

A Love That Transforms



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This week's parashah includes the tragic story of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's two eldest sons, who died, consumed by divine fire, after bringing an offering of alien fire within the sacred precincts of the Mishkan. Considering the dramatic nature of the narrative and its compelling pathos, the story is told with remarkable terseness. Nadav and Avihu place coals and incense in their firepans and offer it as a sacrifice, an act which they had not been instructed to do.

Immediately, fire issues forth from God and kills them. Moses tells his brother rather cryptically, "This is what God meant in saying I will be sanctified by those close to me, and I will be glorified before the entire people." Aaron is silent. Moses then calls Aaron's two cousins to remove the bodies. He warns Aaron and his two remaining sons, Elazar and Itamar, not to show any outward signs of mourning lest they also die, nor to leave the sanctuary, again on pain of death. God then addresses Aaron directly, warning him to avoid intoxicating beverages prior to entering the sanctuary—once more on pain of death—and instructs him in further priestly duties. Final instructions from Moses to Aaron and his remaining sons are followed by Moses's discovery of a significant error of omission by Elazar and Itamar in their priestly responsibilities. Aaron offers an explanation and justification for his sons' errors, which Moses accepts ([Lev. 10](#)).

Commentaries through the ages have focused on the actions of Aaron's eldest sons, asking whether being slain by God's holy fire was, in fact, a punishment—and if so, what exactly it was that they were being punished for. Most commentators conclude that the deaths of Nadav and Avihu were indeed punishment, but disagree as to the nature of their transgression: they were drunk when they entered the sanctuary; they were improperly clothed; they

had not washed their hands and feet; they were unmarried; they had entered the holy place without authorization; or they had expounded the law before Moses, their teacher. What we can conclude from this plethora of possible explanations is that no one knows for sure why they were killed. Commentators are equally intrigued and perplexed by Moses's statement to Aaron, and Aaron's subsequent silence, in the face of this horrific tragedy.

If, however, we look at the unfolding narrative in its entirety, a case can be made that the protagonists are not Nadav and Avihu, but Aaron. This story is about Aaron. It is a story about a parent-child relationship in the same tradition as the accounts of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, Jacob and Joseph. Two elements of the story stand out: When Nadav and Avihu are killed, Aaron is silent. But the language the Torah uses, *vayidom Aharon*, is strong language. This is not mere silence, the absence of speech. It is a profound silence. Aaron is dumbstruck! We can picture him as virtually catatonic. Then, after his brother Moses tells him he must not show outward signs of mourning or leave the Mishkan, God speaks to him. It is one of only two times in the entire Torah that God speaks directly to Aaron, the other being after the death by fire of his cousins, Korah and his followers, in the desert insurrection. It is at this point in the narrative, when God speaks to Aaron, that Aaron undergoes a transformation.

William F. May, a Christian theologian, describes two kinds of parental love, *accepting love* and *transforming love*, that necessarily exist in tension with each other. *Accepting love* is unconditional. It is a love that accepts the child as she is. *Transforming love* promotes the well-being of the child. It is a love that wants the child to flourish, to be the best he can

possibly be. As May [notes](#), however, “accepting love, without transforming love, slides into indulgence and finally neglect. Transforming love, without accepting love, badgers and finally rejects.” It is the need to find the balance between these two kinds of love that we find at the heart of this narrative.

Aaron has been busy, preoccupied with the preparation for and consecration of the Mishkan. Immediately after the week of consecration, Nadav and Avihu make a tragic error, perhaps with sincere and praiseworthy motivation. They make the offering of incense not as prescribed, but on their own initiative and in their own way. Does Aaron bear some responsibility? Has he been an enabler of his sons as he was in the incident of the golden calf? Is that perhaps why he is in a state of shock and cannot speak? The Torah never answers these questions explicitly but leaves them for us to ponder.

Then God, for the very first time, speaks directly to Aaron. Is that act in and of itself meant as a kind of comfort? And what words does God speak? They are words of instruction, rules of behavior, and a charge to teach the Israelites God’s laws as transmitted by Moses. Here, God is modeling what May called transforming parental love, the love that seeks the betterment of children, even as Aaron is charged with becoming the teacher-in-chief of the people. And then, when Moses learns of the transgression of Elazar and Itamar, Aaron comes to their defense, takes responsibility on himself, and mollifies his brother.

Aaron, it seems, finally comprehends the tension between *accepting love* and *transforming love* and the necessity of finding a balance between them. In doing so, he becomes our teacher and exemplar, showing us how we may instruct, exhort, and criticize our children, even at times saying “no,” and still assure them of our accepting and unconditional love. It is a lesson all of us—parents, teachers, and community leaders—should take to heart.

This commentary originally appeared in 2017.