



Parshat Shemini: “I Will Be Sanctified Through Those Near To Me”

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone
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The untimely death of Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aharon devoured by a heavenly fire after offering a sacrifice upon the *mizbeiach*, the altar, on the day of the Mishkan's inauguration, has long been seen as an enigma. With no reason given for their death, the classical Rabbinic commentators are left to puzzle over the handful of clues offered by the Torah that might provide the cause for the taking of their lives.

Yet I have always been drawn to the position that Nadav and Avihu didn't sin at all, and that none of the transgressions suggested would have been grievous enough to justify a punishment as grave as death. Rather, as emerges from the words of the Midrash (Sifra, Shmini I:23), the actions of Nadav and Avihu as well as their death all play a role in the dedication and consecration of the Mishkan.

Moses said to Aaron: “My brother, I knew that this House was to be sanctified by those who are beloved of God and I thought it would be either through me or through you; now I see that it has been sanctified through Nadav and Avihu – they are greater than me and you” (Rashi, [Vayikra 10:3](#))

“*Vayidom Aharon*” – Aharon falls silent. He accepts the price his family needs to pay in the dedication of a House of God in this world. The word דום (*dom*) does not merely connote silence (usually reflected in the word שתיקה, *shtika*), but rather a tranquility of spirit, a realization and acceptance of the role he and his children must play in the unfolding narrative of the Torah.

The words of Moshe, בקרובי אקדש, “I will be sanctified through *krovim*, those near to me,” ring especially true during these times as young and not so young, religious and secular, Israelis of every walk of life are snatched away from us in these long, heavy, tragic months.

The active partnership and participation of the *krovim*, those righteous and beloved by God, helped consecrate God's presence in the Mishkan and, painfully, now help consecrate God's presence in the House of God's larger embodiment: Medinat Yisrael. Like Aharon, their painful absence leaves us silenced but hopeful that the Divine plan will lead from the losses we have experienced to a better, holier future for our people and our state.



Families throughout Israel – in every community, in every classroom, in every synagogue – contain the heroic and courageous likes of Aharon. Even in the face of immeasurable loss, these parents, spouses, siblings, children, and friends continue as Aharon did; to carry on, finding the courage to keep their lives afloat in the absence of their loved ones. Listen to their words at funerals, shiva homes, and memorial services. Their courage defies description, and their commitment to the posture of “*Vayidom Aharon*” – falling silent, with allegiance to the mission of Medinat Yisrael – has given new meaning to these words. This seems to be the way our immortality is guaranteed, through the sacrifice of God’s most beloved.

Standing at one military funeral after another, I am reminded of a teaching from Rabbi Soloveitchik, who once addressed his view of the Israeli flag. Does the object of the flag have any religious status or sanctity? While at face value, there is no halakhic status afforded to any flag, Rabbi Soloveitchik points to the rule that the clothing of a Jew murdered *al kiddush hashem*, for the sanctity of God, must be buried along with the person – a *halakha* that has taken on entirely new dimensions in the aftermath of Oct. 7, with clothing, bedsheets, and even entire cars being included in this observance. With this in mind, Rabbi Soloveitchik offers a striking perspective on the Israeli flag:

If you ask me, how do I, a Talmudic Jew, look upon the flag of the State of Israel, and has it any halachic value? – I would answer plainly. I do not hold at all with the magical attraction of a flag or of similar symbolic ceremonies. Judaism negates ritual connected with physical things.

Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of a law in the Shulchan Aruch to the effect that: “One who has been killed by non-Jews is buried in his clothes, so that his blood may be seen and avenged ...

How much more is this so of the blue and white flag, which has been immersed in the blood of thousands of young Jews who fell in the War of Independence defending the country and the population (Religious and non-religious because the enemy knows no difference). It has a spark of sanctity that flows from devotion and self-sacrifice. (Rabbi Soloveitchik, Five Addresses, p.139).

The flag reflects our sense of shared purpose and mission, which brings with it our shared feelings of loss for those who have been taken from us on our journey towards protecting our State and the future of our people. Together, we grieve for the holy lives taken from us and dream for the future of our people unified in purpose and peace.