

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This haftara series is dedicated in memory
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

PARASHAT SHEMINI

WALKING BETWEEN FIRE AND SNOW

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

The connection between the *haftara* and the *parasha* of *Shemini* (II *Shemuel* 6:1-7:17) is quite clear; both describe the tragic deaths of individuals who drew near to the holy, thus spoiling the joy of the dedication ceremony in the framework of which the calamity occurred. The one story backs up the other, reinforcing the message regarding the fear that is appropriate when approaching the holy. This is already clear and obvious on a cursory reading of the *haftara*. Upon closer examination, however, contrasts and distinctions between the two stories become evident.

ADDING LOVE TO LOVE

Let us open with the first point. Both Nadav and Avihu and Uzza are lacking in their fear of the holy and suffer injury as a result, but from the perspective of their religious motivation these personalities are as different as night and day. Though Scripture seems to spell out the sin of Nadav and Avihu in explicit manner, *Chazal* saw fit to offer several proposals as to their specific offense:

Bar Kapara said in the name of Rabbi Yirmiya bar Elazar: The sons of Aharon died on account of four things: For drawing close, for offering, for a strange fire and for not seeking each other's counsel.

For drawing close – for they entered the innermost sanctuary.

For offering – for they offered a sacrifice about which they had not been commanded.

For a strange fire – for they brought a fire from the kitchen.

And for not seeking each other's counsel.

Rabbi Mani of Sha'av and Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin in the name of Rabbi Levi [said]:

The sons of Aharon died on account of four things, regarding each of which death is mentioned:

For having entered [the sanctuary] after having drunk wine, and it says: "Do not drink wine or strong drink...lest you die" (*Vayikra* 10:9).

And for having entered without washing [their] hands and feet, and it says: "When they go into the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water, that they die not" (*Shemot* 30:20).

And for having entered without [all] the [priestly] garments. What were they lacking? Rabbi Levi said: They were lacking the robe (*me'il*), about which death is mentioned, as it says: "And it shall be upon Aharon when he comes to minister: and its sound shall be heard... that he die not" (*Shemot* 28:35).

And because they did not have sons, about which death is mentioned, as it says: "And Nadav and Avihu died...and they had no children" (*Bamidbar* 3:4).

Abba Chanan says: **Because they did not have wives**, and it is written: "And he shall make atonement for himself and for his house" (*Vayikra* 16:6). (*Tanchuma, Acharei Mot* 6)

Despite the diversity of these proposals, one basic common denominator underlies them all, namely, the outburst of religious fervor that recognizes no limits. Nadav and Avihu's actions are founded upon an ecstatic religious experience, one that is based on a love of God that bursts forth in disregard of the quality of fear and in search of release and unrestrained expression. This quality was already manifest in our earlier encounter with them, in the description found in *Shemot* 24 of their eating and drinking in the presence of the *Shekhina* at Sinai:

Then Moshe went up, and Aharon, and **Nadav and Avihu**, and seventy of the elders of Israel: and they saw the God of Israel: and there was under His feet a kind of paved work of sapphire stone, and as it were the very heaven for clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand; and they beheld God, **and did eat and drink.** (*Shemot* 24:9-11)

Some commentators interpret this eating and drinking at Mount Sinai to Nadav and Avihu's credit, while others interpret this conduct to their discredit. For our purposes, neither understanding undermines the connection between their actions at the time that Israel stood at Sinai and their sin at the time of the dedication of the *Mishkan*. For even if they acted then with the appropriate caution and with the required safeguards, the aforementioned verses indicate an inclination to Divine service based on love which came to a tragic end at the time of the dedication of the *Mishkan*. And, of course, if already on the earlier occasion Nadav and Avihu crossed the line of propriety with respect to fear and awe of God's majesty, there are clear grounds for arguing a connection between the two incidents. Indeed, *Chazal* noted the strong connection between Nadav and Avihu's conduct on the two occasions, as cited by Rashi (*Shemot* 24:10):

They gazed intently and [failing in this] they peeped [in their attempt to catch a glimpse of God], and [thereby] made themselves liable to death. But it was only because God did not wish to disturb the joy caused by the Giving of the Torah, that He [did not punish them instantly, but] waited for Nadav and Avihu until the day of the dedication of the *Mishkan*.

The Midrash clearly views Nadav and Avihu's actions and spiritual world as built on excessive and ecstatic love, for it asserts that "when they saw the new fire, they tried **to add love to love,**" and thereby sinned.

