



Can Death Be Explained?

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The opening scene of Parashat Shemini is both brief and dramatic. It depicts the final day of the dedication of the *mishkan* (tabernacle)—the very day on which Nadav and Avihu die. The reader encounters a terse description:

ויקרא י:א-ב

¹וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶתֶתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשִּׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֶת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה
אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם: ²וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי ה':

Leviticus 10:1-2

¹Now Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before God strange fire, which God had not enjoined upon them.

²And fire came forth from God and consumed them, and they died before God.

The death of Nadav and Avihu is shocking and leaves us puzzled: why did they die? What sin did they commit that deserves death? Even if they sinned—was death the appropriate punishment? Why? The reason for the death is not sufficiently clear from the verses themselves—was it because of the strange fire? what was strange about it? and why did it



deserve death? The description is shrouded in ambiguity, practically inviting interpretive intervention.

The midrashic collection Vayikra Rabbah offers a long list of reasons for the deaths of Nadav and Avihu—a series of improper behaviors that serve, on one level or another, as a justification for their punishment and death.

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One cluster of reasons offered by the Sages relates to the improper conduct of Nadav and Avihu toward the established leadership. For example, one *midrash* looks backward, focusing on a defining moment during the revelation at Mount Sinai—the moment of the Covenant:

שמות כד:א-ג, ט

¹וְאֵל מֹשֶׁה אָמַר עֲלֶה אֵל ה' אֶתְּהָ וְאַהֲרֹן נִדְּב וְאַבְיָהוּא וְשִׁבְעִים מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם מִרְחֹק: ²וְנִגַּשׁ מֹשֶׁה לְבִדּוֹ אֵל ה' וְהֵם לֹא יִגָּשׁוּ וְהָעָם לֹא יַעֲלוּ עִמּוֹ: ³וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וַיְסַפֵּר לָעָם אֵת כָּל דְּבָרֵי ה'...: ⁹וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן נִדְּב וְאַבְיָהוּא וְשִׁבְעִים מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Exodus 24:1-3,9

¹And to Moshe, God said, “Come up to God, you and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and bow low from afar. ²Moshe alone shall come near God; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.” ³Moshe went and repeated to the people all the commands of God. ... ⁹Then Moshe and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up.

Vayikra Rabbah offers a homiletical reading of these verses from Exodus:

ויקרא רבה כ"י

"ואל משה אמר עלה אל ה'", מלימד שהיו משה ואהרן הולכין תחלה ונדב ואביהוא מהלכין אחריהן וכל ישראל אחריהן, ואומרים מתי שני זקנים הללו מתים ואנו נוהגין שררה על הצבור.

Vayikra Rabbah 20:10

"And to Moshe God said, 'Come up to God'"—this teaches that Moshe and Aharon walked first, with Nadav and Avihu walking behind them, and all of Israel behind them. And [Nadav and Avihu] would say, "When will these two old men die, so that we may exercise leadership over the community?"

In a surprising turn, the *midrash* reads these verses as an act of defiance by Nadav and Avihu toward their uncle, Moshe, and their father, Aharon. Even in the midst of the revelation at Sinai, Nadav and Avihu were preoccupied with their place in the hierarchy of power. They were so certain that the mantle of leadership was destined for them that they viewed the "two old men"—Moshe and Aharon—merely as obstacles to their own realization of power. They were so impatient that they actually hoped for the death of their own father and uncle.

This blunt and inappropriate behavior toward leadership, toward their family members, and toward those to whom they should have been subordinate, eventually spills over into their relationship with the Holy Blessed One:

אמר רבי תנחומא מלימד שפָּרְעוּ אֶת ראשיהן וגִּיסוּ לָבָם וְזָנוּ עֵינֵיהֶם מִן הַשְּׁכִינָה.

R. Tanhuma said: This teaches that they uncovered their heads, grew haughty in their hearts, and feasted their eyes upon the Shekhinah (the Divine Presence).

The two are described as acting with extreme arrogance and insolence: they uncovered their heads (a sign of a lack of awe), adopted an attitude of haughtiness, and did not hesitate to derive an improper pleasure by gazing directly—and inappropriately—at the Divine Presence.

The second cluster of homilies focuses on improper behavior specifically at the moment the priests approach their sacred work. These points are brought in the name of R. Levi, who notes that regarding these specific behaviors, “the penalty of death is explicitly written” (Vayikra Rabbah 20:9).

Intoxication: “Because they were intoxicated by wine, and death is written regarding this: ‘Drink no wine or other intoxicant’ (Leviticus 10:9).” Indeed, the verse describes: “Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you and your sons with you, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die; it is a law for all time throughout the ages.”

Missing garments: “Because they were missing the [required] garments, and death is written regarding this: ‘They shall be worn by Aharon and his sons’ (Exodus 28:43).” In the description of the preparations for the *mishkan*, the Torah details not only the vessels of the sanctuary but also the vestments of the priests: “And for Aharon’s sons also you shall make tunics, and make sashes for them, and make turbans for them, for dignity and adornment.... and make for them linen breeches to cover their nakedness.... They shall be worn by Aharon and his sons when they enter the Tent of Meeting.... lest they incur guilt and die; it shall be a law for all time for him and for his offspring after him” (28:40-43).

