

## A TASTE OF TORAH

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

### Silence and Loss

One of the most enigmatic and painful moments of all of Tanakh occurs in Parashat Shemini. Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's sons, come before the altar and offer what Torah describes as an "alien fire." Without any sense of deliberation or warning, a divine fire issues forth and consumes Aaron's progeny. Clearly shocked by the mystery of their deaths, Leviticus tells us that "Aaron was silent" (Lev. 10:1–3). Though I have often pointed to Aaron and his response as a powerful example of mourning the inexplicable loss of loved ones, Nahmanides gives us pause to reconsider the peshat (Torah's literal meaning) of this verse. I, and many others, have always understood Aaron's reaction as a deep, impenetrable silence reflecting the most genuine and profound reaction to tragedy. Ramban is far more nuanced in his reading.

Ramban comments, "'And Aaron was silent.' This means that he had cried aloud, but then became silent. Or perhaps the meaning is as in the verse, 'Give yourself no respite, your eyes no rest (tidom)' (Lamentations 2:18)." Thus, he suggests two compelling interpretations. First, Ramban reads deeper into the text suggesting that Aaron, at first, cried aloud and then fell silent. If we are to embrace Nahmanides's reading, it necessitates translating the relevant part of the verse as "And Aaron became silent." In that case, paralyzing silence is not Aaron's initial reaction to losing both of his sons. He cries aloud, as one would expect, and only after this expression of mourning does he become silent. Alternatively, Nahmanides bases his second reading on a verse from Lamentations. There, the Hebrew "dom" (falling silent) is read in the context of tears pouring forth from one's eyes. And so, applying this understanding to our verse leads one to an image of Aaron's tears ceasing altogether. Both tears and verbal lament cease, and Aaron begins the process of healing.

What I find most empowering about Ramban's perspective—in contrast to what is often understood as the peshat of the verse—is that Ramban allows the reader to embrace the full spectrum of responses to personal tragedy. Silence, crying, and wailing are all appropriate expressions of deep loss. Recognizing this spectrum of human response makes us stronger as a family and as a nation.

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Shemini 5774 / 2014

## PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Rabbi Danielle Upbin, JTS Florida Rabbinic Fellow

### Enthusiastic and Committed Judaism

When my husband and I named our first son *Nadav*, we knew that we would have some explaining to do. On one side, we had friends and family who had never heard of the name and had trouble pronouncing it. On the other, more knowledgeable folks questioned us for naming our son after a biblical character who "clearly" perished for wrongdoing. Our intentions, we explained, were quite good. The name *Nadav* was rooted in the Torah portion of the week in which he was born. In Parashat Terumah, the Torah instructs all who are generous of heart (kol nediv libo) to contribute to the building of the Tabernacle (Exod. 25:2). "Generosity of heart" was our greatest hope for this child.

That being said, one can't argue that the name *Nadav* is loaded with connotations, as many biblical names tend to be.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the ambiguous and mysterious actions of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's older sons, who in their inaugural service in the Tabernacle offered a "strange fire that was not commanded" (Lev. 10:1), an offering that resulted in their death: "And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord" (Lev.10:2).

Commentators throughout the ages have postulated different reasons for Nadav and Avihu's death, many of them unfavorable—including OUI (offering under the influence), lacking faith, egotism, and bucking authority. With such admonitions, you might have thought our subjects were just modern-day kids.

One particularly striking commentary on Nadav and Avihu's behavior, however, resonates with Jewish communal life today, and can be read as a recipe for strengthening Jewish community:

Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezofsky, the Slonimer Rebbe (1911–2000), in his work *Netivot Shalom* (commentary on Parashat Shemini, "Inyan Nadav and Avihu"), posits that Nadav and Avihu had excellent intentions in offering the fire and incense in that particular way. He goes further to say that perhaps they even executed the offering in the correct manner.

They failed, however, to defer to the rightful authorities (i.e., Moses and Aaron), and to discover if their interpretation of the law was acceptable. They also erred in not having consulted with one another as to how or what they were going to perform, as indicated when the verse states: “each took his fire pan” (10:1). Nadav and Avihu went rogue. And in so doing, they disconnected themselves physically and spiritually from their community. That notion of connectivity—to authority, to one another, and to community—the Slonimer explains, is what allows for the presence and protection of God. When that sense of connection is gone, so goes the Presence.

From this interpretation of the narrative, we learn today about the privileged place of “connection” in Judaism. Connection comes in many forms: it is the recognition of an authority and tradition that speaks to us and moves through us; it is the glue that binds us as community builders; it is the feeling that our individual involvement matters; it is the impetus for us to take our place as part of the fabric of our people’s greater narrative.

Had Nadav and Avihu acted in the same manner—drawing close to God through their personal talent and wisdom while also retaining their sense of “connection” in all its manifestations—the narrative might have taken a different turn.

To add one more surprising layer of interpretation, the Sefat Emet (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, 1847–1905) tempers Nadav and Avihu’s misdeeds by stating that they offered their “strange fire” with enormous piety. However, while their gifts were motivated by a great sense of religious devotion (*deveikut*) and enthusiasm (*hitlahavut*), ultimately they could not be accepted ritual practice because they were not commanded (cited in *Iturei Torah*, vol. 4: Leviticus, on verse 10:2).

While the terms *deveikut* and *hitlahavut* are usually applied to the human-divine relationship, they can be reinterpreted to apply to community building. *Deveikut* literally means “cleaving,” but in this context can be construed as one’s commitment and willingness to belong. *Hitlahavut* is a reflexive word built on the root *lahav* (flame), but it can also apply to the enthusiasm that drives one to make a commitment to the greater whole. Thriving communities are often based on the encouragement of individual talent, on one side, and the individual’s sense that his or her investment will be lasting and meaningful, on the other.

As Jews, connection and passion are important values. We find meaning in serving together. We pray together, study together, break bread together. We learn and grow from our connections with one another. As the Talmud

states, God dwells among 10 who pray together, among three who are engaged in a court of judgment, and among two who are sitting and studying (BT Berakhot 6a). That passage goes on to teach that God even dwells with one, but the operative value of the text is community—a community that wants to be together.

In adapting the “what could have been” version of the Nadav and Avihu narrative, our Jewish communities could become even more inclusive and inspiring places. Let us resolve to draw closer with our talent, passion, and enthusiasm, feeling the positive effects without the “burnout.” In so doing, may we strengthen our sense of belonging and connection to our traditions and to one another. And may our vibrant efforts help to realize and sustain our communities well into the future.

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