



SoulSpa 3.25 • P. Shemini
April 11, 2026 • 24 Nisan 5786
9th day of the Omer = Gevurah sheb'Gevurah

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה:

*Barukh Atah Adonai
eloheinu melekh ha'olam
asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei Torah.*

Blessed are You, YHVH, our God,
eternal sovereign, who sanctified us
in God's *mitzvot* and commanded us
to busy ourselves in words of Torah.

Orientation to the Book of Leviticus

ט.ה.ר (t-h-r) pure > *uncharged* ק.ר.ב (k-r-v) proximity, inwardness > *sacrifice*
ט.מ.א (t-m-) impure > *charged* ע.ל.ה ('-l-h) ascent > *burnt offering (olah)*

Always changing, changing always;
nothing stays the same.
Prepare for the sharp turn,
The deep drop,
The meteoric rise.
A child breathes, stops breathing;
Breathes, stops breathing.
The sacred *offering* is acceptable;
The sacred *offering* is unacceptable.

I know what God wants from me,
I don't know.
I know what I want from myself,
I don't know.
I laugh, question.
I weep, question,
laugh, weep,
laugh, weep.
Laugh.

– *Penina Adelman*

- Did Nadav and Avihu WANT to do this and did RIGHT, or did WRONG (drunk?)
- What were Nadav and Avihu after?
- Did *they* experience death, or did it just look like that to “us”?
- Did they become a korban? TUM’AH —> TAHARAH?

ICARUS GETTING TOO CLOSE TO SUN?
 DEPICTS NEED FOR MEDIATED APPROACH
 (i.e. not UNMEDIATED approach)

Leviticus 9:22-10:11

22-24. Aharon lifted his hands to the nation and blessed them. He descended from performing each *olah* for sin, purgation and peace. Moshe and Aharon went into the Tent of Witnessing, then came out and blessed the nation; and the glory of YHVH appeared to all the nation. Fire came forth from before YHVH and consumed [each] *olah* and fat parts on the altar: all the nation saw, shouted and fell on their faces.

וישא אהרן את יָדָיו אֶל־הָעָם וַיְבָרְכֵם וַיֵּרֶד מַעֲשֵׂת הַחֲטָאֹת וְהַעֲלָה וְהִשְׁלָמִים: וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיֵּצְאוּ וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד־יְהוָה אֶל־כָּל־הָעָם: וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת־הַעֲלֹה וְאֶת־הַחֲלִבִּים וַיֵּרָא כָּל־הָעָם וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם:

foreign alien weird

is this a penalty, a result, a reward, ...?!

1-3. Aharon’s sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and placed incense on it; and they *korban*-ified before YHVH **strange fire** that was not comamnded them. Fire came forth from before YHVH and consumed them, and they **died before YHVH**. Moshe said to Aharon: “This is what YHVH spoke saying: **In My close ones** I will be sanctified, and by all the nation I will be glorified” – and Aharon **silenced**.

unified with God?

it’s DAD!

- grief - awe

souls brought to God? **WHY DID THIS HAPPEN

ויקחו בני־אהרן נדב ואביהוא איש מחתתו ויתנו בהן אש וישימו עליה קטרת ויקריבו לפני יהוה אש זרה אשר לא צוה אתם: ותצא אש מלפני יהוה ותאכל אותם וימתו לפני יהוה: ויאמר משה אל־אהרן הוא אשר־דבר יהוה לאמר בקרבי אקדש! על־פני כל־העם אקבד וידם אהרן:

ויקרא משה אל־מישאל ואל אלצפן בני עזיאל דד אהרן ויאמר אליהם קרבו שאו את־אחיכם מאת פני־הקדש אל־מחוץ למחנה: ויקרבו וישאם בכתנתם אל־מחוץ למחנה כאשר דבר משה:

ויאמר משה אל־אהרן ולא־לעזר ולא־יתמר בניו ראשיכם אל־תפרעו ובגדיכם לא־תפרמו ולא תמתו ועל כל־העדה יקצף ואחיכם כל־בית ישראל יבכו את־השרפה אשר שרף יהוה: ומפתח אהל מועד לא תצאו פן־תמתו כי־שמן משחת יהוה עליכם ויעשו כדבר משה:

וידבר יהוה אל־אהרן לאמר: זין ושכר אל־תשת אתה ובניך אתך בבאכם אל־אהל מועד ולא תמתו חסות עולם לדרתיקם: ולהבדיל בין הקדש ובין החל ובין הטמא ובין הטהור:

4-5. Moshe called to Mishael and Eltzafan, sons of Uziel uncle of Aharon, and said to them, “**Approach** and lift your brothers from before the Holy [of Holies] to outside the camp.” They **approached** and lifted them by their tunics to outside the camp as Moshe said.