What emerges from this is that Nadav and Avihu acted out of pure – though erroneous and dangerous - spiritual motivations, their desire being to elevate themselves and draw near to God. The fierce desire for God's closeness is what underlies the assertion found in some midrashim that Nadav and Avihu were exceedingly righteous, and though they were punished for their transgression, we dare not deny their spiritual greatness.

THE HAND OR THE CART

The story of Uzza is very different. The ark had been placed on an ox-cart and Uzza was smitten when he put out his hand to the ark that had begun to shake. The root of the problem, however, was in his general attitude toward the ark. Elsewhere, Scripture explicitly states that the ark must be transported not by cart, but on the shoulders, "because the service of the sanctuary belonged to them, they bore it on their shoulders" (*Bamidbar* 7:9), this owing to the sanctity and uniqueness of the ark. This was also established as a positive precept for future generations, as the Rambam states explicitly in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (positive precept 34) and in his *Mishne Torah*. This, of course, raises a question regarding David who allowed the ark to be transported by cart, rather than borne on the shoulders. The parallel verse in *Divrei Ha-yamim* (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 15:13) indicates that post factum David understood that earlier he had erred. When, in the course of the second attempt at transporting the ark, David turns to the heads of the priests and the Levites and assigns them the task, he declares: "For because you did not do so at first, the Lord our God made a breach upon us, because we did not seek him according to the prescribed form." Various explanations can be proposed regarding the specific mistake, e.g., they understood that bearing the ark on the shoulders was a *mitzva* limited to the wilderness, but not applicable in later generations, or perhaps they relied on the precedent set by the Pelishtim when they sent the ark back on a cart.

The offense, however, appears to be rooted not only in the specific transgression, but also in the manifest lack of fear which found expression in the transgression.

As is evident from the verse in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, David assumes responsibility for the mistake that had been made and points to the very placing of the ark on the cart as the root of the problem. Thus, there exists a certain tension with what is related in the story itself, both in our *haftara* and in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, for there the blame is assigned to Uzza's action.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DAVID AND UZZA

To understand the matter, we must recognize that both David and Uzza were insufficiently aware of the quality of fear, this being the common denominator between them. As for Uzza, there is no need to expand upon his failure to fear the ark and its holiness, but even David failed in his diminished fear. For in the wake of Uzza's death, Scripture testifies: "And David was displeased, because the Lord had burst out against Uzza... And David was afraid of the Lord that day" (II *Shemuel* 6:8-9), which implies that previously David had insufficiently internalized the quality of fear. However, whereas David tipped the scales in the direction of joy and love, out of a strong and exuberant religious feeling, Uzza's attitude toward the ark was not one of a creature of flesh and blood standing before the seat of God's *Shekhina* on earth. To him this was just another box that had to be transported from one place to another. Uzza grew up in the building in which the ark had come to rest, and this apparently dulled his senses, the ark turning into an ordinary and commonplace element of his domestic landscape. He regarded the ark as a piece of furniture, and he saw his mission to supervise its transport as a merely functional task. David, in contrast, recognized the ark as a unique and holy article, and together with the entire house of Israel he played before the Lord "on all manner of instruments made of cypress wood, on lyres, and on lutes, and on timbrels, and on rattles, and on cymbals" (II *Shemuel* 6:5). He stood before the ark in the way that one stands before God Himself.

THE CART – FOR THE GLORY OF GOD OR FOR PORTAGE

We see then that David's loading the ark on the ox-cart was a mistake, but it did not express disrespect for the ark; on the contrary, it is possible that David saw it as better enabling him to play before the ark. However, it opened the door for Uzza's mistake. The way that the Torah emphasizes in *Parashat Naso* that, owing to their sanctity, the ark and the other holy utensils must not be transported on the carts that had been donated to the *Mishkan*, stems precisely from the concern that the functional benefit of carts would stand at the heart of their transport, and that their unique sanctity and status would become blurred. In this context, attention should be paid to the fact that the prophet speaks of the two sons of Avinadav, Uzza and Achyo – like the two sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu – who were supposed to accompany the ark as it was transported on the ox-cart. At the very beginning, the verse testifies that "Uzza and Achyo, the sons of Avinadav, drove the new cart" (II *Shemuel* 6:3), whereas in a later verse, there is a split between them. Whereas "Achyo went before the ark" (v. 4), Uzza alone sent out his hand to God's ark. It would appear that Achyo recognized the greatness of the ark and went before it as one who stands before the holy ark and before God, whereas Uzza conducted himself differently, moving as a porter accompanying a piece of furniture, and therefore he was smitten for his error.

