

# The Path To Follow

Shemini

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## The Greatness of Nadav and Avihu

It is written, “The sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan. 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” (Vayikra 10:1-2).

Why did Nadav and Avihu die? Our Sages have provided us with several explanations on this subject. In the Gemara we read, “Moshe and Aaron were once walking along, with Nadav and Avihu behind them, followed by all Israel. Nadav said to Avihu, ‘If only these old men might die, so that you and I would be the leaders of our generation.’ However the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, ‘We will see who shall bury whom’” (Sanhedrin 52a).

We also read, “The sons of Aaron died only because they rendered a legal decision in the presence of their teacher Moshe” (Eruvin 63a). It is also written, “Aaron’s sons died on account of four things: For drawing near to the Holy of Holies [reserved only for the Kohen Gadol], for offering [without having been commanded to offer], for the alien fire, and for not having taken counsel from each other” (Vayikra Rabba 20:8), and also because they had not married (ibid. 20:9).

We note that Nadav and Avihu committed several errors, and because of their greatness and sanctity, these faults could not go unpunished. In fact it was not fitting for great individuals to possess such character flaws.

Nevertheless, we need to understand how all the reasons brought by our Sages agree with the testimony of the Torah: “I will be sanctified by those who are closest to Me” (Vayikra 10:3). The Sages explain this verse in the following way: “Moshe said to Aaron: ‘My brother, at Sinai I was told that I would sanctify this house, and that I would sanctify it through a great man. I thought that this house would be sanctified either through me or through you. Yet now, [I see that] your two sons are greater than me or you’” (Sifra, Shemini 1). After they died, Moshe commanded: “Your brothers, the entire House of Israel, shall bewail the burning that Hashem ignited” (Vayikra 10:6). That being the case, how can we say that such holy men erred?

It is clear that Nadav and Avihu were extremely holy men, something to which their fate testifies. All their deeds were done unselfishly, and thus all the actions in question (drawing near to the Holy of Holies while intoxicated, offering an alien fire, not marrying, and their “unkind” words for Moshe and Aaron) had a single objective: To teach the Children of Israel that if they wanted to draw closer to Hashem and to love Him with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their strength, then they had to be careful to respect all the mitzvot – be they easy or difficult – in order to reach a state of self-annulment. A person can achieve this in only one way: By investing himself in Torah and mastering his evil inclination.

Nevertheless, no person can truly affirm that he is close to G-d and loved by Him. In fact even if we invest ourselves in Torah day and night, a single deficiency in our service of G-d can tarnish it. How much more is this true for numerous deficiencies in our dealings with other people, something that even Yom Kippur does not atone for without the forgiveness of the offended party (Yoma 85b). Hence it follows that we are far from Hashem, even if we know a great deal of Torah and engage in good deeds.

Nadav and Avihu saw that despite the sin of the golden calf, the repentance of the Children of Israel had been accepted. G-d then gave them the second tablets of the law and the Sanctuary was built. They also knew that on the eighth day, the glory of Hashem would be revealed before the eyes of all Israel, and that He would dwell among them, as it is written: “Let them make a Sanctuary for Me, and I will dwell among them” (Shemot 25:8). Here our Sages note that the text says “among them,” not “in it” (the Sanctuary), signifying that the Shechinah [Divine Presence] was for the Jewish people. In other words, the place they would devote to His residence would be in the midst of each person, this being on account of Torah and mitzvot.

Nadav and Avihu thus believed that they had to teach the Children of Israel how to act when the Shechinah would be revealed in the Sanctuary, and from there into themselves. If they yearned to draw closer to G-d – in the spirit of the teaching, “Hashem, the Torah, and Israel are one” (Zohar

III:73a) – then they needed to make an effort to be upright in serving Hashem, without any stain that could act as a barrier between themselves and the Shechinah.

Nadav and Avihu also wanted to teach the people that, according to a person’s greatness, character flaws can cause enormous damage if they are not quickly rectified. Indeed, the Shechinah will sometimes refuse to dwell in the heart of a Jew who possesses many shortcomings, especially if he is a great man. Thus instead of protecting him, the Torah may cause him to be punished, G-d forbid.

By their actions, Nadav and Avihu created deficiencies in themselves, such that the Shechinah which had come to dwell in the heart of each Jew could not tolerate these deficiencies. Thus given the greatness of Nadav and Avihu, they were punished. In fact it is not fitting to draw closer to Hashem while being filled with character flaws and vices that are at odds with the spirit of Torah.