OUCH. SO HARD.

6-7. Moshe said to Aharon and to Elazar and Itamar his sons, “Do not wild [=bare] your heads and do not tear your clothes, and you will not die and anger not strike all the community. But your kin, all the house of Israel, will bewail the burning that YHVH burned. Do not go out from the opening of the Tent of Witnessing lest you die, for the anointing oil of YHVH is on you” – and they did as Moshe said.

8-10. **YHVH spoke to Aharon saying: “Do not drink wine or intoxicant** – not you or your sons – when you enter the Tent of Witnessing, so you will not die. It is an eternal law for your generations, to distinguish between the holy and the ordinary, and between the *tamei* and the *tahor*.”

Sefaria’s standard translation of Leviticus 10:2

<p>וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: 2</p>
<p>And fire came forth from GOD and consumed them; thus they died by GOD’s will. ^a by GOD’s will Lit. “before GOD.”</p>

Vayikra Rabbah 20:8

בר קפרא בשם רבי ירמיה בן אלעזר
אמר בשביל ארבעה דברים מתו
בניו של אהרן, על הקריבה, ועל
הקרבה, על אש זרה, ועל שלא נטלו
עצה זה מזה. על הקריבה, שנכנסו
לפני ולפנים. ועל ההקרבה,
שהקריבו קרבן שלא נצטוו. על אש
זרה, אש מבית פירים הכניסו. ועל
שלא נטלו עצה זה מזה, שנאמר:
איש מחתתו, איש מעצמו עשו שלא
נטלו עצה זה מזה.

Bar Kappara said in the name of R. Yirmiyah ben Elazar, "The sons of Aharon died for four reasons: the **approach**, the *korban*, the strange fire, and for not seeking guidance one from the other. The **approach** – they entered the ultimate presence. The *korban* – they *korban*-ified a *korban* they were not commanded. Strange fire – they entered with [fire] from the kitchen. For not taking guidance – "Each took his fire pan" (Lev. 10:1), each deciding oneself, not seeking guidance one from the other.

Other midrashic explanations:

- They wanted to upstage their father
- They went into the Mishkan drunk
- They went in wearing the wrong clothing
- They went in without washing their hands
- They did not marry and have children

Blu Greenberg, Contemporary Reflections / The Women's Torah Commentary

What could have happened? We struggle to understand. Was this a punishment from God, or a random accident? What crime could they have committed that was so heinous as to warrant death by flash fire? Perhaps they were acting out of enthusiasm and desire to serve. Perhaps they were overcome simply by the pure joy of being in the presence of God – and wished only to increase awe in the hearts of the people. And even if they were guilty of not following God's word to the last, did not their father Aaron have credit in the storehouse of good deeds? Was there not some milder punishment that could have been meted out on the scale...? ... a mom redeeming her own son [[what could we have done??]

What was Aaron's response? Two simple words: *vayidom Aharon* ("Aaron silenced"). The word *vayidom* means more than he kept quiet (*vayishtok*). Aaron responded with a profound, shattering silence, a stunning silence, a shocked silence. He does not justify the cruel decree by blaming his sons and accepting their fate as punishment for their sins. Yet, neither does he revolt or protest God's action. Total silence.

(if, in fact, it was God's action at all)

Aaron's response is the profoundest human and religious response to the reality that there are times when good people die unjustly or are consumed in tragedies that seem to be arbitrary, shocking, without justification, and with nothing to ameliorate the pain and loss of those who love them...

THIS TRADITION COMES DIRECTLY FROM HERE

The Jewish laws of bereavement, so exquisitely tuned to the needs of the mourners, stipulate that **the *shiva* visitor should not speak until the mourner speaks**. I had always thought that the point of that precept was to ensure that the conversation would flow to the place the mourner needs it to reach. But I now understand that the *halakhah* enjoining the comforting visitor to hold back in silence serves a different function: to caution against offering a rationale for the decree of death. The deeper human religious response is to be silent, to live with the contradiction, and to affirm that **we need not force meaning into tragedy**. Sometimes, the deepest response of love is to be silent.

The Women's Torah Commentary

Aaron was silent. There is not much that one can say when confronted with the awesome power of God. But what was the reaction of Nadav and Avihu's mother, Elisheva? The text does not record her response to this tragedy.

