

Shemini

April 2, 2016

This Week's Text

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן, הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה לְאמֹר בְּקִרְבֵי אֲקַדֵּשׁ וְעַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָעַמֶּאֱפֹכֵד; וַיִּדַם אַהֲרֹן.

Then Moses said to Aaron: 'This is it what Adonai spoke, when saying: Through them that are near to Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be honored.' And Aaron was silent.

Linking Our Text to Modern Israel

Biblical episodes, like the one this week, illustrate how communities seek to understand why people meet with adversity and even untimely death. Aaron's sons die suddenly and the text offers no explanation beyond an act of spontaneity—an unsolicited offering of “alien fire.” Many commentaries have argued that God's wrath consumed these young priests for their audacious offering of uninvited sacrifices, ignoring Moses' leadership, and attempting to usurp the role of Aaron the High Priest. Yet, careful consideration of alternative explanations points to the idea that Nadav and Avihu died because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In the *midrashic* volume *Vayikra Rabba*, Bar Kapara, in the name of Rab Yimiya ben Elazar, comments that Nadav and Avihu met their demise because they entered sections of the Mishkan which were out of bounds, using as proof a later verse 16:1 that reads, “And Adonai spoke to Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they got too near to God and died.”

The medieval commentator, Rashbam, takes another angle—explaining that it was timing. Rashbam states that the offering brought by Aaron's sons at that time was consumed by a blast of Divine fire because God was actually scheduled to appear at that very moment. Nadav and Avihu were merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Perhaps as disturbing as the untimely death of Nadav and Avihu are Moses' and Aaron's reaction and response. Moses offers Aaron consolation with an “aha” moment—ah, that's what Adonai meant when God said, “יברקיב,” it is *through them* that I will make myself known. Aaron, stunned by his brother's ineffective explanation, remains silent.



Additional Resources:

A beautiful [contemporary midrash](#) on the deaths of Nadav and Avihu.

[Israaid](#) - a non-profit, nongovernmental organization that provides disaster relief within and outside of Israel.

Bruce Rosen, et al, Health Policy Monitor: [The Evolution of Emergency Preparedness Policy](#), 2007

There is a stark difference in this story and the response to calamity and heartbreak in contemporary Israel. While a segment of Israelis may still explain misfortune as Divine punishment, the emotional response is never silence. Rather, when a single person is at risk, let alone, dies, under tragic circumstances, there is an outcry from family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers who somehow feel that any loss is their loss. Visitors to Israel know that upon hearing the news through loudspeakers on a bus ride (a not uncommon occurrence), in a grocery store, or anywhere else, should the announcer tell of any civilian, soldier or child dying, there is a collective outcry from everyone present. Israel mourns aloud for each and every loss. There is a sense that, indeed, those victims were truly in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In addition to their notoriously active emotional side, Israelis have created an incredible network for practical preparedness for tragedies and emergencies. With limited casualties, the emergency response is swift and utilizes some of the world's most contemporary resources. With a large-scale event anywhere in the country, immediate response takes place and Israel's Supreme Health Authority, a committee of the Ministry of Health, works on-site to manage the response. This management system includes prevention, contingency planning, and coordinated action with interdisciplinary teams. The public health emergencies that arise out of major incidents are intense and Israel has demonstrated effective coordinated response supported by innovative thinking during and after the incidences. As a result, countries around the world look to Israel as a model for emergency response preparedness.

Jewish people throughout the world have just concluded the celebration of Purim, with its silly costumes, light hearted parodies, and boisterous parties for children and adults. This is one way Jews responded to extreme hardship and religious oppression while in exile. And now we are on a countdown to Passover, a triumphant celebration of breaking the bonds of slavery and escaping the tyranny of ancient Egyptian ruler. We know very little of the real-time response of ancient Israelites or early Jewish communities other than what we can glean from the modern day rituals and legal material that grew out of the experiences of those first centuries of Jewish life inside and outside the land of Israel. Yet, today we are privy to the media from Israel and from global sources that praise the immediate action of Israel and its citizens when they are faced with tragedies.

Discussion Questions:

1. What can be learned by the culture of societal connection in the face of tragedy exercised by Israelis?
2. After a few years of refraining to speak of his experience during the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel said: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation." His words are meant to spur action in the face of oppression. In this context, how can we use his words to encourage both the voicing of our dismay in response to tragic deaths and the actions we must take to give honor and dignity to those who have died and those who are bereaved?