

Elie Wiesel Brothers in the Bible: Nadav and Avihu

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Elie Wiesel:

The silence of a father. The transgression of his two sons. And the banishment from God. This is a unique story made of pain and grief. It is locked from within. Is it about ecstasy and injustice? It is frightening and sickening. It is secret, finally impenetrable, and I confess that aspects of it elude me. I have never understood it. All of its leading characters exist beyond [00:01:00] our range of comprehension. Yet, in the rich Talmudic and mystical literature, attempts, often contradictory, have been made to explain it. None seems satisfactory.

In the end, we must acknowledge that this episode troubled even our greatest ancient and medieval commentators. And it continues to disturb us today. If death is often unjust, it is a thousand times more so in the case we are about to explore. Two men, still young and promising, destined for great careers, are mysteriously struck down. Killed. Why? And why by fire? Their father's behavior, and their uncle's, the silence [00:02:00] of one and the speech of the other. Every element of this grief-shadowed tale eludes our understanding. And yet, all

around them, and after them, life goes on. Shall we read the text?

"And Nadab and Abihu, or Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his pen and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered alien fire before the Lord which He commended them not. And, there went out fire from the Lord and devoured them." So begins the tale that we shall study this evening. On the face of it, the narrative proceeds by strict biblical logic. A sin was committed, bringing about an exemplary punishment. [00:03:00] The style is journalistic, clear, and to the point. The facts, just the facts. Deed, motive, outcome. The text tells us who did what to whom, and in what circumstances. It also tells us what followed. We read on.

"Having learned of the catastrophe which has just struck the house of his brother Aaron, Moses says to him, '*Bikrovai ekadeish*, Thus said the Lord, "I will be sanctified in them, in them that come near me, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" At that moment, this is all that Moses said to his doubtless stunned brother. And Aaron's reaction? *Va'yidom Aharon*. [00:04:00] And Aaron held his peace, Aaron remained silent. He wrapped himself in silence. Aaron became silence.

Meanwhile, Moses busied himself with the practical side of the funeral rites, the specific rules of mourning that applied to priests. Do not uncover your hats, do not rend your clothing, do not go out from the door of the Tabernacle, the *Ohel Moed*. Let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the Lord had kindled."

And so ends the dry, precise account of the tragedy, giving way to the sequel, a series of discourses bearing on the event. God's words to Aaron, Moses's words to Aaron and his two surviving sons, Aaron's words to Moses. The chapter ends with the two words, [00:05:00] "*Va'yitav be'enav.*" "Moses was content." And doubtless, God as well. Well, I am among those who are not content. But having arrived at this point in the story, let's pause for the usual preliminary remarks.

First, an explanation about the program of our annual sessions. Until tonight, the second subject has always been Talmudic. Don't worry, it still is. But instead of studying a Talmudic master, we shall take one or two biblical characters and see them in the Midrashic light. In other words, Nadav and Abihu belong to the Bible. But we shall consider them by the light of theories and texts taken from the Talmudic tradition. Why this change of course? I owe it to you to be frank and sincere.

[00:06:00] It is because for 26 years, we have been making the acquaintance of the greatest figures of the Talmud. Which is to say, the most celebrated of that dazzling universe. This is not to say that the others are less profound, or less erudite, but simply that we have fewer sources from which to grasp their essences, and draw their portraits. I must confess, after Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, and so many others, I came to a point where I found the others not of lesser interest, but of lesser accessibility. I couldn't get close enough because I didn't have enough material. I couldn't build a dramatic figure like a Resh Lakish. I didn't have enough material. [00:07:00]

But that doesn't mean that the others, those that we have not mentioned, are less great. Who would dare to say that Rabbi Papias was less important than his friends? Rabbi Yehoshua or Rabbi Eliezer? Or that Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh is less worth knowing than Rabbi Yishmael? It's simple. Some have been luckier than others. The chronicle has retained more facts, anecdotes, and laws. That is why we shall confine ourselves to the Book of Books. There, we always find material. But following our tradition, this study, too, will be dedicated to the memory of our master, Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman, to whom I owe, we all owe, so much. It was he who showed me the way,

[00:08:00.0] and whenever I open a tractate every day, I still feel his presence. And I miss, I miss his teaching, his smile, his friendship. I even miss his messages on the answering machine. We would meet three times a week, but every day I would find a message. Using a Talmudic expression, he would say, "Reb Eliezer, Reb Eliezer, *v'haTorah mah tehei aleha?* If you don't study, what will happen to Torah?"

