

Geulas Yisrael #145

The Power and the Glory.. of Life in Israel

The long-awaited day had finally arrived. After collecting building materials, weaving priestly clothing, and crafting the various components of the Mishkan, the grand project of building a house for Hashem was completed. Evidently, our prayers for forgiveness after the egel fiasco were accepted. Hashem agreed to settle His presence in a wooden and gold-plated house which we had fashioned. The great love between Hashem and His chosen people had survived the horrific egel debacle.

Until the fire descended from heaven however, no one was certain that Hashem also desired our korbanot. Perhaps He had forgiven us, but only half-way. Perhaps He was willing to visit our Mishkan but not prepared to accept our sacrifices. Once the heavenly fire descended and consumed the korbanot it became evident that our relationship with Hashem had undergone a full restart.

Suddenly, tragedy struck. Two children of Aharon deviated from Mishkan protocol, and a second more ominous fire descended from heaven, this time incinerating Nadav and Avihu. A day which had been slated for celebration and vindication transformed into a dark and sorrowful day of tragedy. Our national excitement was washed away in grief and misery.

What was so terrible about the sin of Aharon's two sons? What possible crime warranted such severe divine retribution, especially on this triumphant day. Given the blissful occasion, perhaps Aharon's children should have been pardoned or at least should have received clemency. What were they guilty of?

Too Comfortable?

There are differing accounts as to the exact nature of their sin. From the Torah 's description it appears that Nadav and Avihu offered a personal blend of ketoret which hadn't been authorized or, as the Torah refers to it, an **אש זרה**. Certainly, unlicensed ketoret is an offense, but why did it elicit such a harsh repercussion.

Chazal assumed that there were additional crimes, aside from the unsanctioned ketoret. According to one version Aharon's sons entered

the Mishkan while slightly inebriated. Even a minimal amount of intoxication is forbidden when entering the Mishkan. A different opinion in Chazal suggests that the “additional” crime of Aharon’s two sons was their hastiness in issuing a halachik ruling in the presence of Moshe Rabeinu. Instead of deferring to a higher authority, they usurped Moshe’s title, and for this impudence they were punished.

These three crimes – unauthorized ketoret, inebriation, and usurping Moshe’s authority share one common denominator: none of them is sinister or wicked. They can all be considered misdemeanors or minor offenses, especially given the “spirit of the day”. It was reasonable to assume that a day this festive, invited special korbanot, in addition to the standard fare. It was reasonable to imagine that moderate drinking could enhance the liveliness and joviality of the religious celebration. It was reasonable to assume that, on this day, hierarchies could be temporarily suspended, and that younger Torah scholars could enthusiastically “cut the line” and answer Torah questions. The opening day of the Mishkan was a once-in history event and slight deviations should be tolerated, or at least, shouldn’t be “excessively” punished. The crimes of Nadav and Avihu, even if taken together, seem mild and don’t appear to justify the severe punishment they suffered.

Educational, Not Punitive

Evidently, their death wasn’t just a punishment, but also was a lesson. On a day when humans could, potentially, feel *too close* to Hashem, when a human-crafted began to lodge the infinite divine presence, Hashem’s unknowability and unfathomability could, potentially be compromised. On this day of celebration, the distance between Hashem and Man had to be accentuated. When standing in the presence “the Other” you don’t freelance, you don’t drink, and you certainly don’t break protocol.

The death of Nadav and Avihu wasn’t solely punitive, it was also instructive, lessoning us about proper boundaries between Hashem and Man. As Moshe Rabeinu instructs Aharon after the tragedy:

בְּקִרְוֵי אֶקְדָּשׁ

The tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu strengthened Hashem's kedusha, reaffirmed His transcendence and reinforced His incomprehensibility.

Had these sins occurred *somewhere else* they would not have warranted such a harsh response. Had these deviances occurred *on a different day*, perhaps the heavenly response would not have been so radical. Since, however, these misdemeanors occurred on a day on which Hashem's transcendence may have been diminished and, additionally, the crimes occurred in the presence of Hashem in the Mishkan, they could not be overlooked.

Such is the steep price of standing before Hashem. The closer you live to Him the more delicate the relationship, the greater care must be taken, and the less margin of error exists.

Hundreds of years later the same harsh lesson was handed down a second time. During the early stages of Dovid Hamelech's reign, after a twenty-year sojourn outside of Yerushalayim, the aron hakodesh was joyously paraded back to the capital city. During the jubilant procession the aron slipped from the wagon. Attempting to prevent it from falling, one of the caretakers named "Uzza" illegally clutched it with his bare hands. Uzza made an honest and innocent mistake, assuming that the aron regulations could be violated to prevent it from falling. He was immediately killed and, once again gala day of celebration turned sorrowful. Like the two sons of Aharon, Uzza's crimes didn't warrant such stern punishment. Once again, the fatal outcome was educational and not merely punitive. The festive parade of the aron threatened to diminish the distance between Hashem and the revelers. Too much giddiness and too much merriment may have diminished reverence and gravitas. On this day, even a slight miscue, such as touching the aron hakodesh elicited a severe response. Living in close precincts to Hashem leaves little margin for error.

The Glory and the Fear

Living close to Hashem is frightening but also glorious. Sadly, some are so gripped with terror and fear of consequences that they cannot perceive the grandeur of living Hashem's presence. Because he was petrified of the potential consequences of this lifestyle, Esav bartered his rights to the first born. As he himself announced

הנה אנכי הולך למות ולמה זה לי בכורה

Chazal infer that Esav was concerned that a life in the Mikdash would be deadly. One minor slip-up and the consequences would be dire.

Paralyzed by fear, Esav could not appreciate the glory of a life of mission. He couldn't see beyond the consequences and appreciate the splendor. Life before Hashem sometimes comes at a steep price, but that life is meaningful and momentous.

Crisis in Israel

Over the past few months, we have all discovered the steep price of living closer to Hashem. We don't know why this dreadful tragedy struck our people and our land, but we do know that, along with the privilege of living in Israel comes a massive responsibility to live up to the standards of a life before Hashem. For thousands of years, we didn't live in Hashem's direct presence and our margin for error was greater. Now that we are back in His presence our relationship is more delicate and our mistakes more critical. We are starting to appreciate the grave responsibility of living in the land of Hashem. We certainly don't know what caused this tragedy, but we realize that, in Israel, our relationship is more fragile and the impact of our behavior more fateful.

Some view this price as too steep and prefer to live outside of Israel and far away from the awesome responsibilities and consequences of this privilege. That is an "Esav" attitude. We finally have the opportunity to live near Hashem and we dare not shrink in fear. Esav was obsessed with dread, we are enchanted by the glory.

We have all suffered through tragedy, anxiety, and sadness over the past few months. However, many Israelis will concede that during this period they have searched for meaning in ways they haven't ever before. Every Israeli will acknowledge that, despite the hardships, they can't imagine living elsewhere during this period. Living before Hashem in His land makes our everyday lives meaningful, purposeful, and historically resonant. We hope we never again have to pay the price for that privilege. But let's not forget the privilege and let's not forget the glory.