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## Reticence vs. Impetuosity

It should have been a day of joy. The Israelites had completed the Mishkan, the Sanctuary. For seven days Moses had made preparations for its consecration.<sup>1</sup> Now on the eighth day – the first of Nissan (Ex. 10:2), one year to the day since the Israelites had received their first command two weeks prior to the Exodus – the service of the Sanctuary was about to begin. The Sages say that it was in heaven the most joyous day since Creation (Megillah 10b).

But tragedy struck. The two elder sons of Aaron “offered a strange fire that had not been commanded” (Lev. 10:1) and the fire from heaven that should have consumed the sacrifices consumed them as well. They died. Aaron’s joy turned to mourning. *Vayidom Aharon*, “And Aaron was silent (10:3). The man who had been Moses’ spokesman could not longer speak. Words turned to ash in his mouth.

There is much in this episode that is hard to understand, much that has to do with the

concept of holiness and the powerful energies it released that, like nuclear power today, could be deadly dangerous if not properly used. But there is also a more human story about two approaches to leadership that still resonates with us today.

First there is the story about Aaron. We read about how Moses told him to begin his role as High Priest. “Moses [then] said to Aaron, ‘Approach the altar, and prepare your sin offering and burnt offering, thus atoning for you and the people. Then prepare the people’s offering to atone for them, as God has commanded’” (Lev. 9:7).

The Sages sensed a nuance in the words, “Approach the altar,” as if Aaron was standing at a distance from it, reluctant to come near. They said: “Initially Aaron was ashamed to come close. Moses said to him, ‘Do not be ashamed. This is what you have been chosen to do.’”<sup>2</sup>

Why was Aaron ashamed? Tradition gave two explanations, both brought by Nachmanides in his commentary to the Torah. The first is that Aaron was simply overwhelmed with trepidation at coming so close to the Divine Presence. The second is that Aaron, seeing the “horns” of the altar, was reminded of the Golden Calf, his great sin. How could he, who had played a key role in that terrible event, now take on the role of atoning for the people’s sins? That surely demanded an innocence he no longer had. Moses had to remind him that it was precisely to atone for sins that the altar had been made; and the fact that he had been chosen by God to be High Priest was an unequivocal sign that he had been forgiven.

There is perhaps a third explanation, albeit less spiritual. Until now Aaron had been in all respects second to Moses. Yes, he had been at his side throughout, helping him speak and lead. But there is vast psychological difference between being second-in-command and being

a leader in your own right. We probably all know examples of people who quite readily serve in an assisting capacity but who are terrified at the prospect of leading on their own.

Whichever explanation is true – and perhaps they all are – Aaron was reticent at taking on his new role, and Moses had to give him confidence. “This is what you have been chosen to do.”

The other story is the tragic one, of Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu, who “offered a strange fire, that had not been commanded.” The Sages offered several readings of this episode, all based on a close reading of the several places in the Torah where their death is referred to. Some said they had been drinking alcohol.<sup>3</sup> Others said that they were arrogant, holding themselves up above the community; this was the reason they had never married.<sup>4</sup>

Some say that they were guilty of giving a halachic ruling about the use of man-made fire, instead of asking their teacher Moses whether it was permitted (Eruvin 63a). Others say they were restless in the presence of Moses and Aaron. They said: when will these two old men die and we can lead the congregation? (Sanhedrin 52a)

However we read the episode, it seems clear that they were all too eager to exercise leadership. Carried away by their enthusiasm to play a part in the inauguration, they did something they had not been commanded to do. After all, had Moses not done something entirely on his own initiative, namely breaking the tablets when he came down the mountain and saw the Golden Calf? If he could act spontaneously, why not they?

They forgot the difference between a Priest and a Prophet. As we have seen in previous *Covenant & Conversations*, a Prophet lives and acts in time – in this moment that is unlike any

other. A Priest acts and lives in eternity, by following a set of rules that never change. Everything about “the holy,” the realm of the Priest, is precisely scripted in advance. The holy is the place where God, not man, decides.