Need I say that this evening's theme has always fascinated me, and even obsessed me, because of Aaron's silence? There is something else. This chapter gives new dimension to the subject of brothers, as they are presented in Scripture. [00:09:00] We are always struck by what sets one in opposition to the other, culminating in division, separation, and tragedy. Isaac, Cain and Abel, one an assassin, the other his victim. Isaac and Ishmael are strangers to each other. Jacob and Esau, fears enemies, always fleeing one another. Joseph and his elder brothers, a ghastly and depressing story of jealousy, envy, treachery. We understand their misery, their suffering, which they are, in a sense, responsible for. The day when Joseph was sold by his brothers remains in Jewish history a black day marked by blood and ashes.

What always pained me, when I read the story of Joseph, was the commentary, naturally, but even the Bible itself. [00:10:00]

The text says that while they were eating, while they were having their meal, their brother was in the pit, and then the Ishmaelites arrived. And in the course of their meal, they sold their brother. And I was thinking, "My God, how is that possible? How could brothers be so insensitive?" But they were. And we learn from that an important lesson. That no one is immune to temptations, to seductions, to evil. Evil can penetrate any heart, any soul, even the children of Jacob.

But Nadav and Abihu are different. I like them. They are attached to each other, [00:11:00] and loyal to each other. We never speak about them alone, they are always together. Always, Nadav and Abihu, together, *Nadav v'Abihu*, together, together. Nothing comes between them. Not ambition, nor beliefs. They aspire to the same religious perfection, to the same spiritual purity, to the same inner conquests. Their fraternal love is exemplary. All that they undertake, they do together. Together they decide to intensify their religious quest, to serve God with more zeal, more fervor. Together, acting as one, they proceed towards the sanctuary and, together they fall, at the same moment. They breathe their last at the same moment.

[00:12:00] For what reason?

Well, we shall try to make sense of that a bit later. For now, let's leave them in their sanctuary, a place forbidden to strangers. And let's invite those who are not strangers to take courage and enter. (laughter, pause)

Why is this story told and retold on Yom Kippur? Why do we read it [00:13:00] on the holiest day of the year? Is it to awaken us to repent? But then, that is the entire purpose of liturgy. The goal of the entire service of Yom Kippur. I would rather believe that there is another reason to it. If we are called upon to remember this tale of personal tragedy, it is to teach us that there are events in life -- in our national life, in our personal life -- events that transcend our understanding. God's motives and ours are not necessarily the same. There is pain, and there may even be injustice, that we cannot understand. We may try to find answers, but we do not have the answers. And therefore, [00:14:00] when we read this story on Yom Kippur, we understand that we don't understand.

Now, that day, when the story took place, must have passed in general rejoicing. In an exalting communal elation. It was the first day of the month of *Nisan*, a holiday. Were they not celebrating the dedication of the sanctuary in the desert, and

the appearance of God's spirit in the Tabernacle, the *Ohel Moed*? We can almost picture the scene. People were dancing, singing, affirming their faith in a national future sanctified by God. A Midrashic legend identifies the happiest person of all. She was called Elisheva. Daughter of Amminadav, and wife of the high priest, Aaron. She had every reason to be happy. [00:15:00] Her husband was the high priest. Her brother-in-law was Moses. (laughter) After all, Moses, he was the uncrowned leader of the whole people. Her son, Eleazar, was his father's first assistant. Eleazar's younger brothers, Nadav and Abihu, were much loved and admired for their piety and devotion. Devotion to God, to spirituality. Her grandson, Pinchas, was *mashuach milchama*, a sort of warrior priest, an anointed priest. His brother, Nachshon, was serving as a tribal chief.

So, after all, everything was in the family. And she must have said to herself what *l'havdil elef alfei havdalot*, Napoleon's mother would whisper many centuries later, when she looked in Europe and she saw that [00:16:00] every one of her sons was a king somewhere, she said, "*Pourvu que ça dure*" -- "I only wish it would last."

Comments the Sifra:), "*be'otah sha'ah kaftzah ha'puranot*". It was then that the punishment or catastrophe fell on that first

family of Israel. And hence, on Israel itself. Two illustrious young priests, the sons of Aaron and Elisheva, suffered death by fire, and the people were torn from their joy and plunged into distress. The event roused an understandable and lasting interest among commentators. How could the two young sons of the first Jewish family have provoked heaven to such implacable wrath?

