**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT SHEMINI**

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**The Standing of the Priesthood   
in Light of the Sin of the Sons of Aharon**

**Rav Gad Eldad**

Just as the celebration of the inauguration of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) reaches its climax, a catastrophe strikes that casts a dark shadow over the event. Nadav and Avihu, the two older sons of Aharon, die when they offer a strange fire on the Altar. Moshe immediately reacts with composure, even finding words to say to his bereaved brother while Aharon remains silent:

And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.

Then Moshe said to Aharon: This is it that the Lord spoke, saying: Through them that are near to Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aharon held his peace. (*Vayikra* 10:1-3)

Moshe takes charge of the situation with level-headedness:

And Moshe called Misha’el and Eltzafan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aharon, and said to them: Draw near, carry your brothers from before the sanctuary out of the camp. So they drew near, and carried them in their tunics out of the camp, as Moshe had said. (*Vayikra* 10:4-5)

At this point, Moshe turns to his brother and nephews to instruct them as to what they should do next. At the end of the section, we read that Moshe becomes angry with the surviving sons of Aharon, Elazar and Itamar, whom he claims have erred in their actions. Aharon responds to this complaint, and this time it is precisely Moshe who remains quiet.

Thus we find that the passage opens with Moshe's words and Aharon's silence, and it closes with Aharon's words and Moshe's silence. We will try now to understand what happens in the middle.

**“And they did According to the Word of Moshe”**

Moshe addresses Aharon and his surviving sons twice. The first time, he instructs them about the appropriate mourning practices:

And Moshe said to Aharon, and to Elazar and to Itamar, his sons: Let not the hair of your heads go loose, neither rend your clothes, that you die not, and that He be not wroth with all the congregation; but let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the Lord has kindled. And you shall not go out from the door of the tent of meeting, lest you die; for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you. **And they did according to the word of Moshe**. (*Vayikra* 10:6-7)

The second time, he directs them with respect to their conduct in relation to the sacrifices:

And Moshe spoke to Aharon, and to Elazar and to Itamar, his sons that were left: Take the meal-offering that remains of the offerings of the Lord made by fire, and eat it without leaven beside the altar; for it is most holy. And you shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due, and your sons' due, of the offerings of the Lord made by fire; for so I am commanded. And the chest taken as a wave offering and the hind leg taken as an elevated gift shall you eat in a clean place; you, and your sons, and your daughters with you; for they are given as your due, and your sons' due, out of the sacrifices of the peace-offerings of the Israelites. The hind leg taken as an elevated gift and the chest taken as a wave offering shall they bring with the offerings of the fat made by fire, to wave it for a wave-offering before the Lord; and it shall be yours, and your sons' with you, as a due forever; as the Lord has commanded. (*Vayikra* 10:12-15)

This time, however, the Torah does not mention that they act according to the words of Moshe. The explanation for this seems to lie in an event that is described in between these two commands:

And the Lord spoke to Aharon, saying: Drink no wine nor strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, that you die not; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. And that you may distinguish between the holy and the mundane, and between the unclean and the clean; and that you may teach the Israelites all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moshe. (*Vayikra* 10:8-11)

Here we come to a turning point in the story. God turns directly to Aharon. Moreover, this section brings us to the realization that until this point God is silent throughout the event. Moshe is running things, with no instructions from above.

Suddenly God appears, and to our surprise, He skips over Moshe and turns directly to Aharon. It is also unclear from the continuation of the story whether Moshe ever becomes aware of this revelation, since he does not relate to it in his subsequent remarks. How are we to understand this twist in the narrative?

**“And There Came Forth Fire from Before the Lord, and Devoured Them, and They Died Before the Lord”**

Let us try to reconstruct what happened.

All the people gather at the door of the Tent of Meeting, and the excitement rises. Before their very eyes, Aharon offers the consecration offerings, presenting them before God. At the end of the service, the tension dissipates when the glory of God appears before them and a fire from heaven devours the offerings. The people prostrate themselves in the face of this spectacle and shout out to God:

**And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and consumed** upon the altar the burnt-offering and the fat; and when all the people saw it, they shouted, and fell on their faces. (*Vayikra* 9:24)

At the same time, the people are exposed to another sight. Nadav and Avihu approach the sanctuary as their father is accustomed to, with incense in their hands. Once again fire issues forth from before God, and once again it devours, but to everyone's shock, this time it consumes not the offering, but those who offer it:

**And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and devoured them,** and they died before the Lord. (*Vayikra* 10:2)

The Rashbam emphasizes the repetition of the same phrase to the point that he claims that we are dealing with the same event and the same fire:

"And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and devoured them" — This is "And there came forth fire" in the first verse… Here too, the two verses are one. When the fire went forth that would devour the burnt-offering and the peace-offering on the Outer Altar, when the sons of Aharon took and offered a strange fire on the Inner Altar, the fire went forth from before the Lord first to burn the incense inside, and there it struck the sons of Aharon and they died, and then it went out from there and came to the Outer Altar and devoured the burnt-offering. (Rashbam, *Vayikra* 10:2)

Now, let us consider the possible meanings of the calamity that cuts short the celebration of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*. The people rejoice in God's acceptance of Aharon's offerings, because they are not only his offerings, as he deals also with their offerings, bringing them before God. The favorable acceptance of the offerings proves that the people find favor before God. In addition, it proves that those who bring these offerings find favor before God. However, that same fire that confirms these truths also clarifies in a most striking manner which priests find favor and which of them do not survive the encounter with God and are rejected by Him.