Nadav and Avihu failed fully to understand that there are different kinds of leadership and they are not interchangeable. What is appropriate to one may be radically inappropriate to another. A judge is not a politician. A King is not a Prime Minister. A religious leader is not a celebrity seeking popularity. Confuse these roles and not only will you fail, you will also damage the very office you were chosen to hold.

The real contrast here, though, is the difference between Aaron and his two sons. They were, it seems, opposites. Aaron was over-cautious and had to be persuaded by Moses even to begin. Nadav and Avihu were not cautious enough. So keen were they to put their own stamp on the role of priesthood that their impetuosity was their downfall.

These are, perennially, the two challenges leaders must overcome. The first is the reluctance to lead. Why me? Why should I get involved? Why should I undertake the responsibility and all that comes with it – the high levels of stress, the sheer volume of work, and the never-ending criticisms leaders always have to face? Besides which, there are other people better qualified and more suited than I am.

Even the greatest were reluctant to lead. Moses at the Burning Bush found reason after reason to show that he was not the man for the job. Isaiah and Jeremiah both felt inadequate. Summoned to lead, Jonah ran away. The challenge really is daunting. But when you feel as if you are being called to a task, if you know that the mission is necessary and important, then there is nothing you can do but say, *Hineni*, “Here I am.” (Ex. 3:4) In the words of a famous book title, you have to “feel

the fear and do it anyway.”<sup>5</sup>

The other challenge is the polar opposite. There are some people who see themselves as rightful leaders. They are convinced that they can do it better than anyone else. We recall the famous remark of Israel’s first President, Chaim Weizmann, that he was head of a nation of a million presidents.

From a distance it seems so easy. Isn’t it obvious that the leader should do X, not Y? Homo sapiens contains many back seat drivers who know better than those whose hands are on the steering wheel. Put them in a position of leadership and they can do great damage. Never having sat in the driver’s seat, they have no idea of how many considerations have to be taken into account, how many voices of opposition have to be overcome, how difficult it is at one and the same time to cope with the pressures of events while not losing sight of long-term ideals and objectives. The late John F. Kennedy said that the worst shock on being elected President was that “when we got to the White House we discovered that things were as bad as we’d been saying they were.” Nothing prepares you for the pressures of leadership when the stakes are high.

Overenthusiastic, overconfident leaders can do great harm. Before they became leaders they understood events through their own perspective. What they did not understand is that leadership involves relating to many perspectives, many interest groups and points of view. That does not mean that you try to satisfy everyone. Those who do so end up satisfying no one. But you have to consult and persuade. Sometimes you need to honour precedent and the traditions of a particular institution. You have to know exactly when to behave as your predecessors did, and when not to. All this calls for considered judgement, not wild enthusiasm in the heat of the moment.

Nadav and Avihu were surely great people.

The trouble was that they believed they were great people. They were not like their father Aaron, who had to be persuaded to come close to the altar because of his sense of inadequacy. The one thing Nadav and Avihu lacked was a sense of their own inadequacy.<sup>6</sup>

To do anything great we have to be aware of these two temptations. One is the fear of greatness: who am I? The other is being convinced of your greatness: Who are they? I can do it better. We can do great things if (a) the task matters more than the person, (b) we are willing to do our best without thinking ourselves superior to others, and (c) we are willing to take advice, the thing Nadav and Avihu failed to do.

**People do not become leaders because they are great. They become great because they are willing to serve as leaders.** It does not matter that we think ourselves inadequate. Moses did. So did Aaron. What matters is the willingness, when challenge calls, to say, *Hineni*, “Here I am.”

## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why did the 1<sup>st</sup> Nissan begin as such a joyous day?
2. Would you have more confidence in a reticent leader or an impetuous leader?
3. Do either of these two extremes affect you in other areas of life, even when not playing a leadership role?

