

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE**SHEMINI/PARAH****Haftarah: Yehezkel 36:16-36****APRIL 2, 2016 23 ADAR II 5776****DEDICATIONS: In memory of Maurice Levy, Moshe ben Sefia A"H****With condolences to his wife, Esther Levy, and to his children, our friends: Charisse Sisselman, Isaac Levy, Raymond Levy, David Levy, and Stephanie Tawil**

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From: Dave Steinberg
Mission Chair, Norpac Mission to Washington

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We expect that 1200 people will join us on May 18. (We already have 700 registered) They will meet in small groups (generally 8-10 people per group - each group meeting with 3 members of the House / Senate) with 80-90% of the members of Congress. During these meetings they will advocate for specific pending legislation relating to Israel.

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MOSES – Congratulations!

Editors Notes

As we sat down at our class on Monday morning and I opened the Chumash to the beginning of this week's portion, I was struck by the opening words. Vayhi Bayom HaShemini - and it was on the eighth day. What's so special about these words? The eighth day of what? What was it that elicited something within me?

The human mind is designed to work by association. An image, a name, a date or a place can set into motion a series of recollections. We call these things

triggers. For me, these three Hebrew words referring to, "the eighth day", are a trigger. I am aware that this eighth day coincided with the first day of Nissan; the inauguration day of the Mishkan or the Tabernacle in the desert. And in the midst of the celebration it was also the day the two sons of Aaron, Nadva and Avihu were taken from the world.

We read this week that in bringing a strange fire, a fire came from the alter and entered the bodies and drew out their souls. I am reminded of a haunting poem we read during the High Holidays reflecting on their death and it is difficult just contemplating, not to shed a tear.

Look at the words today as in all previous years, I am reminded of that event. But beginning this year and I imagine, going forward, this yom hashemini, this eighth day, the first of Nissan, this anniversary of the inauguration of the tabernacle, will remind me of another event.

Along with names, Nadav and Avihu, I will remember Ya'akov, Sarah, Moshe, Yehoshua, Rivkah, David, and Elian, also taken in a strange fire on the first of Nissan, on Shabbat last year in their home on Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn. These children were a part of some of our lives, but they will remain a part of all of our lives forever.

The verse that Moses uses to comfort his brother is also hunting in light of those events. "This is what Hashem has previously said: By those who are close to me I shall be sanctified and thus will I be honored by the entire congregation." The rabbis ask why Moses prefaces his statements by saying that this is what God had already said. I believe that Moses is telling Aaron that tragedy beyond simple understanding is part of the reality in the world we live in. It was in the past, it is now and it always will be.

The question remains in the face of tragedy how does one respond? In the case of Aaron, the verse tells us, VaYidom - he remained silent. But he did not bury his head in the sand, he moved forward with his

work, insuring that the shechina or Divine Presence would dwell among the people.

I believe that Hashem imbues all of us with a somewhat super human strength in times when we are struck or perhaps even touched by tragedy. He gives us the fortitude to build on the tragedy and to form something on the ashes of death.

We see this so often in the secular world. A person is struck by illness or disease and succumbs His family often responds by spearheading efforts to discover a cure eventually saving hundreds of thousands of others. I remember the woman who started MADD in 1980. After Candy Lightner's daughter, was killed by a repeat drunk driving offender she started her campaign. Instead of burying your head in the sand she elected to do something about it and through her efforts millions became aware of this problems and thousand have been spared. .

We, the Jewish people, have our own history of building on ashes. We are told that the Temple in Jerusalem was built on Mount Moriah on the spot where Abraham bound Isaac. The rabbis go so far as to use the term, the ashes of Isaac. Building in the face of tragedy is part of our very being.

Imagine the world in 1945, when the realization of the loss of six million Jewish people began to set in. Many spoke of the end of the Jewish people and even more spoke about the end of a Torah based Judaism. Yet on the ashes of those who were murdered at Auschwitz and Treblinka, the State of Israel was born giving refuge and providing a safe haven to millions. And those who survived witnessed a strengthening of the Jewish people unimaginable with more people learning Torah today and involved in acts of kindness than at any time in the last 2600 years since the destruction of the first Temple. All this is a response to tragedy.

Today we are at the one year anniversary when on Rosh Hodesh Nissan, seven precious souls were taken. Moses speaks to Aaron about glorifying G-d through tragedy. How is that possible? It is all based on our reaction and our response.