It turns out then that in the course of the first realization of the sanctity of the priesthood, it becomes clear that not all of the priests are worthy of it. From here to challenging the standing of the priesthood is but a short jump. It is not a family of priests that is chosen, but rather the good ones who are chosen. If so, perhaps others could also be integrated into the priesthood. At the very least, we see that the sanctity of the priesthood in a particular family is not a genetic phenomenon, for even the rank of the priesthood must be proven and acquired.

**“That He Be Not Wroth With the Entire Congregation”**

It is possible, and so it might appear from Moshe's reaction to the situation, that this is the concern that stands before his eyes:

Then Moshe said to Aharon: This is it that the Lord spoke, saying: **Through them that are near to Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.** And Aharon held his peace. 

And Moshe called Misha’el and Eltzafan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aharon, and said to them: Draw near, carry your brothers from before the sanctuary out of the camp. So they drew near, and carried them in their tunics out of the camp, **as Moshe had said.**

And Moshe said to Aharon, and to Elazar and to Itamar, his sons: Let not the hair of your heads go loose, neither rend your clothes, that you die not, **and that He be not wroth with all the congregation; but let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the Lord has kindled.** And you shall not go out from the door of the tent of meeting, lest you die; for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you. **And they did according to the word of Moshe.** (*Vayikra* 10:3-7)

Moshe insists on emphasizing the people's responsibility for what has happened. In his view, Nadav and Avihu remained holy even in their death. Their status as the people's representatives, whose task it is to represent them before God, is still in place. They fall in the line of duty, and therefore if falls upon the people who have sent them to mourn their deaths. So too the standing of their surviving brothers is not impaired. Since the anointing oil of the Lord is upon their heads, despite the disaster, they remain obligated to the priesthood and may not leave the door of the tent. For this reason, their Levite cousins are called upon to take the corpses of the priests who perished in the disaster outside the camp.

The Torah emphasizes each time that those who hear Moshe's words obey him and that his instructions are carried out in full. But is he able to convince the others that his approach is the right one? Perhaps Aharon's thunderous silence hides his bewilderment about the meaning of the events? Does perhaps a doubt arise in his heart that Moshe's interpretation is not necessarily correct?

**“And the Lord Spoke to Aharon, Saying”**

At this point, God intervenes in the story. Now his words are directed specifically to Aharon, because it is he who must be persuaded:

And the Lord spoke to Aharon, saying: Drink no wine nor strong drink, **neither you nor your sons with you,** when you go into the tent of meeting, that you die not; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. And that you may distinguish between the holy and the mundane, and between the unclean and the clean; and that you may teach the Israelites all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moshe. (*Vayikra* 10:8-11)

The significance of God's words is not limited to their content, but emerges the very fact that God speaks to Aharon. While Moshe makes sure that the surviving sons of Aharon not leave the Tent of Meeting, using the words: **"And you shall not go out** from the door of the Tent of Meeting, **lest you die,"** the parallel expression in the words of Gods runs in the opposite direction**: "When you go into the tent of meeting, that you die not,"** relating to the next time that they will enter.

God confirms Aharon's priesthood for all generations, and instructs him about how to conduct himself in the sanctuary, both him and his sons after him. The Torah returns matters to their proper course when it joins these words to all of the instructions given by Moshe up until this point. Now, Aharon is able to release himself from the tension that has enveloped him regarding the standing of his family. Let us trace the ramifications of this understanding in his actions.

**“And Aharon Spoke to Moshe”**

Let us now move on to the second part of Moshe's words, as he instructs Aharon and his sons about how to conduct themselves with the priestly portion of the sacrifices in light of what has happened:

And Moshe spoke to Aharon, **and to Elazar and to Itamar, his sons that were left:** Take **the meal-offering that is left** of the offerings of the Lord made by fire, and eat it without leaven beside the altar; for it is most holy. And you shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due, and your sons' due, of the offerings of the Lord made by fire; **for so I am commanded.** And the chest taken as a wave offering and the hind leg taken as an elevated gift shall you eat in a clean place; you, and your sons, and your daughters with you; for they are given as your due, and your sons' due, out of the sacrifices of the peace-offerings of the Israelites. The hind leg taken as an elevated gift and the chest taken as a wave offering shall they bring with the offerings of the fat made by fire, to wave it for a wave-offering before the Lord; and it shall be yours, and your sons' with you, as a due forever; **as the Lord has commanded.**

