



“Will You Hear My Voice, My Distant One?”¹

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Drawing close is no simple matter. At times, it can be difficult—even dangerous. And yet, to come near is also wondrous: it can nurture, enrich, and expand life. The possibility of a misstep is always near—but so too are countless opportunities. The line between one kind of closeness and another is often fine. It depends on sensitivity, harmony, the insistence on not including elements foreign to the relationship, and attentiveness to the nature of the invitation.

A connection between closeness (*kirvah*) and sacrifice (*korban*) is woven into the Hebrew language. The Hebrew root of the word *hikriv* (to offer) means “to bring close,” “to draw near,” and by extension, “to present” or “to give a gift.” This is the essence of the *korban*, the offering brought to God. The opening words of Sefer Vayikra—“When any of you presents (*yakriv*) a *korban* to God...” (Leviticus 1:2)—foreshadow the later story of Aharon’s sons and their tragic fate. They speak of a human being who steps forward, offers a gift, who brings something close to the Divine. From this, it becomes clear: the questions of how to approach and how not to approach are not peripheral, but central. They lie at the very heart and

¹ The opening words of the song “*Zemer Nugeh* (A Sad Melody)” by the poet Rachel Bluwstein. Thank you to Motty Fogel and the Hadar staff for their editing contributions.



purpose of the Book of Vayikra itself.

A *midrash* in Vayikra Rabbah that opens our portion of Aharei Mot reflects on these themes:

ויקרא רבה כ:ח

בַּר קַפְרָא בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי יִרְמְיָה בֶּן אֱלֵעָזָר אָמַר בְּשִׁבִּיל אַרְבָּעָה דְּבָרִים מֵתוּ בְּנֵי שֵׁל אַהֲרֹן, עַל הַקְרִיבָה, וְעַל הַקְרִבָה, עַל אִשׁ זָרָה, וְעַל שְׂלֵא נָטְלוּ עֵצָה זֶה מִזֶּה.
עַל הַקְרִיבָה, שֶׁנִּכְנְסוּ לַפְּנִי וְלַפְּנִים.
וְעַל הַהִקְרָבָה, שֶׁהִקְרִיבוּ קָרְבָן שְׂלֵא נִצְטָו.
עַל אִשׁ זָרָה, אִשׁ מִבֵּית כִּירִים הִכְנִיסוּ.
וְעַל שְׂלֵא נָטְלוּ עֵצָה זֶה מִזֶּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ויקרא י, א): אִישׁ מִחֻתָּתוֹ, אִישׁ מִעֲצָמוֹ עָשׂוֹ שְׂלֵא נָטְלוּ עֵצָה זֶה מִזֶּה.

Vayikra Rabbah 20:8

Bar Kappara in the name of R. Yirmiyah bar Elazar said: For four reasons the sons of Aharon died—1. because of drawing near (*kerivah*), 2. because of offering (*hakravah*), 3. because of foreign fire, 4. and because they did not consult one another.²

1. “Because of drawing near”—they entered the innermost sanctum.
2. “Because of offering”—they brought a sacrifice that they had not been commanded to bring.
3. “Because of strange fire”—they brought in fire from a household stove.
4. “And because they did not consult one another”—as it says (Leviticus 10:1): “Each took his fire pan,” meaning each acted on his own, without seeking advice from the other.³

The brief *midrash* offers four reasons for the death of Aharon’s sons, serving as an elaborate reflection on the potential missteps involved in drawing close. We will focus on the four distinct errors identified by the *midrash*: excessive closeness, closeness without invitation,

² The version in the Sifra (Aharei Mot *parashah* 1 ot 2) suggests that this *midrash* stems from the ambiguity inherent in the verses themselves in the use of the root ב.ק.ר.: compare Leviticus 10:1, 16:1, Numbers 3:4, 26:61.

³ And see also what I wrote in my essay on Parashat Shemini, “Can Death Be Explained?” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/can-death-be-explained>.

insisting on including foreign elements in the relationship and closeness that emerges from disconnect.

1. Because of drawing near

Bar Kappara's first explanation is direct, painful, and almost jarring. Aharon's sons, he suggests, came too close—they entered *lifnai ve-lifnim*, the innermost sanctum. The *midrash* teaches that it is indeed possible to overstep in our desire to draw near. When we yearn for closeness—whether with the Divine, with another person, even when trying to offer something to another—we risk crossing a line. We may come too close, too quickly, or in ways that overwhelm or transgress boundaries. The phrase “because of drawing near” serves as a cautionary declaration: the impulse to approach must sometimes be tempered.