No matter who we are, observant or not observant, Sephardic or Ashkenaz, Hasidic or Litvac, man or woman, child or elder, Jew and Gentile alike; we were all touched and struck by this tragedy. It hit a cord deep within each of us. And with it each of us was given an opportunity and a challenge. Do we bury our heads or do we respond? Do we forget? Do we turn away? Or do we step up and build something on the ashes of these holy children as a testament to

their holy souls? Every one of us has an opportunity to make the world a better place and to affect countless people. I know that Hashem has given us the strength. I see it in their mother, my dear friend Gayle and in the entire family. That strength and opportunity sits within each of us.

Our response is the test. What can rise on those ashes on Bedford Avenue? Gayle Sassoon has a vision. Who will join her in making that vision real?

Gayle writes: "On Rosh Chodesh Nissan, with Hashem's help, Synagogues around the world will commemorate the yahrzeit of the passing of my children A'H.

"The event will consist of showing a pre-recorded video of myself speaking on my personal experience since the severe loss I suffered a year ago. I plan to speak of my Bitachon and Emunah in Hashem that has remained strong and unwavering despite the many challenges I have had throughout this year, and how it has allowed me to cope with the struggles I continue to face every day.

"My goals of this event are to impact the ladies of both the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities with chizuk, to show hakarat hatov for all the support they have shown my family and myself, and to share with them my hopes for a future project that is very close to my heart.

"The mission of this project is to build a Makom Kaddosh on Bedford avenue in Brooklyn where my parents former house stood and where the neshamot of my children left this world. This structure will be dedicated to avodat Hashem in the form of a kollel as well as a room for ladies classes. This facility would also be a place for chesed where any Jew in need can have a place for small simachot such as a Bris or Sheva berachot. In addition, an extensive Jewish library would be created accessible at separate hours for men, women, and children of all ages.

"Along with the health and happiness of my daughter, the fruition of this vision is what gives me purpose and motivation in my will to survive. To provide a place of sasson ve'simcha that brings Jews closer to HaShem and to each other will give me nechama beyond what words can describe."

For information on how your synagogue or community can participate in this showing, please contact Pella Teitelbaum at 917-439-5189 or at makeitmatter2u2@aol.com .

To make a donation, please send a check to Sassoon 7 Inc, 1820 Avenue M, Box 207, Brooklyn NY 11230

Our response is the test. What can rise on those ashes on Bedford Avenue? Do we enable Gayle Sassoon's vision? Do we bring this woman who only wants to help others some level of nechama? Or do continue our existence as if this never happened? The latter would be the greatest tragedy of all.

Shabbat Shalom,
David Bibi

MIRACLE ON BUS # 4

ED: In the article above, I refer to building from Ashes and note the State of Israel after the war. On Wednesday I was sent this by my friend Phil Rosen

It was a very hot day in July 1951. I was in Tel Aviv and too hot to walk. I boarded Dan bus #4 on the corner of Ben Yehuda and Gordon streets.

The bus was very crowded and there was no available seat. I had to stand next to a Yemenite woman holding a live chicken under her apron.

People were chatting, discussing with fervor the day's news, each one offering a personal description of the political situation, everyone with a different opinion. As is common in Israel, every person holds himself to be the authentic source of "inside" information. This one said "I have a cousin in the police force and he told me....." Another replied, "that doesn't make any sense. My neighbor's son is in the army and he was telling us....." And from the rear of the bus, a passenger shouted "who cares? Nothing will change soon".

At each bus stop some passengers alighted and new passengers boarded. Now there were a few empty seats and I grabbed one in the middle of the bus.

As we approached another bus stop (I can't remember which corner), three or four new passengers boarded. One elderly lady stepped up to the coin box next to the driver and deposited a few coins.

Suddenly, looking at the bus driver she gave a loud shriek. "Moishele, Moishele, Moishele mein kind." The driver jammed on the brakes, looked at the elderly woman and cried, "Mama, Mama, is it you Mama?"

Both were Holocaust survivors from Poland and each one thought the other one was dead.

Jumping up from his seat, the driver embraced his long-lost and presumed dead mother and both hugged and hugged and both wept bitter tears of joy.

All the passengers clapped hands. Several were weeping from the joy of seeing mother and son reunited. One passenger jumped off the bus and hailed the next approaching bus. He shared the news with the new driver and requested him to notify the Dan bus company to send a relief driver.