From the example of Nadav and Avihu, the Children of Israel would learn that they must first be concerned with rectifying their faults so as to be capable of loving Hashem with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their strength. Only then can the Torah protect them, and they will merit the Shechinah in their midst. From all this, we learn that Nadav and Avihu’s objective in bringing an alien fire was to be punished so that the Children of Israel would hear and see Hashem. That being the case, we may consider them to have sacrificed themselves for the entire Jewish people, as it is written: “I will be sanctified by those who are closest to Me” (Vayikra 10:3). From their example, all the Children of Israel understood that possessing certain character flaws can lead to the loss of all the benefits of investing in Torah, to the point that a person deserves to die, G-d forbid, especially if he is a Torah scholar. Thus anyone who seeks closeness with Hashem must be concerned with loving Him with all his soul by investing himself in Torah and performing mitzvot with all his strength, not with apathy.

### When Great Individuals Face the Truth

It is written, “Moshe heard and he approved” (Vayikra 10:20).

In the Midrash, our Sages teach that Moshe proclaimed throughout the camp: “I made an error in regards to the Halachah, and Aaron my brother came and taught it to me” (Vayikra Rabba 13:1). Here the Gemara explains: “Moshe heard and he approved. He admitted his error, and Moshe was not ashamed [to excuse himself] by saying, ‘I had not heard it,’ but rather: ‘I heard it but forgot.’” (Zevachim 101b).

This noble virtue, the ability to admit the truth, has characterized all the Sages of Israel throughout the generations. Acknowledging the truth, even when it is difficult and becomes a source of shame and humiliation, distinguishes a person and elevates him to a high level.

The gaon Rabbi Haim Faladji, the Rav of Izmir, distinguished himself by this virtue. He cleaved to the truth in learning Torah, just as he did in other areas of life. In his will (“testament of the living”), he declared: “If a judicious Torah scholar were to find a difficulty or contradiction in my work, and if he seeks the truth in all humility, I would absolutely not be upset or irritated in any way, for such is the way of Torah. If this difficulty concerned a rabbinic decision, especially if it deals with prohibiting something that I have authorized, may the man who corrects it not be ashamed to publish the correction. In this way, no one will transgress a prohibition, G-d forbid, for truth is the most precious thing we have. I often say that I have a great desire to seek the truth. By deceiving myself, I have failed to establish this truth, and thus my gain is offset by my loss.

“Likewise, may my sons not be hindered by the honor which they owe me. If someone proclaims a truth, he must be acknowledged for it even if it opposes my views. Also, my children must pursue the ways of their fathers. My sons, do not be surprised by this warning, which may seem useless to you. On the contrary, it is necessary because I have noticed that when a rav passes away and his successor prohibits what the deceased rav had authorized, this can often cause hostility.... For my part, do not act in this way. For a rav who rests in the World of Truth, it is not fitting that we rule according to his teaching when it does not conform to the Halachah. In fact

in the World to Come, there is neither hatred, nor jealousy, nor competition, as there is in the world of vanities.”

### Only Twice

In Seder HaDorot, Rabbi Yaakov ben Meir (the brother of the Rashbam), known as Rabbeinu Tam, is described as a great Torah scholar. Known for his deep understanding, he was unequaled in logical debate and the acknowledgment of truth. He authored several works, including Sefer HaYashar and Sefer HaPesakim.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin was very attached to the teachings of the Vilna Gaon, and he adopted his method of learning, which was geared towards authenticity. He was therefore not ashamed to publicly state and declare that he forgot a sugia [Talmudic discourse], as he wrote: “I was corrected by a friend who understood the subject well, for he discovered that I was mistaken. I had not actually taken into consideration the sugia in question, which played a role in the subject I was dealing with” (Chut HaMeshulash, Responsa 17).

In a letter that the Chatam Sofer addressed to a rav who attempted to refute his words, he wrote: “I must specify the sources from which I decide the Halachah, such that if a person studies the issue after me and finds an inaccuracy, I will be able to correct myself by affirming: ‘I made a mistake by deciding in this way.’ In fact nobody is infallible! This is why I must specify my reasoning and motivation...but if I have made a mistake, I must rectify it” (Chut HaMeshulash, p.102).

The Rav continued: “Thank G-d, this only happened to me twice in the span of 40 years. One time, the gaon Rabbi Zalman Margalioth corrected me because I wanted to deduce from Tosaphot on the end of Bemeh Madlikin that we must write the name of the country in a get. He pointed out my error, and I ‘recognized my mistake.’ I have now been able to learn the subject of the ‘stolen lulav.’ I examined the issue and noticed that my admission was unjustified, and that my first opinion was the correct one.