So we shall divide our exploration into four parts. First, we shall try to see [00:17:00] just what their transgression consisted of, since there certainly was a transgression. The text says so, emphatically. Second, what did the punishment consist of? Third, what can be said in their defense? We cannot allow two Jews not to be defended. Fourth, what was the reaction among those close to them?

Now, in the biblical text, in Scripture, the sin is stated succinctly but a bit vaguely. And I quote, "Nadav and Abihu introduced a strange or an alien fire within the sanctuary, a fire that God had not commanded of them." Unquote. And that was all, but it was enough. A strange fire. *Eish Zarah*. An impure fire, one that was profane. [00:18:00] But this accusation baffles me. That God had not commanded of them. What does that mean? Are we dealing with one sin, or two? Is

any fire not commanded by God by definition profane? Is whatever God has not commanded forbidden merely because it is strange? Was Nadav's and Abihu's sin simply to have done things their own way, when they should have waited for the command from above, and obeyed the Divine will? To put it another way, in religion, will an initiative, any original idea, any innovative project, must they be disapproved? Disapproved and condemned on high?

Rashi has not far to seek; [00:19:00] a native of Troia, a wine grower, he finds many explanations. Not in women, *cherchez la femme*, but he found the explanation in wine. It's all wine's fault. And Rashi says, actually, "*Shtuyei yayin hayu*" -- Nadav and Abihu had drunk too much. It's as simple as that.

Doubtless, they started with one glass, say, to make *Kiddush*, like everyone else, with everyone else, just to say *l'chaim*, to take part in the general rejoicing. But they couldn't stop. There were so many *l'chaims*, they couldn't stop. (laughter) So they sat down to eat, sampling the best dishes, which gave them a thirst again. And they entered the sanctuary inebriated. And that was the mistake which then became a transgression.

[00:20:00] It is prohibited to enter the sanctuary when not in possession of all your faculties, when your mind is elsewhere.

But wait a minute. Let's consider the case from the legal viewpoint. If they were drunk, doesn't that mean that they were unaware? Doesn't it mean that they didn't know what they were doing? It was an involuntary act on their part to rush toward God, or toward the secret of God, with a strange fire in their hands. They were drunk. Can we condemn a drunkard, except for driving? Since when do we condemn a man to death for an involuntary sin or offense or even crime?

In the tractate of *Sanhedrin*, we find a more serious hypothesis, one that remains pertinent today. [00:21:00] It goes back to the immemorial conflict between generations. Nadav and Abihu, it would seem, lacked respect for their elders. In the tractate of *Eruvin*, it is said, and I quote, "The sons of Aaron died after daring to teach the law in the presence of Moses." And that is *chayav mitah*, that is punishable by death. Worse, much worse, both of them are now presented as terrible young men. Ambitious, arrogant, they were impatient to see Moses and Aaron gone, dead, so they could succeed them as masters and leaders of the people. And again, I quote the Midrash, "One day, when they were walking in a procession behind Moses and Aaron, [00:22:00] with the people following, Nadav and Abihu spoke together. And the first said to the other, 'But when, tell me when, when will these old men finally die? It's time we assume the leadership

of our generation.' At which God remarked, 'Hmm. We'll see who buries whom.'"

Well, now all the masks have been dropped. Now we know why the two sons had to die. They weren't so clean, they weren't so good, they weren't so pure. We must add that there are differences of opinion in the Midrash about this legend, too. Rabbi Yudan states, in the name of Rabbi Ivo, "Nadav and Abihu said, really said, with their lips, with their mouths, those irreverent and offensive words, thus betraying their impatience to succeed their father soon, very soon." [00:23:00] But Rabbi Pinchas doesn't believe it. According to Rabbi Pinchas, they only entertain such thoughts in their minds. Still, in thought or in speech, the two brothers do young men no honor. After all, we are supposed to honor our fathers, and pray for them to live a long life.

It was a man whom I hope you are going to hear in a few weeks, in this very place, Yitzhak Yitzhaky, the marvelous historian of biblical geography in Israel, who pointed out to me an interesting comment by Cassuto, a commentary on the Bible.