None of us left the bus. A relief driver appeared about half-hour later. Passengers sitting in the row behind the driver got up and gave the seats to the mother and son, still clutching one another and weeping with heart-wrenching sobs.

At some point, our original driver and his mother left the bus while all of us clapped hands and the Yiddish-speaking passengers shouted "Mazal tov. Mazal tov. Tzu gezunt. A sach nachas".

I never knew where they were going. Probably to the driver's home so his mother could meet his wife and her new grandchild.

All of us were so filled with emotion that it was difficult to contain ourselves. There was not a dry eye among our passengers.

It was a hot July day in 1951. But I will never forget the miracle on Dan bus #4 on that very happy day.

Summary of the Perasha Shenimi - Inauguration of the mishkan, Kashroot

- 1- 8th day of the inauguration of the mishkan. Aharon brings Korbanot for the first time.
- 2- Aharon brings korban mincha & shelamim and blesses Benei Israel
- 3- Hashem consumes the korbanot. Aharon's sons bring esh zara and die. Hashem tells Aharon and his remaining son's not to mourn and to continue the service.
- 4- Moshe tells Aharon and his sons to eat the mincha and shelamim offerings
- 5- Aharon and his sons don't eat the shelamim. Moshe is confused / angered as to why.
- 6- Laws of Kashroot (animals, birds, fish, flying insects). Laws of the dead animals that cause tumah.
- 7- Items that can become tameh. Laws of kashroot for creeping creatures. Reason for Kashroot.

FROM THE JERSEY SHORE NEWSLETTER

“And you shall be holy” (Vayikra 11:45)

Our parashah speaks about foods that are forbidden to eat and the foods that are permitted. At the end, the Torah concludes and tells us the purpose of all of this. It is to be holy. The Seforno explains, “Because G-d is holy, He wants His people to be holy so that they will be eternal, perceive their Creator and follow in His paths. Only if they abstain from forbidden foods will this be possible.”

If we are holy, we can perceive the Creator, be eternal and follow His ways. A prerequisite to understand Hashem (as much as we can) is to be holy. Kosher food promotes holiness. There are holy people that study the deep secrets of the Torah and gain a greater understanding of the ways of Hashem. For some this is the study of Kabbalah.

Hide quoted text

A man once came to see Harav Hutner zt"l in regard to a question he had about learning a certain book on Kabbalah. “Have you ever ridden on the ‘A’ train?” Rav Hutner asked him.

“Yes, of course.” The man replied

“Then due to the sights you’ve seen there, you are disqualified from learning that book.”

I wonder what Rav Hutner would have said looking at the internet disqualifies a person from. Rabbi Reuven Semah

“And do not defile your souls with any vermin which crawls on the earth, for I am Hashem Who brought you up from the land of Egypt” (Vayikra 11:44-45)

Normally, when the Torah reminds us that Hashem freed us from Egyptian servitude, it uses the term “hamosee - Who brought you out.” Here, however, the Torah says “hama'aleh - Who brought you up,” to teach us that abstaining from forbidden foods, and especially from the forbidden species of vermin, has an uplifting effect on a Jew.

The Sages (Yoma 39a) gave a homiletic interpretation of the previous verse “oc o,nybu - and you will be defiled by them [if you eat them].” The defilement referred to is that the heart would be blocked, as it were, resulting in insensitivity to spiritual concerns.

On the other hand, someone who is careful about what he eats will have an open heart and find it easier to develop a benevolent outlook toward his fellow man. This is the “bringing up” that Hashem spoke of in our verse, an elevation of the spirit from the pride, selfishness and cruelty that characterized the Egyptian mentality. May we be privileged to carefully watch what we eat so that our souls are elevated to get closer to Hashem. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

FOOD FOR THE SOUL

“But this is what you shall not eat.” (Vayikra 11:4)

Every action has a reaction. Just like eating bad food has a negative effect on one’s body, eating non-kosher food has a similar effect on the soul. Apart from the sin of transgressing Hashem’s commandments, the “effect” of eating non-kosher food is “timum haleb, a contamination of the heart.

It is not only the person himself who is affected through eating non-kosher food. The Vilna Gaon was once asked why the laws of kashrut immediately precede the laws of childbirth. He answered that it comes to teach us that when a pregnant mother eats non-kosher food, it not only affects her heart, but the heart of her baby too.