THIS WAS A BIG
INSIDE-FAMILY JOB

Jewish Women's Archive

Elisheva experienced great joy on the day of the Tabernacle's dedication, as the midrash explains: "Elisheva had five joys more than other Israelite women: her brother-in-law [Moses] was king, her husband [Aaron] was High Priest, her sons [Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar] were deputy high priests, her grandson [Phinehas] was anointed for battle and her brother [Nahshon] was the chieftain of his tribe." Her great joy, unfortunately, was turned to mourning, for on that very same day two of her sons (Nadav and Avihu) died when they sought to offer alien fire and were consequently consumed by fire. The Divine Justice laughed bitterly at this, as is stated in Eccl. 2:2: "Of revelry I said: 'It is mad!,'" for man's joy in this world is not complete, and is always mixed (*mahul*) with sadness (B.T. Zevachim 102a, Lev. Rabbah 20:2):

Vayikra Rabbah 20:2

ישמח, עתיד הקב"ה לשמח
במעשיהם של צדיקים לעתיד
לבוא. אלישבע בת עמינדב לא
שמחה בעולם, שראתה חמשה
כתרים ביום אחד, ובמה מלך,
אחיה נשיא, בעלה כה"ג שני בניה
שני סגני כהנה, פנחס בן בנה משוח
מלחמה, פיו שנכנסו בניה להקריב
ונשרפו, נהפכה שמחתה לאבל

The Holy Blessed One is destined to rejoice in the actions of the righteous in the future. Elisheva bat Amminadav did not rejoice in the world when she saw [her relatives'] five crowns on one day. Her brother-in-law was king, her brother a prince, her husband, High Priest, her two sons the two deputy priests, her grandson Pinhas anointed for war. When her sons entered to *korban*-ify and were burned, her joy was transformed into mourning.

Ellen Frankel, The Five Books of Miriam

OUR DAUGHTERS ASK: Why does the Torah say so little about the dramatic deaths of Nadab and Abihu? All we're told is the two men are unexpectedly consumed by divine fire; that Moses offers rather insensitive words of consolation to his bereaved brother, as it is written: "This is what YHVH meant when he said: 'through those near to me I show myself holy, and assert my authority before all the people'"(10:3); and that Aaron remains silent. About their mother Elisheva's response we're told nothing. Why isn't she even mentioned here? Why is she, like Sarah at the Akedah, absent before, during, and after this trial by fire?...

ELISHEVA ANSWERS: What a terrible day that was for me! Being a woman, I was not permitted to draw near when Aaron and his brother, Moses, consecrated the altar. Instead I remained with the other Levite women, preparing food and readying ourselves for the festivities that were to follow.

Then I heard a piercing cry from inside the Tent of Meeting. I recognized the voices of my two sons... but I did not hear the voices of Aaron or Moses. I waited, terrified,

until one of the younger priests appeared from behind the curtain of the tent, his face ashen and taut with fright. "They are dead," he told me, "killed by the invisible hand of God." At first I couldn't move. My ears refused to believe his words. Dead? On the day when we were dedicating a new house for Shekhinah's Presence to dwell in? ...

As my two kinsmen bore my sons toward the outside of the camp, my grief finally shattered its bonds and broke free. I began to wail and beat my breast... I began to follow after my sons, but **Moses ordered the women to hold me back.**

"All of the people shall observe a period of mourning," he announced, "and all the house of Israel shall bewail the burning that YHVH have wrought. But Aaron, together with Eleazar and Itamar, Aaron's two remaining sons" – were they not my sons as well? – "these three shall not bare their heads nor rend their clothes, lest they die and anger strike the whole community."

What was I to do now? Was I allowed to mourn? And who would comfort me, with my husband and two sons separated from me in the Tabernacle? But whether God wanted me to or not, I chose to mourn. If I was to be forbidden entrance to the holy altar, forbidden to accompany my dead sons outside the camp, forbidden even to seek comfort with my husband and two remaining sons, then I would not refuse the comfort of my community. **And so the women put away their hand drums and did not perform the dance that they had prepared for what was meant to be a day of rejoicing. I put on sackcloth and ashes and sat before them on the barren ground. And they sang a lament to my dead sons, and so I was comforted for my loss.**

Penina Adelman, "Elisheva"

Nadav and Avihu were my fussiest ones. I couldn't calm them when they were babies; I couldn't placate them as adults. They would always demand to know why this one received more food than that one; why Aaron and I seemed to favor this one over that one; why they had to look after their other brothers at all. They were never content. Nadav was always scheming against Avihu to show him up, to get there first. I didn't like the way each of them was turning out. I told Aaron, "No good will come from them." ... I had my doubts. I had learned from all those years of midwifery... that a child's destiny is stamped in their eyes with eternal light.

When my two oldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, strode up to the altar in what they may have thought was an imitation of their father, the High Priest, what was in their minds? How long had they been planning their subterfuge? What did they think would happen? Was it their glory, or God's glory, that they were honoring?