“I also disagreed with the gaon Rabbi Shmuel regarding the issue of an excommunication, and I went along with his view. In the end, however, the Halachah corresponded to my initial opinion. Except for these two instances, I have never known any other case, and I thank Hashem for it.”

### What of Truth?

In regards to Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, it is said that at the beginning of his career, as he be-

gan to give lectures in Vilna, his keen insight impressed all the scholars of the city, who marveled at his genius. Many great Torah figures came to hear his Torah teachings, and were stunned and intrigued by this rising star in Judaism. Nevertheless, a few opponents arose who wanted to tarnish the image of this brilliant teacher. What did they do? They found an exceptionally sharp scholar to refute the words of Rabbi Israel by relying on little-known references in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud. Yet due to his brilliance, Rav Salanter clipped the wings of this scholar, who never dared confront him again.

It once happened that this antagonist (who regularly attended his discourses) raised a difficult and serious objection in the middle of one particular discourse. Rav Salanter listened, reflected, and then recognized that his objection indeed had merit. He then descended from the podium. Afterwards, Rav Salanter told his students that at that point, five arguments arose in his mind that could have refuted the man’s objection. Although they were convincing, Rav Israel knew that they did not serve the truth, since the antagonist’s objection was legitimate. Hence he abstained from answering and descended from the podium.

Rav Israel continued: “Don’t think that such an admission is easy to make. Numerous considerations regarding the honor of my Torah teachings, my reputation, and so on went through my mind, trying to convince me that I could refute his objection even with an explanation that didn’t conform to the truth of the Torah. However I snapped out of it and told myself: ‘Israel! Israel! Don’t you teach Mussar? What are you doing to the truth?’ I then immediately acknowledged the truth and left the podium.”

## Guard Your Tongue!

### Raising His Hand Against the Torah

The sin of one who denounces a fellow Jew to the authorities is horrendous, for it brings him into the category of informers, who have the same status as apikorsim [heretics], those who deny the Torah and those who deny the resurrection of the dead. Gehinnom has an end, but they have no end. Hence every Jew must be careful to avoid such a thing. One who transgresses, it is as if he has blasphemed and raised his hand against the Torah of Moshe.

– Chafetz Chaim

### Everlasting Joy

It is written, “The entire assembly approached and stood before Hashem” (Vayikra 9:5).

Everyone approached with joy and stood before Him.

This is like a king who was upset with his wife and sent her away. Some time afterwards, he agreed to pardon her and allow her to return. She immediately did everything she could to serve him, to that point that it was excessive.

Likewise, when the Children of Israel realized that G-d had agreed to forgive their sin, they all approached with joy and stood before Him. Thus here it is written, “The entire assembly approached and stood before Hashem.”

– Torat Kohanim

### Teaching the Halachah

It is written, “The sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan” (Vayikra 10:1).

Rabbi Eliezer said, “The sons of Aaron only died on account of having taught the Halachah in the presence of Moshe their teacher” (We derive this from the verse, “The sons of Aaron the kohen shall put fire upon the altar” [Vayikra 1:7] – they said: “Even if fire descends upon the altar from Heaven, it is a mitzvah to bring it from a human source.”) Now whoever teaches the Halachah in the presence of his teacher is liable to death.

A certain student of Rabbi Eliezer taught the Halachah in his presence. Rabbi Eliezer said to his wife, Imma Shalom: “This one will not outlive the year.” Indeed, he died shortly thereafter.

After his death, the Sages went to see Rabbi Eliezer and asked him: “Rabbi, are you a prophet?” He replied, “I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet [Amos 7:14], but I have the following tradition: Whoever teaches the Halachah in the presence of his teacher becomes liable to death.”

– Torat Kohanim

### Two Te’amim

It is written, “Approach [kirvu], carry your brothers” (Vayikra 10:4).

Why does the term kirvu possess two te’amim [cantillation marks]?

This teaches us that the Holy Once, blessed be He, twice told Mishael and Elzaphan to bring out Nadav and Avihu, for they were afraid to approach. Hence there are two te’amim over the term kirvu.

– Lekach Tov

### Hashem’s Kindness

It is written, “These are unclean to you among all creeping things” (Vayikra 11:31).

What does the term “these” teach us?