To illustrate the effect of timum haleb, Rav Isaac Bernstein quoted the following story:

The Rambam was once in Yemen and came into contact with an extraordinary Talmid Hacham. Their friendship developed and this Talmid Hacham would write Rambam questions and the Rambam would respond.

One day, the Yemenite Rav sent a certain philosophical question. After the Rambam read it, he said, “A believing Jew cannot ask such questions” – and he refused to write back.

Years went by and the Rav from Yemen did not know why the Rambam refused to return his questions. Eventually, after many letters beseeching the Rambam to reply, he wrote back the following, “Investigate your shochet (slaughterer).

Shocked at having received this response, the Yemenite Rav immediately investigated his shochet and found that he had been feeding the community non-kosher meat for the past thirteen years!

The Rambam was not a Prophet. And yet, he knew that someone of the Yemenite Rav’s caliber of learning could only ask such a question if a seed was implanted within him that went contrary to Torah beliefs. When the Rambam thought about it, the only conclusion was that he was unknowingly eating non-kosher food.

It is a sad fact that today, especially in Israel, there are many Christian missionaries pretending to be religious Jews. Claiming to be a religious Jewish charity organization, they send Glatt Kosher food packages to poor widows and orphans. However, after a short time, once their trust is established, they begin to send non-kosher food in kosher wrapping. This way, they claim that a Jew’s mind becomes more receptive to non-Jewish ideas when they are presented to them at a later date. Even they acknowledge that without non-kosher food suppressing their heart, a religious Jew would never abandon his beliefs so easily!

The importance of eating kosher food was demonstrated by the Hatam Sofer when he was asked by the father of a mentally ill child if he should send his daughter to recover in a specialist school where they do not provide kosher food, or is it better for her to stay at home where she will never regain mental stability, but will only eat kosher food? The Hatam Sofer answered something that only someone on his level could answer. He answered that even though it was perfectly permissible to send his daughter there according to Jewish law, he would advise against it for the following reason: If the girl would become stable enough to be required to perform misvot, it is likely that she will eventually reject the misvot and live a life of sin due to the non-kosher food suppressing her heart for all those years. Therefore, it is better for her to remain in her current condition where she is not obligated in misvot, instead of becoming obligated and then rejecting the Torah and misvot. (Short Vort)

MAGIC SOLUTION

The action in a casino is intense. The finish of a close horse race is heart-stopping. The tension in a card game blots out notice of the outside world.

Gamblers take their games very seriously.

However, when you think of gamblers, you must consider that they work very hard at finding an easy way out. They prefer a one-time big win to daily doses of a workingman's salary. They don't want to struggle to accumulate enough money to buy a dream purchase; they expect to win it in a dream situation. It is the long shot bet or the winning ticket that they hope will fill their pockets with the wherewithal to acquire that which takes others years to earn.

It is nice to dream, but it is not commendable to be lazy. You must commit to your dream with fortitude and resolve to persevere until it is achieved. A man may take on the obligation to finish Shas (the Talmud) at the rate of one page a day for seven-and-a-half years. A woman may undertake to organize a hesed project which will require tenacity to complete successfully. A student may commit to a course of study which, when completed, will lead to a title such as doctor or attorney. In every case, the commitment requires consistency and hard work over the long haul.

Can you make that commitment, or will you continue to dream of a magic solution? (One Minute with Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda)

RABBI ELI MANSOUR Having Trust In The System

Parashat Shemini tells of the events that took place on the eighth and final day of the Mishkan's inauguration. It was on this day when Aharon, for the first time, functioned as the Kohen Gadol, offering special sacrifices in honor of the occasion.

The Sages teach that Aharon was initially hesitant to go forth and perform the sacred rituals in the Mishkan. He still had lingering doubts about whether he had truly been forgiven for his role in the sin of the golden calf. True, his intentions in that unfortunate incident were noble. Seeing that the people wanted a graven image, he instructed them to bring their gold jewelry, incorrectly assuming that they would be hesitant to do so, and that in the meantime, Moshe would return and the crisis would end. Nevertheless, Aharon still felt some guilt over having fashioned the golden calf, and still considered himself unworthy of entering the Mishkan and serving God. Moshe therefore had to encourage Aharon and give him a slight "push" to proceed with the day's rituals.

