



The Question in the Middle

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Vayikra is a book that is concerned with the holy and the profane; the pure and the impure. Nearly every *mitzvah* in Vayikra contains these categories. The Jewish people are told that they are to be *kadosh* because God is *kadosh*. In Vayikra, it is the holy that is the primary pathway to God. The *mishkan* (tabernacle), the center of holiness on earth, is the pathway for that connection.

But in Parashat Shemini, the dedication of this special center of holiness becomes a site of tragedy.

The entire Jewish people is gathered outside the *mishkan*, ready to see the glory of God descend, to see the divine flame consume the sacrifice. When it does, the Jewish people scream, rejoice, fall on their faces. Finally, after all this time, God is truly in their midst.

And then, almost immediately, tragedy strikes. The fire descends once again, but this time, it is not the *korban* that it consumes, but the *kohanim*—Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's sons. We are



not told if the Jewish people saw these deaths, or what their reactions were. What we are told is that Aharon remains silent (*va-yidom Aharon*).¹

In contrast to Aharon's silence, Moshe, springs into action. The bodies must be removed—the *mishkan* has been inaugurated, and it is forbidden for dead bodies to remain there. Moshe reminds Aharon that this is no time to mourn. The ceremonies cannot be disrupted. What matters most right now is the holiness of the moment and the place, the *kedushah*—the disruption of which, as Aharon has just learned firsthand, can be fatal.²

Aharon seems to agree with Moshe. He carries on serving, listening to Moshe's new instructions. It seems that Aharon has chosen to put his personal feelings aside, to carry on in his role. In this moment it is Aharon the priest that matters, not Aharon the father.

Until, that is, the final scene of the narrative:

ויקרא י:טז-יח

¹⁶וְאֵת שְׁעִיר הַחַטָּאת דָּרַשׁ דָּרַשׁ מֹשֶׁה וְהָיָה שָׂרָף וַיִּקְצָץ עַל אֶלְעָזָר וְעַל אִיתָמָר בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן הַנוֹתָרִם לֵאמֹר:
¹⁷מִדּוּעַ לֹא אָכַלְתֶּם אֶת הַחַטָּאת בְּמִקְוֶה הַקֹּדֶשׁ כִּי קֹדֶשׁ קֳדָשִׁים הוּא וְאַתֶּה נָתַן לָכֶם לִישֹׁאת אֶת עוֹן הָעֵדָה
לְכַפֵּר עָלֶיהָ לִפְנֵי ה':¹⁸ הֵן לֹא הוֹבֵא אֶת דָּמָה אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ פְּנִימָה אָכֹל תֹּאכְלוּ אֹתָהּ בִּקְדֹשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי:

Vayikra 10:16-18

¹⁶Moshe diligently inquired after the goat of the sin offering (*hatat*)—but behold it was burnt. He was angry at Elazar and Itamar, the remaining sons of Aharon, saying, ¹⁷“Why did you not eat the sin offering in the holy place—because it is holy of holies and it was given to carry the sin of the congregation for you, to atone for it before God!? ¹⁸See, its blood was not brought to the inner holy area! You must eat it in the holy area, as I commanded!”

¹ Vayikra 10:1-3.

² Vayikra 10:4-7.

Why, Moshe asks Elazar and Itamar, Aharon's remaining sons, did you not eat the *korban hatat* like I instructed you to? Why did you not sprinkle its blood in the *kodesh*? Moshe is angry and terrified. The *mishkan* is governed by rules—rules of what is *tamei* and what is *tahor* (impure and pure), what is *kodesh* and what is *hol* (profane). These rules are all encompassing, and they determine who must do what when. Compromising them runs the risk of death.

It is at this point that Aharon breaks his silence:

ויקרא י:יט-כ

¹⁹וַיִּדְבֹר אַהֲרֹן אֶל מֹשֶׁה הֵן הַיּוֹם הִקְרִיבוּ אֶת חַטָּאתָם וְאֶת עֹלֹתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וַתִּקְרָאנָה אֹתִי כְּאֵלָה וְאָכַלְתִּי
חַטָּאת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְיִיטֵב בְּעֵינָי ה': ²⁰וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּיטֵב בְּעֵינָיו:

Vayikra 10:19-20

¹⁹Aharon spoke to Moshe, “See, today they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before God and something like this happened to me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would it have been good in God’s eyes?” ²⁰Moshe heard; it was good in his eyes.

I’ve done everything you’ve asked of me, Aharon says, even though my sons and I are in pain. But this would be too much. I would be incapable of eating the *hatat* offering today—it would be too painful. Too much pain is mixed into what was supposed to be a joyous day. Would God think it was good if I did this?

Aharon’s answer gives Moshe no new information. Moshe, presumably, did think this is what God would want, which is why he was angry in the first place. And yet, Moshe is satisfied with Aharon’s answer—*va-yitav be-einav*, it was good in his eyes.

What about Aharon's enigmatic answer—and even more enigmatic question—changed Moshe's mind? One answer lies in Aharon's word choice: "*ha-yitav be-enei Hashem*." In introducing the word "*ha-yitav*" ("would it be good?"), Aharon shifts the conversation. In the middle of the *mishkan*, the center of Vayikra's focus on *kodesh* and *hol*, Aharon introduces a new axis: good or bad. Until this moment, the word "*tov*" (good) has been entirely absent from Vayikra. In introducing it, Aharon offers Moshe, and the reader, a different religious consideration.

Aharon's question, *ha-yitav be-enei Hashem*, shatters Vayikra's categories. In this moment, Aharon reminds Moshe that even here, in the *mishkan*, God is the same God as God in Bereishit—a God who cares not only about *kodesh* and *hol*, *tamei* and *tahor*, but about *tov* and *ra*, good and bad. Moshe's anger is appropriate within the traditional Vayikra frameworks, but Aharon's question reminds us of a larger, more basic concern. My eating the *korban hatat* today, he says, may indeed be *kadosh*—but would it be good? With this answer, Moshe is satisfied, reminded of the qualities of God he used to know and, perhaps, in his concerns over different qualities, momentarily forgot.

The Gemara in Kiddushin (30a) asserts that the beginning words of this section, *darosh darash* ("Moshe diligently inquired"), are the middle two words of the Torah. While this is not precisely true in the Torah scroll, it is true on a deeper level. By highlighting these words as "the middle," the Talmud teaches us something about the centrality of this exchange between Moshe and Aharon. Perhaps paradoxically, it is in the center of holiness that it is easiest to forget about the good. It is in the midst of the *mishkan*, or in roughly the middle of the Torah, that one can become so concerned—and rightly so—with the details of holiness that they begin to forget about a different category, the category of the good. In that moment, it becomes all too easy to fall into a mistaken *derishah* (inquiring), to seek the sacrificed goat instead of the mourning brother. It is here, in the center of Torah, that it is easiest to forget that God is concerned not only with holiness, but with goodness as well.

Aharon's question, asked in grief, is a reorientation, inviting us back into a larger framework. It does not dismiss categories of purity and impurity, of sacred and profane, but contextualizes them. It provides a roadmap on days when, in the midst of the Torah, we find ourselves lost.

May we be fortunate enough, like Moshe, to find ourselves immersed in the details of holiness. And may we have the courage to remember, like Aharon, that even there, before all, God wants what is good.