Cassuto noted that another man in Jewish history had later named his sons Nadav and Abiha, which is almost like Abihu, and this was the wicked king of the kingdom of Israel [00:24:00] called

Yerevam ben Navat, Jeroboam, the evil ruler of Israel, whom Scripture calls "*hoteh u'mahti et ha'rabim*", a sinner who drove others to sin. So what was Jeroboam's problem? Envy. He envied King David. He insisted he, Jeroboam, Yerevam, insisted on being first everywhere. And the Midrash recounts, marvelous tale, "One day," says the Midrash, "God grasped Yerevam and said to him, 'Yerevam, do *tshuvah*, repent, and if you repent, you and I and David ben Yishai, son of Jesse, will walk together in *Gan Eden*, in the Garden of Eden.' Yerevam asked, 'Yes, it's very nice. But who will go first?'" (laughter) [00:25:00]

"David," answered God. 'In that case,' said Yerevam, 'I refuse.'" Yerevam wanted to be first.

Just as Yerevam wanted to do away with legitimate kings, Nadav and Abihu, it is said, wanted to see their father and their uncle disappear. A coup. They wanted to stage a spiritual coup in their minds. Why? Because their father and their uncle were too famous, too important, too powerful. Question. We can understand why Nadav was punished. It was he, after all, who made those unfortunate remarks about Moses and Aaron, according to the text. But Abihu said nothing. Why did he deserve the same punishment as his brother? And the answer is, because he said nothing. He should have protested. Silence is complicity.

So, look at what happened [00:26:00] to our beautiful two sons, even the apparently moving friendship that united the two brothers is said to have been feigned and flawed. One spoke and the other was too careful. The other thought, better not to risk God's anger, and didn't say anything, either yes, or no. The Midrash, at that point, actually accuses them of not having been too friendly to each other. And the Midrash says that because they were not too close to one another, they ended up in tragedy. Bar Kappara declares in the name of Rabbi Yirmeyah, son of Eleazar, "Here are the four causes that occasioned the death of Aaron's sons. They came too close to the sanctuary. They bore an untimely sacrifice. [00:27:00] They introduced a strange fire. And they did not consult together on the procedure." They didn't discuss the affair. They didn't make plans together. Put another way, it was by accident that they found themselves in the same place at the same time, by accident that they committed the guilty deeds. In other words, they were together, but not united.

So, at the heart of these legends, there lurks a tendency to darken the brothers' names. The only way for us to accept this tragedy is to say, "Well, they deserved it. They were too pushy, too arrogant, too insolent, towards God, who they insulted by approaching drunk, and towards their contemporaries,

especially towards their parents, and their family, and their people. [00:28:00] When you are Aaron's son, you must behave with at least a minimal decency. When you are young, you should not wish the death of those who are no longer young, and from whom you have received the glorious heritage with its many burdens and privileges."

Another thing. I always believe that biblical stories have an impact on modern times. Aren't we doing that today? But thanks to science, to technology, to medicine, people live longer. But once they have reached a certain age, we do away with them. We send them either to old age homes, and visit them once a year, or to Miami (laughter) -- but away. You send them away. And then, [00:29:00] these grandparents feel rejected, dejected. They feel useless. In the field of intellectual or industrial endeavors, how many young people are hoping, wishing, praying, not for the eldest to die, but to disappear, to go elsewhere? So therefore, when you study the text, you do not reflect about the past alone. You also think of the present. People that you know who are either the sons or the fathers.

Still another thing. Nadav and Abihu clung, says another Midrash -- the problem was that they clung to their single state. They wanted to be single. They refused to marry. And

in refusing to marry, they violated [00:30:00] the first biblical commandment, *p'ru ur'vu*, to be fruitful and multiply. But for what reason? Why did they refuse to marry? Why? Is it -- can we attribute their refusal to despair over their people's nebulous future? After all, they were in the desert. It's not the best thing to do, to bring up children in the desert. Or perhaps, to an excess of spirituality? Is it possible that they chose not to marry because they had decided to consecrate themselves solely to God and to heaven? If it were that, we would be tempted to understand them and even to respect them. But that was not the true reason, says the Midrash. Their refusal to establish families, their refusal to marry, sprang not from their passion for God, but from their vanity. Preoccupied with their own image of themselves, [00:31:00] they did not deign to consider others. Let's be plain. In their exaggerated opinion of themselves, they did not believe that any woman in the world deserved them. (laughter) It's not my opinion. It is the Talmud's opinion. (laughter)