What might we learn from Aharon's hesitation, and the extra "push" that he needed?

One Rabbi commented that Aharon's ambivalence on this occasion is characteristic of a problem that many of us experience regarding the process of Teshuba (repentance). Very often, even after sincere repentance, we are plagued by guilt and find it difficult to move on. Even for a righteous Sadik like Aharon, the natural feelings of regret can cause lingering doubts in the system of repentance. Lingering questions such as "Can God really forgive me for what I have done?" and "Am I really worthy of forgiveness?" remain. Moshe's encouragement and insistence that Aharon proceed with the sacrificial rituals should serve as an example to all of us to have faith and confidence in our own repentance. If we are truly sincere in our remorse, prayers and desire to improve, then we have nothing to fear. We must tell ourselves that yes, God very much wants us to "enter the Mishkan," to serve Him with sincerity, despite our past mistakes. If our repentance is sincere, then we must move forward with confidence.

One might, however, question this conclusion in light of a verse in Tehillim (51:5), "Ve'hatati Negdi Tamid" – "My sin is in front of me, always." Does this not imply that we should always be fearful of the consequences of our wrongdoing? Isn't this proof that we must remain concerned and hesitant about the efficacy of our repentance?

In truth, this verse refers not to lingering doubts about the effectiveness of Teshuba, but rather to a commitment to remain constantly vigilant to avoid repeating the sin. Every sin results from a certain weakness or flaw. And part of the process of repentance is identifying that flaw and devising strategies to ensure that it will not cause us to stumble again. "Ve'hatati Negdi Tamid" means that we will always remember what led us to sin so we can avoid it going forward. It might mean, for example, that we will avoid the crowd that exerted pressure on us to transgress the Torah, or avoid inappropriate places that cause us to sin. But it does not mean that we will have lingering doubts about the effectiveness of our repentance. We, like Aharon, must feel confident in the system and believe that God lovingly and mercifully accepts our Teshuba.

Why is it so hard for us to trust the system, and to confidently believe that our Teshuva is accepted?

One answer is that these doubts stem from our reluctance to forgive those who offend us. When somebody wrongs us, even if we outwardly forgive, we still harbor negative feelings; we are not prepared to allow the relationship to be fully restored. And this could make it difficult for us to believe that God has fully accepted our Teshuba. If we cannot completely forgive our peers, then we will doubt whether God can fully forgive us. Thus, one way to gain confidence in the system of repentance is to respond more favorably to those who "sin" against us. The more wholehearted we are in forgiving others, the more trust we will have in God's willingness to forgive us, and thus the less burdened we will be by lingering feelings of guilt and anxiety.

**VICTOR BIBI
SOD HAPARASHA**

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Rabbi Wein

Now that the holiday of Purim is safely behind us, many find themselves suffering from a state we call the hangover. There are those who are suffering from this hangover in a literal sense – too much drink, too much food...just too much. Well, a long nap and an analgesic to soothe the stomach and a cold compress for the headache will eventually provide relief for this type of post-Purim hangover. But I feel that there is a deeper, more persistent and much more painful discomfort that descends upon us after Purim.

And, that hangover is occasioned by the realization that though one Haman was vanquished many centuries ago, there was and are many others ready to take his place. The story of Purim is therefore not a one time event, an aberration of history, an accidental madman rising to power. It is rather the ultimate hangover that just refuses to go away.

If that be the case, then why all of the merriment and celebration on Purim? The triumph over Haman is only a temporary one, a short respite until the next onslaught against Jews, Judaism and the values that the Torah preaches and represents. And what a pounding hangover that realization can be!

Are there cures for this type of hangover? For many centuries, for most of Jewish history in fact, Jews were convinced that there really was no permanent cure for our hangover. Jewish survival and our eventual triumph over all of the various Hamans who constantly arose to persecute us lay in our strength of spirit, our tenacity of faith and tradition and in our attempts to outwit our enemies (for we certainly had no ability to outgun them.)

Jews suffered and died and Haman always appeared triumphant. But eventually Haman fell and the Jewish people, bloodied and battered, persisted and survived. Jews saw this pattern of persecution and survival as a given, a facet of our existence that was almost inexorable and unable to be prevented.

