

The Deathly Power of the Holy

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Finding the right words after loss is hard, but Moses's comments to Aaron in this week's parashah are unusually difficult. At the moment that God fills Aaron's hands with abundance, appointing him as high-priest and his descendants as an eternal priesthood, his two eldest die when they attempt to offer incense with a flame brought from outside the newly dedicated sanctuary—a strange, uncommanded offering. “And fire came forth from the LORD and consumed them . . .”

Moses's response is to state that he now understands something God had said in the past:

Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD meant by saying: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.” And Aaron was silent. (Lev. 10:3)

What is Moses trying to convey to his brother in this moment of sudden tragic loss? Does he mean this to be comforting? Or is he simply musing to himself in the shock of the moment, much as Robert Oppenheimer did on July 16, 1945, in the aftermath of the Trinity nuclear test at the Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range: “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds” (paraphrasing Bhagavad Gita 11:32). Is it not a moment so pregnant with power and potential, triumph and tragedy, that only such words will do?

But the mystery here is greater than at first glance. Even accepting Moses's reverie as a natural human response, we are still left with the question: What was God's original statement? There is no verse in the Torah that directly corresponds to Moses's statement. What did God say? Why had Moses been confused by it? How did the death of Aaron's sons clarify it for him? The answer to these questions

is the subject of a dispute in the Talmud (B. Zevahim 115b) where two verses are proposed as candidates for Moses's conundrum. By looking at the Talmud's two suggestions as to what God's confusing statement was, we can gain insight into Moses and Aaron, understanding their reactions to this moment better.

The first possibility the Talmud presents is that Moses is referring to God's commandment in in Exodus 19:21–22:

The LORD said to Moses, “Go down, warn the people not to break through to the LORD to gaze, lest many of them perish. The priests also, who come near the LORD, must stay pure, lest the LORD break out against them.”

Here God warns Moses that the people should not ascend Mt. Sinai during God's revelation upon the mountain. The power and presence of Divine glory is so great, and the human form so weak, that the bodies of those who approach will be overwhelmed and destroyed. It does not seem that there is any moral quality to this prohibition, but simply anxiety over uncontrollable danger. God seems unable to hold back the inherent radiating power that Divine presence evokes. Like getting too close to the sun, or perhaps to a source of ionizing radiation, those who get too close to God's immediate presence will inevitably perish because of the tremendous force of the radiating Glory.

This is very much akin to the story of Uzza ben Abinadab recounted in II Samuel 6:3–8 and 1 Chronicles 13:7–11. Uzza and his brother were charged with driving the cart carrying the ark when David first tried to bring it up to Jerusalem. On the way, the animals driving the cart stumbled, leading the ark to slip, and Uzza reached out, catching the ark, and dying

instantly on the spot. David was afraid to bring the ark any further and delayed bringing it into Jerusalem for three months. Uzza committed no moral transgression, only an instinctual error, and died from direct exposure to God's power. If we accept this understanding, Moses means to tell Aaron something like: "Working this close to so much power is dangerous, and those closest (i.e., most physically proximate) to God will be the most exposed to the danger." In other words, God's power cuts both ways. It can grant great benefits, but it can overwhelm us and destroy us as well if we fail to take care.

The second possibility the Talmud presents is Exodus 29:42–43:

... a regular burnt offering throughout the generations, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting before the LORD. For there I will meet with you, and there I will speak with you, and there I will meet with the Israelites, and it shall be sanctified by My Presence (*kevodi*).

Here God alludes to the Divine glory (*kevodi*) as the "power source" of the desert sanctuary, namely God's presence. What does Moses find mysterious or confusing about this? Well, even in the desert, God is represented by the *kohanim*; they make up at least a portion of God's glory. Can humans truly sanctify the Divine, when the Divine is already entirely holy? Here, the Talmud suggests that we read the word *kevodi* (lit. "My-glory") as *mekhubadai* ("those who glorify me"). In other words, God's presence is one and the same as the human beings who attempt to approach God. Those who reach out to God can come to represent God so completely that they are equivalent to God's own presence.

With this interpretation, the Talmud links the act of Nadab and Abihu in bringing strange fire with more typical acts of martyrdom. The Talmud seems to be claiming that the two sons of Aaron chose to serve by dying for God in order to dedicate the sanctuary with their lives. This act of self-sacrifice would show the power contained in the sanctuary and make it a source of awe among the people. While this may be troubling to us, the Talmud's interpretation attempts to fully demonstrate the strength of Moses's words to Aaron:

"Your sons did no wrong. They died doing a good thing, sanctifying the Divine name among the people."

The raw, visceral potency of this understanding is undeniable, and I find its call a primal one. Though I know there will be many who find this second interpretation deeply disturbing, its demand that connection with God is worth giving up one's life raises the stakes in religious life. When we fail to see that this power, majesty, and glory is one of the things that consistently *attracts* people to religion, we put ourselves in a very dangerous position. At some level, the tremendous mystery which awakens within us fear and trembling can be properly taken as the Divine voice calling out to us. On the other hand (and this is the thing that disturbs us so deeply), what we think to be a great mystery can simply be a moment of self-delusion, leading us into acts of nihilistic self-destruction. One of our most central tasks as religious people is to sort out magical thinking and wish-fulfilling fantasy from God's true demands, demands that lead to authentic holy deeds and actual moral imperatives.

I think this last thought is more aligned with the Talmud's first interpretation, that all power, especially religious power, can be overwhelming and dangerous, and it needs to be contained in order to be safely employed for the betterment of the world. This is what happened at Mount Sinai when God told the people they should not ascend the mountain lest they die. Can we understand the purpose of the desert sanctuary similarly? Must we not keep Divine power contained in the midst of the people? If we are able to do so, becoming a community both containing and embodying holiness, we can approach God without fear. My blessing for us all is that we have access to God's power, but safely and beneficially, not as a mighty storm, but as a gentle rain.