Lack of ritual washing: “Because they entered without washing their hands and feet, as it is written: ‘They shall wash their hands and feet, that they may not die’ (Exodus 30:21), and it is written: ‘When they enter the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water’ (30:20).” In the verses commanding the construction of the laver in the *mishkan*, it says: “Aharon and his sons shall wash their hands and feet from it” (30:19).



It appears that the author of this *midrash* imagines the sons of Aharon entering the Holy of Holies drunk, uncovered, and in some way—physically or ritually—unclean. In all these verses, the command is directed specifically toward “the sons of Aharon,” not just Aharon himself or the priesthood in general. In each instance, it is noted that this is “a law for all time” and “throughout the ages.” In each, the danger of failing to fulfill the command is explicitly stated as death. Furthermore, all the behaviors in this list are centered on the body: drunkenness—which is a failure to properly manage what enters the body; nakedness—meaning exposing the body in a way deemed inappropriate; and lack of washing—which is a failure to care for the exterior of the body, a lack of physical or ritual cleanliness.

We are presented here with behaviors that reflect a lack of clarity of mind and physical purity, a deficiency that manifests as disrespect and a certain lightheadedness (*kalut rosh*). It is worth noting that these behaviors—drunkenness, nakedness, bad hygiene—are inappropriate not only in a sacred space but in general society as well. It seems that according to R. Levi, proper conduct in the sanctuary is an extension—or a more rigorous application—of the proper conduct that reflects human dignity as a whole.

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A third cluster of *midrashim* focuses on and broadens the improper behavior within the family context and, in a broader sense, within a social and moral framework (Vayikra Rabbah 20:9):

וְעַל יְדֵי שֶׁלֹא הָיוּ לָהֶם בָּנִים, וְכָתִיב בּוֹ מִיתָה, הִדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב (במדבר ג, ד): וַיָּמָת נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא.

Because they had no children, and death is written regarding this: “And Nadav and Avihu died.”



The verse upon which this *midrash* rests relates:

במדבר ג:ד

וַיָּמָת נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא לִפְנֵי ה' בְּהִקְרָבָם אֵשׁ זָרָה לִפְנֵי ה' בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי וּבָנִים לֹא הָיוּ לָהֶם וַיָּכָהּן אֱלֹהִים
וַאֲתָמָר עַל פְּנֵי אֶהֱרֹן אֲבִיהֶם:

Numbers 3:4

And Nadav and Avihu died before God when they offered strange fire before God in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children; and Elazar and Itamar served as priests in the presence of Aharon their father.

At first glance, the verse explains why Elazar and Itamar were chosen to replace their brothers in the *mishkan* service. However, the *midrash* chooses to read the words “and they had no children” as a cause for the death of Nadav and Avihu, rather than (just) a description of Aharon’s family tree.

While the *midrash* does not explicitly explain why the two had no offspring, it may be linked to the subsequent statement:

אָבָא חֲנִין אָמַר עַל יְדֵי שֶׁלֹּא הָיוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים, דְּכָתִיב (ויקרא טז, ו): וְכָפַר בְּעֵדוֹ וּבְעֵד בֵּיתוֹ, בֵּיתוֹ הִוא אִשְׁתּוֹ.

Abba Hanin says: It was because they had no wives, as it is written: “And he shall make atonement for himself and for his house” (Leviticus 16:6)—“his house” refers to his wife.¹

Beyond the literal claim that Nadav and Avihu were unmarried, this *midrash* forges a profound link between atonement and the home. This connection suggests that atonement is most

¹ This is a common midrashic technique to read “house” as “wife.” See R. Yose’s comment on Shabbat 118b and Rashi’s explanation there.



effective when it is not a selfish endeavor; atonement is truly worthy when it is sought by the individual not just for themselves, but for their kin and their loved ones.

The critique of Nadav and Avihu takes on an additional, particularly sharp dimension in the following *midrash*:

רבי לוי אמר שחצים היו, הרבה נשים היו יושבות עגונות ממתינות להם, מה היו אומרים, אחי אבינו מלך, אחי אמנו נשיא, אבינו כהן גדול ואנו שני סגני כהנה, אי זו אשה הוגנת לנו.

R. Levi said: They were arrogant. Many women remained anchored, waiting for them. What would [Nadav and Avihu] say? “Our father’s brother is a King (Moshe), our mother’s brother is a Prince (Nahshon ben Aminadav), our father is the High Priest, and we are the two deputies of the priesthood—what woman is worthy of us?”

In this reading, which imagines the women waiting to marry them, the hubris of the two brothers is depicted as a barrier to human connection. Their elitism created a wake of heartache and human suffering.

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The abundance of reasons offered by the *midrash* testifies to the possibility of understanding the sin of Aharon’s sons in a broad, multi-faceted way. Yet, inherently, it also testifies to the profound difficulty of extracting a cause of death from the verses themselves. This very multiplicity also leaves us with the impression that we are standing before an unexplained—perhaps even arbitrary—death. The authors of the *midrashim* seem to share our emotional and moral pain standing in front of an unexplained death, which leads them to a set of possible explanations, at times only loosely related in the text itself.



In other words, the *midrash* possesses two contradictory faces: On one hand, it offers specific claims about the cause of death, including clear principled stances on sin and its punishment. On the other hand, the sheer volume of explanations leaves us without any real explanation, questioning the nature of this death. In the end, the *midrashim* leave us questioning what stands behind this death, and with a feeling that it may not have a single comprehensive explanation. Thus the *midrash* affirms a profound human experience: in the face of death, there is not always a good explanation for death.