When I saw them struck down, my spirit briefly left me and went to be with them. My boys had come from my womb and now they were returning to the earth's womb. At that moment, I could not weep and I could not laugh.

R. Aviva Richman, "Whiplash and Endurance"

Moshe refuses to let Aharon see this as a punishment... Nadav and Avihu are not sinners; they wanted to come **close** to God. This was a sanctification, not desecration, of God's name (Leviticus 10:4). And when Moshe tells Aharon and his sons to stay inside the Mishkan (10:7), it conveys that these deaths are not a sign of rejection and punishment. God wants to hold Aharon **close** even in these tragic circumstances. When we feel we have really messed up, like Aharon in the golden calf, or when we face disaster, like Aharon suddenly losing his sons, Shemini invites us to imagine what it looks like to stay inside the possibility of relationship, rather than run away. Just hearing the words "don't leave" offers a pathway towards hanging on and finding support, and an alternative to the kind of self-blame that might result in total alienation....

A dive into Elisheva's inner experience leads us into the turmoil of great joy and profound loss. One midrash (Midrash Mishlei 31:5) describes the honor that encompassed Elisheva on this day as her **close** relatives rose to positions of great stature, ascribing to her the verse in Proverbs (31:25): "She is clothed with strength and splendor; she looks to the future cheerfully (עז והדר לבושה ותשחק ליום אחרון)." Yet, a parallel midrash takes an entirely different turn (Kohelet Rabbah 2:2). Casting a shadow on the glory and confident joy of Proverbs, it ascribes to Elisheva a verse that undermines joy entirely (Eccl. 2:2): "Of revelry I said, 'It's mad!' Of merriment, 'What good is that?'" The midrash declares:

Kohelet Rabbah 2:2

מה מעורבב השחוק ששחקה מדת
הדין על אלישבע בת עמינדב ... שני
בניה סגני כהונה, וכיון שנכנסו
להקטיר שלא ברשות נשרפו
ונהפכה שמחתה לאבל.

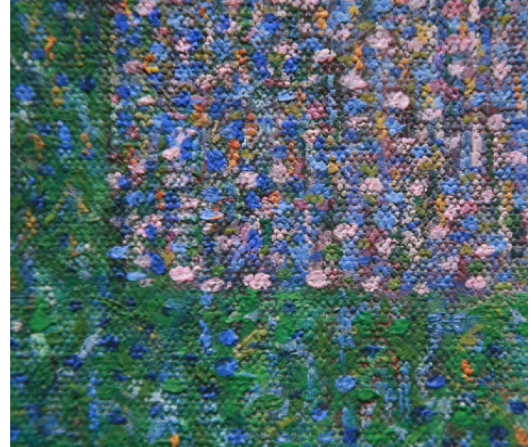
How mixed up is the joke that the attribute of judgment played on Elisheva daughter of Amminadav! ... Her two sons were made officials of the priesthood. But when they went inside to use incense without permission, they were burnt up, and her joy was turned into mourning.

We could hold up one of these *midrashim* at the expense of the other, but we can learn more from living in the tension between the two. Rather than optimistic naivete, the Proverbs *midrash* can be seen as offering a complex response to Ecclesiastes' cynicism. Even though the attribute of judgment played a "joke" (שחוק) on Elisheva on that eighth day, Elisheva knows that ultimately she will rejoice again (ותשחק ליום אחרון). Elisheva reserves the confidence of the last laugh, a hard-won joy that is not ignorant of pain.

Michal Fox Smart, "The Sound of Silence"

Speaking of her own faith journey, Rachel Goldberg-Polin told an interviewer (recounted in JNS March 7, 2025), "This will probably sound strange...but I actually feel that the **closest** that I've ever come to feeling, really feeling God, is when Hersh was killed. It felt so unbelievable that it could only be from God." She went on to recall her experience as a child, viewing the famous painting by Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte*: "It's the pointillist masterpiece that, if you look at it very

closely, it doesn't make any sense; it's just a bunch of dots and chaos and blurriness. And when you step back, then you see this glorious tapestry of gorgeousness. But when you're very **close** and in it, you don't see it. And I really believe—and maybe this is a survival tactic, maybe it's the lies we tell ourselves to keep ourselves okay—but I believe that there is a grand tapestry. I don't have the hubris to say that I understand the tapestry, but I'm faithful that it's there and that's why I think that this indescribable blow that we're learning how to digest is also in some way a kiss from God."



She wasn't alone

I think – hope –
the women kept
company with Elisheva.
Sat with her
on the ground.
Brought her lentils
and boiled eggs,
foods without edge.
Maybe they sang
rounds, their voices
rising and falling.
No one said
for the best.
A child's death
isn't. At least
then, singing laments,
she wasn't alone.

– REB 2026