### NOTES

1. As described in Exodus 40.
2. Rashi to Lev. 9:7, quoting Sifra.
3. Vayikra Rabbah 12:1; Ramban to Lev. 10:9.
4. Vayikra Rabbah 20:10.
5. Susan Jeffers, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, Ballantine Books, 2006.
6. The composer Berlioz once said of a young musician: “He knows everything. The one thing he lacks is inexperience.”



## You Are What You Eat

One of the distinguishing practices of Jewish observance is the distinct set of dietary considerations that constitutes the laws of kashrut.

In the early chapters of the Torah, the prohibition against eating any part of a live animal is introduced - not as a "Jewish" law, but rather as a universal practice. Later, in the chapters that detail the formation of the Jewish People, the law requiring separation between milk and meat - specifically, the commandment not to "cook a kid in its mother's milk" - is repeated several times. Subsequently, prohibitions against the consumption of blood and certain fats were added.

In the book of Vayikra, in Parashat Shmini, we are presented with a long and detailed list of prohibited and permitted animals, fowl and fish. The list is not accompanied by any explanatory verses; all of the laws of kashrut are given without rhyme or reason. These particular laws are generally characterized by the term "*chok*" or statute, a biblical term used to denote a decree, something beyond the constructs of human logic - the type of law that man never would have intuited or created in the context of the "social contract."

The propriety or even the permissibility of searching for reasons for such laws is debated among the commentaries; we are, by definition, incapable of understanding God's

motives in creating these laws. On the other hand, many of our greatest sages encouraged all those who observe these laws to enhance their understanding of them from the human perspective: Rather than asking **why** God decreed that our diet should be governed by these specific rules, rather than asking **how** these laws affect us and our world, we are encouraged to approach *hukim* (Divine decrees) from the perspective of the adherent, and to ask, **what** is the spiritual message for me?<sup>1</sup> Subservience to laws of this type may constitute what Kierkegaard labeled a "leap of faith," but the subjective religious experience of the practitioner lies in the realm of the individual's intellectual, emotional and spiritual engagement with the mitzvah.

Dietary laws illustrate this distinction: The prohibition against eating a severed limb from a live animal (or, for that matter, severing a limb from a live animal), should require no explanation. Human decency recoils at the very thought of such barbaric behavior, and we require no symbolic interpretation for this universal prohibition. On the other hand, the prohibition against mixing milk and meat is not intrinsically repugnant in this way, and requires us to consider less literal levels of meaning: Milk is symbolic of the flow of life from mother to child. Although the Torah does permit us to eat meat, and, unavoidably, to take the life of an animal for this purpose, there are limitations that must be respected. The prohibition against mixing milk and meat implies that the flow of life symbolized by milk is incongruous with the consumption of flesh. To combine the two is to create an incongruity that dulls our sensitivity. Thus, although the law is transmitted without a rationale, the symbolism involved in this law speaks to the human condition. We do not ask what God's rationale is, nor do we examine the physical affects and outcomes of observance or non-observance. Instead, we discern a deeper message that impacts our inner spiritual world, and, at the same time, brings us closer to the Creator.

In this same way, we may now approach the laws in Parashat Shmini. The list of animals and birds that are deemed unkosher includes carnivorous species: Although eating meat is allowed, the animals we eat should be herbivores and not carnivores. Additionally, we are permitted to eat only fish that have scales and fins. On a functional level, fins serve an interesting purpose: They allow fish to swim upstream, against the tide.

Perhaps these seemingly arbitrary sets of markers contain a great spiritual message: We are what we eat. We must be careful about the food we ingest, because it becomes a part of us, not only biologically, but also spiritually. Although we are permitted to eat meat, this should not be our defining trait. Furthermore, perhaps fish is an important part of our diet not only because it is a healthy source of protein, but because of the defining characteristic embodied in the signs of their kashrut: their ability to swim against the tide. This same ability has been a defining trait and an invaluable skill for Jews throughout history. Just as the laws of kashrut have, to a great extent, secured our identity as a separate people, our ability to swim against the tide has insured that we are not pulled by the shifting tides of time and fashion into oblivion.