And Moshe diligently inquired for the goat of the sin-offering, and, behold, it was burnt; and he became wroth **with Elazar and with Itamar, the sons of Aharon that were left,** saying: Why have you not eaten the sin-offering in the place of the sanctuary, seeing it is most holy, **and He has given it you to bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord?** Behold, the blood of it was not brought into the sanctuary within; you should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, **as I commanded.**

And Aharon spoke to Moshe: Behold, this day have they offered their sin-offering and their burnt-offering before the Lord, and there have befallen me such things as these; and if I had eaten the sin-offering today, **would it have been well-pleasing in the sight of the Lord?**

And when Moshe heard that, **it was well-pleasing in his sight.** (*Vayikra* 10:12-20)

Moshe continues with his decisive instructions dealing with maintaining the sanctity of the *Mishkan*, ignoring what has happened. He emphasizes the imperative dimension of his words and expects compliance, but we must pay attention to the fact that from this perspective, this section of his words stands in contrast to the earlier section. In this series of commands, the Torah does not note that Moshe's instructions are carried out in any way. It is precisely the comparison to the previous passage, where the Torah notes that Moshe's instructions are fully obeyed, which highlights the fact that in the second part, with all that relates to the sanctuary, his words remain hanging in the air, until the climax regarding the goat of the sin-offering.

While clarifying what happened with the goat of the sin-offering, Moshe discovers to his surprise that Aharon and his sons have deviated from the instructions that they have been given, and he lashes out at Aharon's sons. In his opinion, the priests must function as usual, and burning the goat undermines the atonement of those that sent it, thereby opening the door to a challenge to the priests' standing.

However here, for the first time, someone responds to Moshe's words. Aharon, whose voice has not been heard since the beginning of the narrative, and who has been passive the entire time, hearing the words of Moshe and the words of God, suddenly reacts. In his words, he presents the antithesis to Moshe's approach. He argues that matters cannot go on as usual. He has suffered a family tragedy, and this impacts upon his ability and fitness to take part in the routine service of the *Mishkan.*

In my opinion, Aharon's answer, which explains his decision to deviate from the command and burn the goat instead of eating it, could only have been given after God speaks to him. Moshe insists on sending the message that matters are continuing as usual, in order to repel any doubt raised against the standing of the priesthood. Aharon, however, already knows that such a disqualification will not stick to him. Now Aharon can turn to his personal grief, knowing that his conduct in the *Mishkan* will not impair the firm and everlasting standing of the priesthood. In such a situation, he allows himself to consider what has happened to him on the personal level in order to make the right decision about how to deal with the offerings of those that sent him. The Torah alludes to the correctness of Aharon's approach in a brilliant manner.

It refers to Elazar and Itamar as "his sons that were left" (*banav ha-notarim*) just two steps away from the formulation "the meal-offering that is left" (*ha-mincha ha-noteret)* and it seems that the intention is to draw a comparison between the meal offering that is left and the sons of Aharon that are left. The sanctity of the meal-offering that is left follows from its being part of the dough, a handful of which has been offered on the altar, and so too the sanctity of the sons of Aharon that are left follows from their being part of the priestly family, that same family of which the sons of Aharon who perished were members.

**“Would It Have Been Well-Pleasing in the Sight of the Lord?”**

It is possible that Aharon in his response aims precisely at this point. Throughout the story, Moshe issues directives. He both presents himself as the source of these imperatives and also relies on commands that he has heard earlier from God prior to the period of the *Mishkan*'s inauguration. As we have already pointed out, God remains silent in the story, and it is precisely this fact that drives Moshe to fill the vacuum as he sees fit. Since no other command has been issued, the previous command still applies.

Indeed, the only one who hears God's words in this context is Aharon. In his words, he does not contradict the words of Moshe, but rather directs him to the question of whether it is right to ignore what has happened and to continue to obey the word of God given in a reality which never anticipated what has actually happened.

In this spirit, the end of the passage makes use of another play on words. Aharon formulated his words as a question regarding God's will at this bizarre time, and one might have expected that Moshe would inquire of God in order to answer him.

However, he does not do this. It stands to reason that Aharon is asking a rhetorical question: Is it necessary to ask God? Would it have been pleasing in the sight of the Lord to comply with earlier imperatives without considering the events that have taken place in the meantime?

In response, the Torah implies that Moshe understands the point. Aharon asks: **"Would it have been well-pleasing in the sight of the Lord?"** and the Torah formulates Moshe's reaction with the same words: "And when Moshe heard that, **it was well-pleasing in his sight."** There is no need here for any further communication from God, for He has already spoken by way of the fire. It is, however, necessary to understand God's words in the proper manner: "And when Moshe heard that, it was well-pleasing in his sight."

(Translated by David Strauss)

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