



After the Silence: Rebuilding from the Holy of Holies

R. Elazar Symon – symon@hadar.org

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When we think of the Holocaust, we can only be silent.

We are incapacitated emotionally, morally, theologically. At times it seems that the countless museums and memorials, the ceremonies and journeys, the songs and the prayers, are but a desperate attempt to break free from the paralysis that grips us in its shadow.

The Torah, too, knows such a moment when children are consumed by fire, and their surviving family is left with nothing but silence. It occurs when Nadav and Avihu die in the Tent of Meeting:

ויקרא י:א-ב,ג

¹וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֹתָתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָּהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשִּׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קֹטֶרֶת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֵשׁ זָרָה
אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם: ²וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי ה': ³... וַיֵּדֶם אֶהֱרֹן:

Leviticus 10:1-2,3

¹Now Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it, placed incense upon it, and brought before God strange fire, which God had not commanded them. ²Fire



came forth from before God and consumed them....³ Aharon was silent.

What explanation can possibly suffice for a father who has lost his sons? What remains for Aharon but silence?

And yet, perhaps the story of Nadav and Avihu does more than confirm our muteness. Perhaps it gestures toward what may—or must—follow catastrophe. Shortly after their deaths, Aharon is commanded regarding the order of entry into the Holy of Holies:

ויקרא טז:א-ג

¹וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וַיָּמָתוּ: ²וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֶל אֶהֱרֹן
אַחִיר וְאַל יָבֹא בְּכָל עֵת אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ... וְלֹא יָמוּת כִּי בְעֵנָן אֶרְאֶה עָלָה כְּפֹרֶת: ³בְּזָאת יָבֹא אֶהֱרֹן אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ...

Leviticus 16:1-3

¹God spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons, when they drew near before God and died. ²God said to Moshe, "Speak to Aharon your brother, that he not come at all times into the Sanctuary... so that he not die; for in a cloud I appear upon the cover. ³With this shall Aharon come into the Sanctuary: ..."

The straightforward link is obvious: they entered improperly and died; Aharon must learn how to enter and live. But there is another parallel way of telling the story of this archetypal Yom Kippur: A bereaved father, stunned and speechless, is commanded to return to the place of his trauma¹—to step into its innermost chamber, to perform an act of repair for himself and for

¹ It is unclear in which part of the tent of the meeting Nadav and Avihu perished. The words "Before God" are ambiguous, and their use of the incense suggest they didn't actually go to the Holy of Holies, but rather stayed in the sanctuary next to the incense altar (Rashbam). However, the connection the Torah makes between the incident and the practice of entering it on Yom Kippur suggests otherwise (see Tanhuma Aḥarei Mot 7). The rest of this essay is written as though they perished in the Holy of Holies. The argument is most convincing that way, but even if that is not the case, the Avodah ritual involves the purification of the entire Sanctuary, including the incense altar. Therefore, Aharon is in any case required to enter the place where his sons died and to confront it.



his people, and to emerge alive.

A careful reading of Leviticus 16 and of the Avodah service in our Maḥzor reveals that the drama is not only about entering the Holy of Holies, but about leaving it. The heart of the Avodah is the sprinkling of the blood of the special sin-offerings on various components of the *mishkan* (tabernacle), in order to purify them and effect atonement for them.² But the high priest does not advance gradually from the outer altar inward, as we might expect. Rather, he is commanded, without any preliminary stage, to enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle the blood on the cover of the ark. From there he works his way outward—to the curtain and then to the incense altar. The climax is not the arrival, but the exit.

The fact that the drama is centered on leaving the Holy of Holies also makes sense in the world of Aharon's experience: often the greater challenge is not confronting trauma, but emerging from it. It is, in some sense, easier to stand by the graves of those we loved, and harder to turn away and return to the demands of the day. It is easier, in a sense, to travel to Auschwitz than to go home from it.

Yet the Holy of Holies contains much more than trauma and the fear of death. At its center stands the Ark of the Covenant, inside which are the tablets of the Ten Commandments, containing the covenantal core of our faith: loyalty to God and reverence for the human being created in God's image.

Our sages teach that when the ark reached its permanent resting place in the Temple on Mount Moriah, there was something additional in the Holy of Holies: the Foundation Stone, upon which the ark rested. The Talmud explains that this is the stone "from which the world

² As the Torah says, "He shall sprinkle it upon the cover and before the cover; thus he shall atone for the sanctuary from the impurities of the children of Israel and from their transgressions, for all their sins" (Leviticus 16:15-16).



was founded” (Yoma 54b). It seems to me that what our Sages are gesturing at through this image is that the Holy of Holies is the place from which a new world can be built. The Kabbalists later gave voice to this intuition by saying that Israel’s prayer at Ne’ilah on Yom Kippur draws renewed life into the world.

So the various elements of entering the sanctuary sketch the following picture: Aharon is called to descend into his trauma, to the very spot where his sons died. There, alongside pain and fear, he encounters and reconnects to the most fundamental truths and values, symbolised by the tablets. His mission is then to take the lessons of the Foundation Stone: to emerge, step back out, and begin the work of building a new and better world.

The Mishnah (Yoma 5:1) tells us that, upon emerging, the high priest would offer a brief, simple prayer—for rain, for sustenance, for life—not a metaphysical solution, but a plea for the coming year to be better. According to the Talmud (Yoma 53b), his prayer read as follows:

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ שֶׁתִּהְיֶה שָׁנָה זוֹ ... אִם שְׁחוּבָה תִּהְיֶה גְשׁוּמָה.

Let it be Your will, Hashem our God, that this year... if it is hot, it should be rainy.

Perhaps this, too, is our task on Yom HaShoah. We cannot supply explanations; consolation for six million souls lies beyond us. But pain can open the heart. And through that opening we may bind ourselves anew to our most basic commitments as a people, and as human beings, to the dignity of every person fashioned in the image of God, and to the simple, stubborn prayer for life and peace.

From there, we begin again to build.