For a more in-depth understanding see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2015/04/audio-and-essays-parashat-shmini.html>

1. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik discussed this distinction at length. An adaptation of some of The Rav's lectures on this topic may be found in Chapter 10 of Abraham Besdin's **Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav, vol. 2** (1989: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., Hoboken N.J.).



## The Sins at the Beginning

During the dedication of the *Mishkan*, the Jewish people were required to bring many *korbanos*, sacrifices, (Vayikra 9:3-4) a goat for a sin offering, a calf and lamb for a burnt offering and a bull and a ram for peace offerings.

Why so many? The *Toras Kohanim* explains that the Jewish people had an account with Hashem, with “sins at the beginning and sins at the end.” The “sins at the beginning” refer to the sale of Yosef, when the brothers dipped his coat in goat’s blood. The goat comes as atonement for that sin. The “sins at the end” refer to the Golden Calf, for which the calf is brought as atonement.

We can readily understand why the Jewish people had to make amends for the sin of the Golden Calf during the dedication ceremony of the *Mishkan*. The erection of the Golden Calf as an intermediary to Hashem was tantamount to *avodah zarah*, a direct affront to Him. Therefore, when the *Mishkan* was being dedicated and the *Shechinah* was about to dwell within it, amends were very much in order.

But what was the connection between the sale of Yosef and the dedication of the *Mishkan*? It was not a recent occurrence. Why then should it be brought up again in this context?

The *Yalkut Yehudah* points out that an underlying element of jealousy led to the sale

of Yosef. The brothers could not bear that Yaakov singled Yosef out for a special role, that he gave him special treatment, that he provided him with special garments. If Yosef was so special, that meant they were less special. Unable to bear the thought, they plotted against him and eventually sold him into slavery.

What was happening when the *Mishkan* was being built? One family was being singled out to be the priestly caste, to perform the sacred service, to wear special priestly garb, to be given the priestly gifts, to be treated as special in every way. The *Kohanim* were an easy target for jealousy, as indeed came to pass during Korach's rebellion, when they declared (*Bamidbar* 16:3), "The entire congregation is holy and God is among them; why should you lord it over the assembly of God?"

The dedication of the *Mishkan* was, therefore, a time to remember that in Judaism there are roles. There are roles for *Kohanim*; there are roles for Levites; there are roles for men; there are roles for women. Not everyone is alike. Not everyone has the same strengths. Not everyone is going to have the same duties and responsibilities. Not everyone is going to get the same benefits and privileges. Everyone must be content with the role Hashem has assigned to him.

This then was an exceedingly appropriate time to bring sacrifices to atone for the sin of selling Yosef. This would impress upon the people the extreme danger of giving in to jealousy. It had led to disaster in the past, and it could lead to disaster in the future, unless it was nipped in the bud.

## Special Qualifications

After Moshe gave Aharon all the detailed instructions regarding his duties in the dedication of the *Mishkan*, he said to him, "Draw near to the Altar." What happened? Why did he need special encouragement? Why

did Moshe have to coax him forward?

The *Toras Kohanim* explains that Aharon suddenly saw the Altar in the shape of an ox, and he shrunk back. As the Ramban explains, the shape of the ox reminded Aharon of the sin of the Golden Calf, in which he had played an unwilling role.

In his great righteousness, Aharon did not consider himself worthy of approaching the Altar. "How can I come near to the Altar?" he said. "I, too, participated in the Sin of the Golden Calf."

"My brother, you're afraid of that?" Moshe told him. "You of all people don't have to fear what the ox represents."