And they would say, they would say, "What woman would be a worthy match? After all, one of our uncles is our sovereign. Another is our tribal leader. Our father is high priest, and we are his deputies. And who are they? Who are these women?" Thus, the legend insists, through their doing, because of them,

numerous women in Israel remained old maids. (laughter) And that is what the Talmud cannot forgive them. [00:32:00] Of course, these women could have married other men. (laughter) But they all preferred to wait for Nadav and Abihu. It would have been a better *shidduch*. (laughter) Well, the tradition doesn't forgive them the tears of solitude that so many beautiful and virginal women shed, because of them. The fact that they were waiting, by the way, may incite us to think that they had reasons to wait. Maybe somehow in the desert, as they were walking, you know, a kind of look in the eye, maybe, who knows what they were thinking? But the fact is, the women were still hoping that they would be married by Nadav and Abihu. Not too attractive, these two sons of the high priest of the Jewish nation and of Jewish history.

Rather objectionable, in their need to assert themselves and command attention. Why are they presented in such somber light? To justify their early death? [00:33:00] To explain God's sudden anger? Let's note immediately, however, lest this version seem too convincing, that the general view suggests the opposite. Always in the Talmud. The moment you start believing one thing, the general view is the opposite. So, the general view is that Nadav and Abihu were guilty, quote unquote, of one thing to do too well: "Serve God with even more passion, more

fervor, more fire. Every time Scripture mentions the death of Nadav and Abihu," says the Midrashic text, "it adds the reason why they were dead. Because of the alien fire. Why the need to mention the reason?" And the Talmud says, "So we may know that this was their only fault. That because of this alone they died that horrendous death, [00:34:00] so that people of ill will may not say, 'Who knows what sins committed in secret brought this upon them?' No secrets, no sins. Only this."

The old proverb, that "the best is the enemy of the good," would apply to Nadav and Abihu, according to this version. They were not content to be respected sons of the high priest, carrying a weighty heritage on their shoulders. They wanted to do things that their father himself would not have dared to do, meaning, to enter the sanctuary bearing a fire that God had not commanded. "Even earlier, on Mount Sinai," says the Talmud, "they had gazed as it were upon the face of the Lord from too close," something which implies the death penalty. "*Ki lo yirani ha'adam va'chai.*" It was because even close up, God seemed far off. They knew perfectly well that it was impossible and forbidden to move forward, [00:35:00] to approach the Almighty too closely. But the urge was too strong for them. They wanted to abolish any space at all between the Creator and His creatures. And the Talmud, and the Sifra, comments, "*amdu*

le'hosif ahavah al ahavah," which is a marvelous poetic way to describe their state of mind. They believed that they could, that they should, add to their love of God a greater love, a more imposing love, an all-encompassing love, in order to melt into His radiance and complete themselves in His profundity.

L'hosif ahavah al-ahavah.

And here, therefore, is a glowing portrait of all imaginable human and Jewish virtues. In the eyes of the *Zohar*, the Book of Splendor, Nadav and Abihu of course attain [00:36:00] the quality of saintliness. They are young, just 20 years old. And bubbling with religious activity. The Midrash says that they were handsome. Physically? Probably. But morally as well, thirsting for perfection. They dreamed of nothing else. The Midrash asks, "Why does the Bible repeat twice the word '*Va'yamutu,*' which means 'They are dead'?" It is to indicate that they also died before they died. They died before dying, by remaining celibate. They truly had a part in the world to come, the world of truths. In the other world, they didn't die.

And so they have been compared to the four Talmudic masters, who dared enter into the *Pardes*, the orchard of forbidden knowledge. [00:37:00] Like Ben Azzai, they perished for gazing where one must not look. And so, let's proceed with our exploration. The

Midrash considers at length the circumstances in which the two men died. We know that they were victims of fire, but of which fire? One Midrash says they were victims of the very fire they introduced. And, it's clear. In religious morality, everything is consistent and connected. *Middah k'neged Middah*, measure for measure. Since they offended heaven by fire, by fire they were punished, by their own fire.

In the tractate of *Sanhedrin*, the scene is described in close detail. Two fine jets of fire blazed out of the sanctuary and divided into four. Two of them penetrated Nadav's nostrils, [00:38:00] and two Abihu's. And thus their souls were burned away, but not their bodies. The latter remained intact. There were no visible wounds, and no visible scars. That was instantaneous like a candle snuffed out. Other commentators think otherwise, that the bodies were devoured by flames, while the souls remained intact.

