking about the parallel between Nadav and Avihu and Esther. Just as Esther approaches King Ahasverus uninvited (an inverse of Vashti, who refuses to approach even when commanded), so also do Nadav and Avihu approach God sans invite. Yet Esther, we know, was afraid, and fasted in preparation for her daring confrontation. What is missing in the story of Nadav and Avihu is a description of their preparation.  The upshot of this comparison is that Nadav and Avihu were not just bold in that they did something unsolicited, but that they were also totally spontaneous. It is their spontaneity that most stands out to me, especially given how rule-heavy and fixed the surrounding context is.  For any system to function, be it priestly sacrifices or health care, there have to be protocols and standards which are basically consistent and transparent, otherwise corruption and inefficiency reign.  On the other hand, a system that defines right and wrong in advance and leaves no room for criticism or invention, a system that closes its borders to the foreign and the foreigner, is a system whose “purity” is purchased at a high cost to human freedom and dignity.We will never resolve the story of Nadav and Avihu, because we will never settle the *machloket*(dispute) between rule and exception, law and conscience, order and innovation.  And perhaps, realizing this, that is why Aaron is silent.  He knows he must work within a system that is both holy and flawed, a system that creates intimacy just as it excludes, a system that unifies as it marginalizes, that seeks equality just as it maintains inequality. But his pragmatic life-philosophy does not protect him from weeping for all the Nadavs and Avihus whom his own sacred system has failed.  Aaron does not enjoy his “privilege,” yet he knows better than to renounce it.Rachel Korazim points out that the Holocaust Museum in Israel and Washington D.C. commemorate events that did not take place anywhere near where  they are located.  How can this be? Could we imagine people making a pilgrimage to a 9/11 memorial that was not in New York, but Chicago or Paris? Rachel’s answer comes from her *drash*on the name “Yad Vashem,” which appears in Isaiah : |

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|  וְנָתַתִּ֨י לָהֶ֜ם בְּבֵיתִ֤י וּבְחֽוֹמֹתַי֙ יָ֣ד וָשֵׁ֔ם ט֖וֹב מִבָּנִ֣ים וּמִבָּנ֑וֹת שֵׁ֤ם עוֹלָם֙ אֶתֶּן־ל֔וֹ אֲשֶׁ֖ר לֹ֥א יִכָּרֵֽת׃ | To them [the eunuchs, those who cannot reproduce life] shall I give in My house And within My walls a monument and a memorial [yad vashem] Better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting memorial, That shall not be cut off.Isaiah 56:5 |

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| Rachel notes that the prophet is channeling God’s promise to those in captivity that even when the Israelites will return to their homes and things will be “b’seder” (in order) again, that those who have no future will not be forgotten, and that their future will be preserved through memory.In a similar vein, I suggest, the Nadav and Avihu story is itself a kind of monument and memorial, a Yad Vashem to those who are failed by the system. In the heart of Vayikra, in the heart of an instruction manual detailing how to separate the pure from the impure, we bear witness to those whose optics were different, the boundary-crossers.  Just as at weddings, when we smash a glass to remember the world’s continued brokenness in a time of great joy, so too, here, with so much intimacy, connection, and celebration surrounding a newfound relationship between God and the people, we readers are enjoined to stop to consider the legacy of our sacred and perplexing ancestors.  May Nadav and Avihu’s memory be a blessing for us.Shabbat Shalom,Zohar |

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