That is why, the *Toras Kohanim* concludes, Moshe said to Aharon, "Draw near to the Altar."

The *Toras Kohanim* leaves us somewhat in the dark. Why indeed did Aharon have nothing to fear from the image of the ox? What was wrong with his reasoning? Even if he was not fully guilty, it was certainly a matter of concern. What did Moshe mean when he told him that "you of all people don't have to fear" the memory of the Golden Calf?

The *Yalkut Yehudah* offers an explanation based on the Midrash. Why indeed did Aharon participate in the construction of the Golden Calf? Even after he saw Chur murdered, why didn't he put his foot down and take a stand? Why didn't he say, "I will not allow this. Over my dead body will you make an idol"?

According to the Midrash, Aharon had the best interests of the Jewish people in mind. "If I let them build the Calf," Aharon reasoned, "the sin will be forever on their heads. Better that I should build it. Better that I should be blamed than the Jewish people. Better that I should bear the sin."

Hashem told Aharon, “Your love for the Jewish people was such that you were willing to sacrifice your righteousness to save them. Therefore, you will be anointed High Priest.”

Because of his self-sacrifice, because he was willing to give up his *Olam Haba* for the Jewish people, because he placed the welfare of the people above his own, precisely for these reasons was he deemed worthy of being the *Kohein Gadol*.

“My brother, you are afraid of that?” Moshe told Aharon. “That’s precisely why you were chosen. Draw near to the Altar!”

## Perfect Faith

*And Aharon was silent. (10:3)*

Aharon’s two older sons, Nadav and Avihu, were men of extraordinary stature, righteous leaders who were worthy of someday stepping in the shoes of Moshe and Aharon. And then, during the joyous dedication of the *Mishkan*, they made a small error, and a fire reached out from the Holy of Holies and snuffed out their lives.

We cannot even begin to imagine the shock to Aharon, a father who witnessed his two glorious sons perish right before his eyes. What went through his mind in that split second? His own loss, the loss suffered by the entire Jewish people, the loss suffered by the two deceased sons themselves. So much loss. Such a gaping void.

What was Aharon’s reaction? The Torah tells us that “Aharon was silent.” Silence. Complete acceptance. Unshakable faith. One of the most eloquent and powerful exhibitions of faith recorded in the Torah.

The Torah forbids excessive mourning over a deceased relative (*Devarim* 14:1). “Do not mutilate yourselves, and do not tear out your

hair between your eyes over the dead.” The Ramban writes that self-destructive mourning shows a lack of faith in Hashem. If we believe in the immortality of the soul and that all Hashem does is ultimately for the good, we do not mourn too much, even in the face of tragic youthful death.

A few years ago, the Baltimore community suffered a tragic loss on Erev Pesach. Mr. and Mrs. Israel Weinstein’s son and his wife were killed in an automobile accident while coming from Lakewood to Baltimore for Pesach.

I was not there to witness it personally, but I heard from others that Mr. Weinstein’s faith and acceptance were incredible. It is hard to conceive how a man who has just been told that his two beloved children had been torn away from him can walk into the Pesach Seder and make the *Shehechianu* blessing, thanking Hashem for sustaining life and bringing us to this joyous occasion. It is hard to conceive how such a man can walk into *shul* the next day and say “*Gut Yom Tov*” to everyone without a trace of his grief on his face so as not to disturb the festival spirit. It is hard to conceive how such a man, sitting in *shul*, can reach out and affectionately pat the cheek of a little child that happens to walk by. It could only be accomplished by a man whose heart is full of a rare and unshakable faith.

During the *Shivah*, the father of the boy whose cheek Mr. Weinstein had patted asked him, “How, in the moment of your most profound grief, could you still bend down to a child and pat him on the cheek?”

“At that exact moment,” Mr. Weinstein responded, “when your little boy walked past me, with everything I was feeling in my heart, I realized how special each and every one of our children is. Sometimes we take our children for granted. Times like these clear our vision.”