Rabbi Akiva leans towards the first theory. The question is one of physical death. But then, there would have been two corpses within the sanctuary. How could these be removed, if entry was forbidden? Two hooks were set into their mouths and people pulled them out. Question. Why did God choose to punish them on a national holiday? Did He not hesitate [00:39:00] to

disrupt the festivities surrounding the inauguration of the Tabernacle? And the answer is, in fact, Nadav and Abihu were living in a kind of reprieve, on parole. Weren't they supposed to have died at Sinai for having gazed too closely upon the face of the Lord? But why didn't they die immediately, there? "Because on Sinai," says God, "Israel espoused my Torah. That was their celebration. And I was surely not going to disturb it with my problems, with an execution. I would bide my time." And the Midrash comments, "It is like the story of the king who discovers on his daughter's wedding day that the best man, the couple's best friend, has committed a great sin, deserving capital punishment. To have him executed on the spot would spoil the princess' joy. He preferred to wait for a holiday of his own. In this case, [00:40:00] God waited for the day of the sanctuary's inauguration, which was His holiday. It was, of course, the people who gave themselves over to joy and ecstasy. It was the people who danced and sang, but it was God's holiday that they were celebrating. God had found his place on earth, in history, at the heart of a human community. Isn't that a reason to rejoice? But then came the disaster. Fire was emitted from the Lord, and He devoured them, these two sons of Aaron. They died before God. Did they die in God?"

Who gave the news to the unfortunate parents? We imagine it was Moses, for it was he who spoke to his brother in God's name, "Bi'krovai ekadeish," "I will be sanctified in them that come near me, [00:41:00] and before all the people I will be glorified." Did he say anything before that? If so, what words did he use? We would very much like to know, in case *chas v'chalila*, God forbid, someone else should find himself in similar circumstances. But the text is meager. It does not reveal what the prophet said to his elder brother to make him understand that -- that what? The text tells us only the argument that Moses passed along in the name of God. It may be that he said nothing else, and that Aaron understood the profound, and profoundly harrowing, significance of the words *bi'krovai ekadeish*. That sometimes we must be ready to die. Sometimes, we must actually die to be close to God. [00:42:00] And it is, therefore, sometimes by death and not only by life that the name of God is sanctified.

And so we can imagine the father, stupefied, overwhelmed. Doubtless he is wondering if this is not a nightmare. He just saw his two sons, he saw them near the sanctuary. He knows their religious fervor. Their piety. He knows their spiritual capacities, and now they are no longer alive? In an instant, it all happened. Is that possible? And the text declares,

"*Vayidom Aharon.*" In two awe-filled words, the text says everything. "And Aaron remained silent." Was he in the grip of grief, [00:43:00] of despair? Aaron's silence lends itself to various interpretations. We shall set forth a few of them. But before that, we may ask, why does no one speak of his wife, of Elisheva? The mother of Nadav and Abihu, where was she? Who broke the news to her? Where was she at the precise moment when the sun was darkened over her head? At the precise moment when her two sons disappeared from her world? And how did she live the tragedy? How did she live through the event?

Most unjustly, the biblical text proves too modest, too discreet, about the reaction of Elisheva, daughter of Amminadav. [00:44:00] Could it be because she chose not to be silent? That she chose to express herself in another way? The Midrash, as usual, imagines the other way. The Midrash beautifully imagines what the Bible conceals. The Midrash imagines Elisheva sobbing, lamenting, and that's a natural response too. For the high priest's wife is also a mother. At the sudden death of her two sons, she cannot remain stoic. When the heart is torn, it screams in pain. When the grief is too heavy to bear, it breaks. But then, according to the Ramban, Moshe ben Nachman, the father also broke down. [00:45:00] And I agree with him. Aaron would have been totally inhuman not to have been broken

down. Some commentators hasten to specify that he wept for his sons' sins. Others suggest that he shed tears for his own sins. He grew calm only when Moses consoled him with the already-famous words, *bi'krovai ekadeish*. And the Midrash adds these sentences from the mouth of Moses himself, "Aaron, my brother, I have known for a long time because God told me, that God wishes to be sanctified by those closest to him. I thought He was speaking of me, or of you. But I was wrong. Your sons were closer to Him."