2. Because of offering

The phrase “because of offering” points to a second kind of failure: approaching without invitation. One can attempt to draw near with the best of intentions, yet still go astray if that approach was never called for. In the case of Aharon's sons, Bar Kappara explains that they brought an offering they had not been commanded to bring. They were not attentive, they did not wait for an invitation to come near. Their approach seems to have been motivated by an inner impulse rather than an awareness of the will or readiness of the One to Whom they sought to draw close. This interpretation teaches that true closeness requires context—it depends on dialogue. Even when the desire for connection is genuine, one must carefully consider how and when to approach. It is essential to ensure that the person before me genuinely desires and intends, is calling for, and aspires to be close to me.



3. Because of foreign fire

“Because of foreign fire” points to a third kind of failed closeness, an approach that includes something alienating or disconnecting, an attempt to draw near while remaining, in some essential way, distant or like a stranger. The illusion of intimacy without true connection. The *midrash* suggests that we cannot forge closeness through something that is foreign to the relationship, something that contradicts the essence of connection. To bring foreign fire is to attempt to hold two opposing realities at once: to reach for nearness while relying on tools or gestures that are fundamentally out of sync.

4. And because they did not consult one another

The fourth possibility Bar Kappara raises for a failed attempt at closeness is the pursuit of connection without genuine relationship—closeness without intimacy, without harmony. The phrase “they did not consult one another” reveals the inner state of Aharon’s sons: they were distant from each other, disconnected. If one lives in a state of disconnection—estranged from others, lacking inner harmony—it is impossible to truly seek closeness. If a person is not attuned, not capable of relationship, not grounded in connection, how can they hope to draw near?

* * *

We have seen some of the fundamental pitfalls in the pursuit of closeness: excessive closeness or closeness without invitation; closeness marked by alienation; and closeness that stems from disconnection—a person distant and ungrounded. Yet the verses do not leave us only with warnings of what to avoid. They also offer a path forward—a framework for healthy, meaningful closeness. In this way, the text contains not just caution, but also hope and comfort. In fact, the opening of our *parashah* echoes the four failures identified in the



midrash and responds to each with a guiding alternative. The *parashah* begins:

ויקרא טז:א-ג

¹וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וַיִּמָּתוּ: ²וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן אַחִיר וְאֵל יִבְא בְּכָל עֵת אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִבֵּית לְפָרֹכֶת אֶל פְּנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל הָאֹרֶן וְלֹא יָמוּת כִּי בָעֵנָן יֵרָאֶה עַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת: ³בְּזֹאת יִבֹּא אַהֲרֹן אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ ...

Leviticus 16:1-3

¹God spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon who died when they drew too close to God's presence. ²God said to Moshe, "Tell your brother Aharon that he is not to come at will into the sanctuary behind the curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, lest he die; for I appear in the cloud over the cover. ³Thus only shall Aharon enter the sanctuary..."

In response to excessive closeness, the verse presents the possibility of a gradual, process-oriented approach—at least as a first step, God does not approach Aharon directly: "God said to Moshe: Tell your brother Aharon." At this moment, right after his son's death, God does not address Aharon directly.

In response to the question of invitation, God does indeed invite Aharon into the sacred space—but also makes it clear that the invitation is not permanent: "he is not to come at will." One must discern whether an invitation is truly present before drawing near.

In contrast to an attempt at closeness using an element that creates alienation, the *parashah* offers a precise and detailed description of how approach is to be made: "Thus only shall Aharon enter..."

And finally, in contrast to a closeness born of inner disconnection, the *parashah* begins by



presenting Aharon as a connected person—he is a father, a brother—and through these relationships, he is invited into the sacred.

Thus, in contrast to closeness that is excessive, uninvited, alienated, or disconnected, the *parashah* offers a model of closeness that is gentle, responsive, harmonious, and grounded in relationship. And even in a situation that went drastically wrong, the Torah adds a note of comfort: the narrative speaks, almost in passing, but with quiet certainty—there is an **after**, there is a path forward for the relationship between the people and God even “after the death of the two sons of Aharon.”