A person can only have such strength if he has a clear vision of the eternal light that shines at

the end of every dark tunnel, if he has a strong and abiding faith in the Master of the Universe. Such a person, like Aharon before him, can be silent.



## Seven Fatal Mistakes

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's Torah portion contains the dramatic story of Nadav and Avihu, two of Aaron's sons, who bring a strange offering to God. This is so unacceptable that a fire consumes them on the spot and they die. The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 524) suggests seven reasons why Aaron's sons might have deserved death:

1. Nadav and Avihu were impatient for Moses and Aaron to die so that they could take over leadership of the Jewish people.
2. They made Jewish legal decisions in front of Moses, their rabbi, a sign of disrespect.
3. They entered the holy area while intoxicated.
4. They entered the holy area without first washing their hands and feet.
5. They entered the holy area without wearing the priestly garments
6. They did not get married.
7. They did not try to have children.

Although these reasons seem entirely unrelated, we could suggest that all seven of

them stem from one fundamental fault. Nadav and Avihu were great people, and they were aware of their high spiritual level. Yet they felt they had already reached the pinnacle of their achievement, and therefore had no need to strive for further growth and self-improvement. This misjudgment was the root of all seven possible reasons for their death:

1. Nadav and Avihu felt they had reached completion and perfection, so it seemed fitting for them to take over leadership of the Jewish people.
2. They felt they had achieved the epitome of Torah knowledge, so they made Jewish legal decisions in front of their rabbi.
3. Since they assumed they had reached their maximum potential, they felt they could relax, so they entered the holy area while intoxicated.
4. Since they felt they had reached the height of purity, they no longer needed water to become purified, so they entered the holy area without first washing their hands and feet.
5. Since they felt they had achieved perfection, they no longer needed the atonement provided by the priestly garments (Arachin 16a), so they entered the holy area without wearing them.
6. They assumed that, since they had perfected themselves, God could speak with them at any time - as He did with Moses, who separated from his wife, Tziporah, due to this consideration (Numbers 12:7-8) - so they did not get married.
7. Since they did not get married, they were halachically forbidden from having children outside of marriage.

## THE MEASURE OF A MAN

Now that we see the common source of the seven reasons, let us examine another detail of the story. The Torah tells us (Leviticus 10:2)

that a fire consumed Nadav and Avihu after they brought their strange offering. According to the Yalkut Shimoni (524), this fire came from the Holy of Holies. Why is it relevant to know the source of the fire?

The Holy of Holies contained only one vessel: the Holy Ark. Unlike the other Temple vessels, the dimensions of the Ark were all fractions - 2.5 by 1.5 by 1.5 cubits (Exodus 25:10). According to the commentator Kli Yakar, the fractional measurements of the Ark teach us that we should always feel lacking in regards to the wisdom we have acquired. Each of the Ark's dimensions teaches us a different dimension of this lesson. The height of the Ark shows us that we lack depth of knowledge; the length shows us that we lack breadth of knowledge; and the width shows us that we lack the ability to grasp concepts.

In Hebrew, the same word *midot* means both "measurements" and "character traits." This is why the fire that consumed Nadav and Avihu came from the Holy of Holies: the resting place of the Ark. The Ark, with its fractional measurements (*midot*) teaches us that we, too, are fractional - lacking in Torah knowledge and imperfect in our refinement of character (*midot*). Nadav and Avihu thought that they had reached completion. The origin of the fire that consumed them showed that they still had work to do.

If this lesson was relevant to such great people as Nadav and Avihu, it is all the more relevant to us. Although we should take *pleasure* in our positive achievements, we should never take *pride*. We should not feel so satisfied with our accomplishments that we lose our yearning to stretch and grow further.

May we continually desire to push beyond our current level, and in the merit of this attitude, may we soon deserve to see the return of our centerpiece, the Ark, with the building of the Third Temple.