That is when, and that is why, Aaron kept silent. A silence made of resignation, [00:46:00] but not of acceptance. His brother's argument reassured him Nadav and Abihu were not guilty. It was by their love of God, and by God's immeasurable love for them, that they lost their lives, which became *korbanot*, offerings. Their death was therefore an act of *Kiddush HaShem*. In dying, they glorified His name. So much so that, according to Rashi, it was to reward Aaron for his worthy and trusty attitude, that God a few verses later speaks to him directly, personally, and not through Moses.

And I again must say, with all due respect to the sources, which I love, that all these theories trouble me. Whatever a father's role, whatever his public responsibilities, he cannot, he must

not, accept calmly, in faith and resignation, [00:47:00] the sudden death of his children. If Abraham could protest against the identical punishment inflicted on the just and unjust alike, why shouldn't Aaron echo his protest? How could a father tolerate such a tragedy without falling in despair? Is it because he, a peacemaker, a peerless mediator, gentleness and harmony personified, was afraid to quarrel with God? In that case, he distances himself from me altogether. If the need for peace means choosing submission, submission at any price, do we not run the risk of descending into humiliation, and hence into servitude?

[00:48:00] But careful, we are going too fast. What is so pleasing about the Midrashic literature, is that we find in it both a thing and its opposite. As I said, you suggest an idea, and immediately they answer, "*u'mei-idach gisa*" "On the other hand." True, one legend tells us that the high priest, Aaron, chose faith, confidence, and acceptance, but another, another version, urges us to imagine otherwise.

According to this latter version, having heard the news, Aaron cried out, uncomprehending, full of pain, and he said, in quote, "All the children of Israel gazed upon you, Almighty God, when we crossed the Red Sea, and then they saw You again at Mount

Sinai, and none suffered for it. But my sons? [00:49:00] Was it not You who commanded them to enter the Tabernacle or the sanctuary, a place that no one -- not a priest -- may penetrate and emerge from alive? And why did they enter? To gaze upon Your power, to gaze upon Your glory, and yet, they paid for it with their lives. Why?" I must admit that I like this explosion of grief and despair on Aaron's part. Hence, the father is stronger than his function, or his election as high priest. How can we not feel compassion for his suffering, his distress? How can we not feel compassion for a man who has just lost his children? What he asks of God, he has a right to ask.

Apparently, still according to the Midrashic version, God thinks so too. For He tells Moses to console him with the words, *bi'krovai ekadeish*, better yet. [00:50:00] And here comes a marvelous theory. Aaron learns that his sons actually could have escaped the death penalty. It is Moses himself who reveals it to him in the name of God, saying, "Listen, Aaron. You know very well, whoever enters the Tabernacle or the sanctuary without permission will become a leper. Such is the Divine will, such is the law." Now, would Aaron have preferred to see his sons Nadav and Abihu, his cherished sons, banished from the camp? Cast out from their people, unclean? Marked by a divine reprimand? In other words, it was for their own good that their

lives were taken. And there, Aaron agreed. A leprous life, far from the community, would have been a lingering death for his sons. [00:51:00] Better to die on the spot, without suffering. To die a heroic death. And that is why, *va'yidom Aharon*. That is why Aaron kept silent.

And here, we detect even a spark of knowledge and of gratitude in his silence. But here, too, the Talmudic sages do not agree. Rabbi Aha ben Zeira poses a question that must make us tremble if we seek imminent and transcendent justice at the same time. And he says, I quote him, "*Korach* and his people came quarreling to the Tabernacle, and they were burned up, while the sons of Aaron wished to bring their sacrifice to God, but without quarreling, and they too were consumed with fire. Is this just? The same justice to both?" And further along, "General Titus, [00:52:00] Titus Harasha, Titus the wicked, entered the holy of holies with a naked sword in his hand, and he slashed the sacred curtain, the *Parochet*, he profaned the name of God. And he left the sanctuary in peace, unharmed. But the sons of Aaron went into the Tabernacle intending to offer their sacrifice to God. And what happened to them? They were brought back, burned to cinders. Where is justice? What is justice? Was Titus, the enemy and destroyer of Jerusalem, worth more than Nadav and Abihu? Was his life, his destiny, more precious than theirs?"