In a most ironic and paradoxical way, Purim represented not triumph or the elimination of Hamans from our world but rather the ability to survive and be productive and creative in spite of the fact that there would always be a Haman and that we would always have to struggle to survive his persecution.

Because of this view, Jews really did not suffer from a post-Purim hangover as they never had any illusions that Haman was really going to disappear on a permanent basis. Only when great expectations are fostered and permanent solutions promised, and in spite of all of our efforts, Haman still mocks us and continues to threaten our annihilation, does the sickening feeling of the post-Purim hangover take hold.

Purim warns us that the story is not complete and that we are, at best, only granted respite in the words of Ahasveirosh to Esther of "up to half of a kingdom." To expect the whole kingdom would certainly lead to disappointment and depressed spirits, not to mention a splitting headache.

Purim is connected with the commandment in the Torah regarding remembering Amalek. In that struggle against evil and murder, the Torah states

explicitly that this a never-ending battle, a war of God and Godliness against Amalek from one generation until the next. From this it is easy to deduce that Amalek is not subject to a one-time knockout punch that will end the struggle once and for all.

It is rather a continuing struggle that every Jewish generation faces and must overcome, each generation in its own way and under its particular circumstance. The joy of Purim is always tempered by the fact that there are many more Purims that will be necessary to sustain us.

In the Haggadah of Pesach, which we will recite at the Seder table in a few short weeks, we are reminded that there is a continual line from Pharaoh to Haman, to Titus to Chmelienicki, to Hitler and to the current president of Iran. These people really meant to destroy us....and continue to do so. No words are minced and no threats are veiled. It would be foolhardy at the least to pretend that no real danger exists to our survival.

Yet, as all of our history tells us, we should not be overly pessimistic about our future. We should not fall prey to the post-Purim hangover syndrome. Rather, our reality should include the lessons of faith and tenacity that have stood us in such good stead over the ages. The tempered joy of our Purim will help usher us into the moment of redemption and renewal that Pesach signifies.

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks The Dangers of Enthusiasm

Excavating the history of words can sometimes be as revealing as excavating the ruins of an ancient city. Take the English word "enthusiasm". Today we see this as something positive. One dictionary defines it as "a feeling of energetic interest in a particular subject or activity and an eagerness to be involved in it." People with enthusiasm have passion, zest and excitement, and this can be contagious. It is one of the gifts of a great teacher or leader. People follow people of passion. If you want to influence others, cultivate enthusiasm.

But the word did not always have a favourable connotation. Originally it referred to someone possessed by a spirit or demon. In the seventeenth century England, it came to refer to extreme and revolutionary Protestant sects, and more generally to the Puritans who fought the English Civil War. It became a synonym for religious extremism, zealotry and fanaticism. It was looked on as irrational, volatile and dangerous.

David Hume (1711-1776), the Scottish philosopher, wrote a fascinating essay on the subject.[1] He begins by noting that "the corruption of the best

things produces the worst", and that is especially true of religion. There are, he says, two ways in which religion can go wrong: through superstition, and through enthusiasm. These are quite different phenomena.

Superstition is driven by ignorance and fear. We can sometimes have irrational anxieties and terrors, and we deal with them by resorting to equally irrational remedies. Enthusiasm is the opposite. It is the result of over-confidence. The enthusiast, in a state of high religious rapture, comes to believe that he is being inspired by God himself, and is thus empowered to disregard reason and restraint.

Enthusiasm "thinks itself sufficiently qualified to approach the Divinity, without any human mediator." The person in its grip is so full of what he takes to be holy rapture that he feels able to override the rules by which priestly conduct is normally governed. "The fanatic consecrates himself and bestows on his own person a sacred character, much superior to what forms and ceremonious institutions can confer on any other." Rules and regulations, thinks the enthusiast, are for ordinary people, not for us. We, inspired by God, know better. That, said Hume, can be very dangerous indeed.

We now have a precise description of the sin for which Nadav and Avihu, the two elder sons of Aaron, died. Clearly the Torah regards their death as highly significant because it refers to it on no less than four occasions (Lev. 10:1-2, 16:1, Num. 3:4, 26:61). It was a shocking tragedy, occurring as it did on the day of the inauguration of the service of the Mishkan, a moment that should have been one of the great celebrations in Jewish history.

The sages themselves were puzzled by the episode. The text itself merely says that "they offered unauthorised fire [esh zarah] before the Lord, that He had not commanded. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord." Evidently the sages felt that there must have been something else, some further sin or character flaw, to justify so dire and drastic a punishment.