King David said, “The doer of ‘these’ shall never falter” (Tehillim 15:5). Whenever Rabban Gamliel read this verse, he would grieve and say: “What man can do all of these things?” Yet when Rabbi Akiva read this verse, or the verses in Ezekiel beginning with, “If a man is righteous, and practices righteousness and justice” (Ezekiel 18:5-6), he did not grieve, but rejoiced. Rabban Gamliel asked him, “Why do I grieve while you rejoice?”

Rabbi Akiva replied, “Note that it is written, ‘These are unclean to you among all creeping things. Anyone who touches them...will be unclean.’ It may therefore be argued that for a man to be unclean, he would have to touch all these creeping things, and if he touched just one of them, he would not be unclean. Yet in reality...[just] one creeping thing...can make him unclean. ... What measure is greater? The measure of goodness, or the measure of punishment? Certainly the measure of goodness is 500 times greater than the measure of punishment. Thus if a man who touches a single creeping thing, even a portion of it no larger than a lentil, thereby becomes as unclean as though he has touched all creeping things, does it not follow that if a man does a single one of these good deeds, it is as though he has done all of them? And does it not also follow that just as the word ‘these’ specifies the creeping things and defilements to indicate that a man touching any of these touches them all, likewise a man who does any of the good things of which it is written, ‘The doer of these shall never falter’ – indeed, he does any one of them at all – it is as though he has done them all.”

At that point Rabban Gamliel said to Rabbi Akiva, “You have comforted me, Akiva. You have comforted me.”

– Midrash Tehillim 15

### Male Offspring

It is written, “To distinguish between the impure and the pure... When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male” (Vayikra 11:47-12:2).

Why is the verse on impurity located next to the beginning of Parsha Tazria?

Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: “He who separates from his wife near her period will have male children, even as it is written: ‘To distinguish between the impure and the pure,’ and next to it: ‘When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male.’”

– Shavuot 18b

In Sefer HaYirah, Rabbeinu Yona writes: "When we go to synagogue, we should say upon entering: 'And I, through Your abundant kindness, come into Your house....' We should then take our place. We should sit down and wait a moment before opening our mouths. We should try to grasp before Whom we are standing and Who is listening to our words. We will then be filled with fear and awe, seized with shaking and trembling. We should then start our prayer."

The Rambam writes: "What is meant by [proper] intention? One should clear his mind from all thoughts and envision himself as standing before the Shechinah. One must therefore sit for a short while before praying in order to focus his attention, and then pray in a pleasant and supplicatory fashion. One should not pray like one carrying a burden, who throws it off and walks away. One must therefore sit for a short while after praying, and then leave. The pious ones of the previous generations would wait an hour before praying" (Hilchot Tefillah 4:16).

Books dealing with the fear of Heaven have tried to understand what the Rambam meant by "a short while." Rav Wolbe believes that five minutes is a sufficiently long-enough period of time, and that whoever stops for an actual minute – sitting at his place in silence and focusing his thoughts on the prayer that he is about to make – will miraculously notice what an impact this minute can have on his prayer.

We have been conditioned by the rhythm of modern life, in which everything proceeds quickly. However we extend our meals and conversations with friends, but rush when it comes to Shacharit. Everyone has to get to work, one going here, another going there. We find it difficult to pray calmly, and every minute that we can "save" seems precious. Thus we have to fight and make a real effort in order to devote an extra minute for "taking time out" before praying. Nevertheless, we should never abandon this practice!

## A Lesson from the Brinks Security Guard

An extraordinary lesson is recorded by Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein in the book *Tuvcha Yabiu*:

I was once accompanying someone who was sick to the Tel Hashomer hospital. While we were waiting in a certain department, two young security guards, armed, walked into the room with a stern look on their faces. With guns in hand, they approached the people in the room and asked us to move away.

Their stern expressions left no room for doubt. The order to move away was unequivocal, and there was no place for discussion. Naturally, I got up and moved aside, all while observing them.

I quickly realized that they worked for Brinks Security, which is responsible for transferring money from Israel's central bank to various financial centers around the country. As it turned out, these two armed young men were refilling the hospital's ATM with cash.

At that point, I suddenly witnessed an unexpected scene: While they were busy refilling the ATM, a man approached one of the security guards, affectionately patting him on the shoulder and warmly saying: "Aaron, hi! How are you?"

He seemed to be a longtime friend, but the Brinks security guard did not respond. In fact he gestured to the man to immediately step back, signaling to him that he was busy with an important task and that, despite their friendship, any discussion was out of the question at that point. Anyone not there at the time cannot imagine the stress and tension of the security guard, who with his weapon had to ensure the security of the money transfer.

At that point, chatting wasn't allowed under any circumstances!