Before we conclude, let's return to the narrative. Aaron holds his peace, he is silent. [00:53:00] We visualize him lost in thought, forlorn. Unable to act or even to react. And therefore it is Moses, the leader, the pragmatic leader of the nation, Moses, who takes care of the funeral arrangements. He must be prepared, by his function, to deal with any and all circumstances, and he knows it. So he orders Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Aaron's uncle Uzziel, to carry the brothers out of the camp. To Aaron and his two surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, he explains how they must conduct themselves, and then it is God who speaks to Aaron, "Do not drink wine, or strong drink, thou nor thy sons with thee." He also tells him that the whole community will mourn the two brothers' death by fire, and if not, if the community fails in this observance, [00:54:00] divine anger will descend upon it. All this happens, and life goes on.

As we said earlier, this tale comprising a few short verses is among the saddest and most mysterious in the Bible. It grips us, it takes us by the throat. Yes. Is there a greater sorrow for man or woman than to bury a child? I think not. It is against nature. It smacks of a curse. Why is war the worst curse of all? Because it reverses the laws of nature. The

Talmud says, "Woe to the generation in which parents bury their children." We link the tragedy of Nadav and Abihu to others, [00:55:00] equally overwhelming, personal and collective, and we read it on Yom Kippur to inspire repentance, and to tell us that there are things we don't understand. The *Zohar* says, "Whoever weeps reading the death of Aaron's two sons will not suffer the same fate. He will not see his children die young."

Determined to make sense of this drama, of apparent injustice, Rabbi Aba bar Ravina says, "The death of the just serves as expiation for their contemporaries." Does it mean that there is a useful and fruitful element in the death of the innocent? It's hard to conceive. Isn't Jewish tradition opposed to death? Isn't death an inevitable tragedy, a catastrophe, of which God alone knows the secret? A secret that only God can decipher? Has tradition not taught us, for generation upon generation, that only life is sacred? [00:56:00] That death is always impure? And that we must choose life, and the living? That asking questions of the dead is a sin?

The fact that the text stresses the reasons for the punishment is in itself interesting. That happens frequently in Scripture. If we skip several chapters, we arrive at the *sidra* of *Haazinu*, and we hear God tell Moses why he will not be buried in sacred

ground, in *Eretz Yisrael*. What God says is terrible. Extremely unjust, unfriendly, cruel. God says, "You and Aaron have trespassed against me. You have not glorified my name. And that is why you will not set foot on the land I have promised your people." [00:57:00] Every year when I read that, it hurts. Moses? Our master, our guide, our interpreter? *Adon kol ha'Neviim!* He, a sinner? He, a rebel against God? What has he done to deserve those final Divine rebukes? And why at that moment, before he was departing from the world? How is it that God didn't see fit to say a few consoling words to him, Moses? Yes, there was a time I didn't like what you did. You didn't like what I did? Okay. But now! (laughter)

And the answer may be simple. Moses knew that he would never reach the land of Canaan. And God, in pity, in compassion, wanted to tell him why. [00:58:00] To a man worthy of his name and his destiny, nothing is worse than uncertainty. Nothing is more overwhelming than the unknown. It's better for Moses to know that God decided to punish him, and for what, than not to know at all. And that is why the text tells us the reason for Aaron's sons, Nadav and Abihu, and their punishment by death. But something inside me keeps me from making my peace with this tale of two beautiful young brothers, fervent, pious, who, whatever one may say about their impulsive spirits, [00:59:00]

tried to overcome snares and obstacles in order to approach the Creator of all beings, of all things, and to love Him, *le'hosif ahavah al-ahavah*, to love Him more. To reach a state of excessive love. Isaac was about to die by fire, but God spared him. Nadav and Abihu were not spared. Why?

Why didn't the God of love spare so many descendants of Moses and Aaron? To bring them closer to Him, He tore them from our midst. Why? *Va'yidom Aharon*. And Aaron the father kept silent. Like God, for God. Never have I read so often these words, *va'yidom Aharon*, as in the years since the last war.

[01:00:00] So many men, so many learned men, so many pious men and women, used *va'yidom Aharon* as their way of coping. So all that we, Aaron's distant disciples or children, can do, is to join our silence to his. Shall we be comforted by it? Are both our silences of the same nature? I do not know. What I know is that from Aaron we learn that faced by the silence born of incommensurate suffering and tragedy, we can only question, interrogate, search, and confront ourselves by looking and looking and looking, more and more, deeper and deeper, for answers. Answers, hidden in the questions themselves.

[01:01:00] (applause)

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