Putting together clues in the biblical text, some speculated that they were guilty of entering the Holy of Holies[2]; that they had given a ruling of their own accord without consulting Moses or Aaron; that they had become intoxicated; that they were not properly robed; that they had not purified themselves with water from the laver; that they were so self-important that they had not married, thinking no woman was good enough for them; or that they were impatient for

Moses and Aaron to die so they could become the leaders of Israel.

Some speculated that the sin for which they were punished did not happen on that day at all. It had occurred months earlier at Mount Sinai. The text says that Nadav and Avihu along with seventy elders ascended the mountain and “saw the God of Israel” (Ex. 24:10). God “did not raise his hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank” (Ex. 24:11). The implication is that they deserved punishment then for not averting their eyes, or for eating and drinking at so sacred an encounter. But God delayed the punishment so as not to cause grief on the day He made a covenant with the people.[3]

These are all midrashic interpretations: true, valid and important but not the plain sense of the verse. The text is clear. On each of the three occasions where their death is mentioned, the Torah says merely that they offered “unauthorised fire”. The sin was that they did something that had not been commanded. They did so, surely, for the highest motives. Moses said to Aaron immediately after they died that this is what God had meant when he said, “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified” (Lev. 10:3). A midrash says that Moses was comforting his brother by saying, “They were closer to God than you or me.”[4]

The history of the word “enthusiasm”, though, helps us understand the episode. Nadav and Avihu were “enthusiasts”, not in the contemporary sense but in the sense in which the word was used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Enthusiasts were people who, full of religious passion, believed that God was inspiring them to do deeds in defiance of law and convention. They were very holy but they were also potentially very dangerous. David Hume in particular saw that enthusiasm in this sense is diametrically opposed to the mindset of priesthood. In his words, “all enthusiasts have been free from the yoke of ecclesiastics, and have expressed great independence of devotion; with a contempt of forms, ceremonies, and traditions.”

Priests understand the power, and thus the potential danger, of the sacred. That is why holy places, times and rituals must be guarded with rules, the way a nuclear power station must be protected by the most careful insulation. Think of the accidents that have occurred when this has failed: Chernobyl, for example, or Fukushima in Japan in 2011. The results can be devastating and lasting.

To bring unauthorised fire to the Tabernacle might

seem a small offence, but a single unauthorised act in the realm of the holy causes a breach in the laws around the sacred that can grow in time to a gaping hole. Enthusiasm, harmless though it might be in some of its manifestations, can quickly become extremism, fanaticism and religiously motivated violence. That is what happened in Europe during the wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it is happening in some religions today. As David Hume observed: “Human reason and even morality are rejected [by enthusiasts] as fallacious guides, and the fanatic madman delivers himself over blindly” to what he believes to be Divine inspiration, but what may in fact be overheated self-importance or frenzied rage.

We now understand in detail that the human brain contains two different systems, what Daniel Kahneman calls “thinking fast and slow”. The fast brain, the limbic system, gives rise to emotions, particularly in response to fear. The slow brain, the prefrontal cortex, is rational, deliberative, and capable of thinking through the long term consequences of alternative courses of action. It is no accident that we have both systems. Without instinctive responses triggered by danger we would not survive. But without the slower, deliberative brain we would find ourselves time and again engaging in destructive and self-destructive behaviour. Individual happiness and the survival of civilisation depend on striking a delicate balance between the two.

Precisely because it gives rise to such intense passions, the religious life in particular needs the constraints of law and ritual, the entire intricate minuet of worship, so that the fire of faith is contained, giving light and a glimpse of the glory of God. Otherwise it can eventually become a raging inferno, spreading destruction and claiming lives. After many centuries in the West, we have tamed enthusiasm to the point where we can think of it as a positive force. We should never forget, however, that it was not always so. That is why Judaism contains so many laws and so much attention to detail – and the closer we come to God, the more we need.

[1] David Hume, “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (1742-1754).

[2] This is based on the statement in Lev. 16:1, that the two sons of Aaron died when “they drew near before the Lord,” implying that they had come too close, i.e. they had entered the Holy of Holies.

[3] The seventy elders were punished later. See Rashi to Ex, 24:10.

[4] Midrash Aggadah (Buber) ad loc.