It was only after having transferred the funds into the ATM that the security guard approached his friend and apologized for not having interrupted his work to return his welcome.

I then thought to myself, "What a great lesson we can draw from this! When a Jew comes to synagogue and pours out his heart before G-d, is he not on an important mission? In that case, why does he happily respond to his friend when he asks him what's new in the middle of prayer?"

Is the duty of the faithful during prayer less important than that of the Brinks security guard? Why does the serious expression which appeared on the face of the security guard not appear on our faces when we pray or study Torah, for which we acquire

incalculable merits that are worth more than treasures of gold and diamonds?

Even the Pesukei D'Zimra [verses of praise] should be recited as if we were counting diamonds!

Why have we grown accustomed to everyday conversations that occur during Torah study or in the four sanctified cubits of the synagogue? Is it because we aren't aware of the value of prayer?

Realizing the value of our role during prayer, and acting in accordance with that realization, will earn us tremendous merit that will intercede for us before the Celestial Throne. It will bring us an abundance of goodness and compassion, even during the difficult times in which we are presently living.

## In the Light of the Parsha

### Joy for Hashem When a Jew Seeks Him

Our Sages have said, "During all seven days of the inauguration, Moshe used to erect the Sanctuary and dismantle it twice each day" (Bamidbar Rabba 12:9). He did this with miracles, as the Midrash states: "When the work on the Sanctuary was completed, the Children of Israel awaited the coming of the Shechinah to dwell upon it. They went to the wisest-hearted and said, 'Erect the Sanctuary yourselves, and the Shechinah will dwell among us! They wanted to erect it, but could not. They went to Betzalel and Oholiab and said to them, 'Erect the Sanctuary that you yourselves built! They began to erect it, but they could not. All the Children of Israel went to find Moshe and said to him: 'Moshe our teacher, we have done all that you have told us. Why does it not stand?' "

Moshe was distressed, until finally the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Because you suffered for not having labored or played any role in the work of the Sanctuary, all these wise-hearted men have been unable to erect it, so that all Israel may know that it will only stand because of you; otherwise it will never stand. It can only be erected by you." Moshe replied, "Sovereign of the universe, I do not know how to erect it!" He said to him, "Do what you can. It will seem that you are erecting it, but it will stand on its own, and I will write that you erected it" (Tanchuma, Pekudei 11).

How amazing are the words of the Midrash! Given that the Holy One, blessed be He, helped Moshe to erect the Sanctuary on each of the seven days of its inauguration, why did Moshe have doubts during all that time, thinking that the Shechinah might not descend upon the Sanctuary? Since G-d was helping him, this was proof that the Shechinah would descend upon it! We may object by noting that G-d had told Moshe, "I will dwell among them" (Shemot 25:8), and although He would help Moshe erect it, perhaps He might not keep His word and dwell there? To explain this, let us recall the verse: "Glory in His holy Name; may the heart of those who seek Hashem be glad" (Tehillim 105:3). The holy Jew of Peshischa Zatzal explained that even if a person has not yet reached a great level in serving G-d, if he is still searching for Him and wondering what His will is, even that – the very fact that he seeks Him – will bring him joy. Hence it is written, "May the heart of those who seek Hashem be glad." It does not say "who found Hashem," but rather, "who seek Hashem." This teaches us that it is a joy for G-d when a Jew seeks Him.

Moshe acted accordingly. Despite his doubts as to whether the Shechinah would descend upon the Sanctuary (since he didn't fully know whether the sin of the golden calf had been forgiven), he still did not lose hope. Thus he continued to erect the Sanctuary during all seven days, in case the Shechinah would descend upon it. Since G-d had told him to make a Sanctuary in His honor, and since the Shechinah would help him to erect it, Moshe knew what he had to do, and he knew that it was G-d's will. However he did not know with certainty if G-d would make His Shechinah dwell upon it, despite having helped him to erect it, since G-d also helps those who seek Him, even if they have not yet found Him. Moshe was not afraid of burdening the Children of Israel in case the Shechinah would not descend, for he knew that he was doing G-d's will. Although he had lingering doubts as he erected the Sanctuary, whenever a Jew does the will of G-d – even without being absolutely certain that it is His will – He still has great joy and helps him. When G-d saw that Moshe and Israel worked on erecting the Sanctuary despite their doubts, He rejoiced and helped them. When the eighth day arrived, Moshe experienced tremendous joy in G-d, and he immediately sensed that the Shechinah would descend upon the Sanctuary on that day. He therefore told the Children of Israel, "Today Hashem will appear to you" (Vayikra 9:4).