It should also be noted that even loading the ark on the cart out of recognition of its importance, is very problematic, for displaying the ark before the entire people, even if to rejoice before it, diminishes the fear that must be displayed in its presence. Let us not forget that the Torah was very particular about the arrangements for the transport of the holy utensils in the wilderness. It established the manner in which they had to be covered with cloths of blue and coverings of tachash skins so that "they shall not go in to see when the holy things are covered, lest they die" (*Bamidbar* 4:20). David's action, whereby he transported the ark by cart in order to increase the joy and religious excitement, does not attach sufficient importance to the quality of fear. As stated above, the verse itself testifies after Uzza's death that David feared God on that day, thus implying that only then did he restore the proper balance between fear and love of God.

We may conclude then that both David and Uzza acted improperly the first time that the ark was transported, and that David himself recognized his wrongdoing in *Divrei Ha-yamim*. But whereas David tipped the scales in the direction of the love of God out of a holy fire and the joy of a *mitzva*, Uzza approached his work without any religious feeling toward the ark – neither love nor fear – and therefore he was punished.

THE REPAIR

It is self-evident that the repair that was to be accomplished during the second attempt to transport the ark corresponded to the mistakes committed during the first attempt. This means that, on the one hand, the aspect of fear displayed by David and his men had to be increased, and on the other hand, the ark had to be borne on the shoulders by people who felt its sanctity and recognized its special status. Our *haftara* does not directly relate to the second point, but in the parallel story in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, we read that David summoned the heads of the Levites and appointed them as responsible for the transport of the ark:

And David called for Tzadok and Evyatar the priests, and for the Levites, for Uri'el, Asaya, and Yo'el, Shema'ya, and Eli'el, and Aminadav, and he said to them, You are the chiefs of the fathers' houses of the Levites: **sanctify yourselves**, you and your brethren, that you many bring up the ark of the Lord God of Israel to the place that I have prepared for it. For because you did not do so at first, the Lord our God made a breach upon us, because we did not seek Him according to the prescribed form. So the priests and the Levites sanctified themselves to bring up the ark to the Lord God of Israel. And the children of the Levites bore the ark of God **upon their shoulders the bars being upon them**, as Moshe had commanded according to the word of the Lord. (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 15:11-15)

This resolved the problem of Uzza, but it still fell upon David to struggle with the issue of fear of God and how to integrate it in the framework of the celebrations surrounding the transport of the ark. It seems that in the wake of what had happened during the first attempt, we might have expected that David would not engage in song and dance whatsoever, but rather he would tip the scales in the opposite direction, and bring the ark into Jerusalem in solemn silence. David, however, understood that in and of themselves joy and merriment are not inappropriate; what had been lacking was balance. Unlike Nadav and Avihu, whose ecstatic conduct and lack of constraints were in and of themselves negative, David had acted properly but without balance. It was for this reason that Nadav and Avihu were punished with death, whereas David was allowed to repair his actions.

REJOICE IN TREMBLING

David's solution was to dance and leap about before God with all his might, as he did the first time, but in combination with fear. In other words, taken from the words of David himself in the book of *Tehilim*, the guiding principle is "Rejoice with trembling" (*Tehilim* 2:11). He, therefore, offered sacrifices after six paces, and thus he preserved the fear of the ark. It is very possible that the sounding of the shofar – missing from the list of happier instruments played during the first attempt – was also meant to give expression to the quality of fear.

In summary, the *haftara* struggles with the issue of man's encounter with the holy and its concrete expressions, in contrast to the actions of Nadav and Avihu. On the one hand, we meet Uzza, who is the total antithesis of the sons of Aharon, but his manner is no less dangerous and mistaken than theirs. While they inclined in the spiritual direction of ecstasy and exhilaration, Uzza inclined in the opposite direction; he is presented as strictly utilitarian and utterly void of religious sentiment. Regarding both – both Uzza and Nadav and Avihu – we can apply the words of the Tosefta (*Chagiga* 2:5), which relate to entry into the "*pardes*":

And furthermore they likened this to a highway passing between two roads, one of light, the other of snow. If one inclines this way, he is burnt with light; [and] if he inclines the other way, he is burnt with snow. What must he do? He must walk in the middle, taking care not to incline this way or that.

If Nadav and Avihu inclined toward the fire, then Uzza inclined toward the ice, whereas David succeeded in following the golden mean.

The *haftara* directly relates to the encounter with the ark and the *Mishkan*, which are tangible objects, and deals with the climactic moments of their dedication. But the spiritual perspective developed before us is appropriate for religious life in general, both day to day living and moments of climax. The concern about not extinguishing love and excitement together with the need to observe limits and recognize man's obligation toward the divine command that is cast upon him, is the spiritual testament that the *haftara* leaves us.

ADDITIONAL POINTS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

We have analyzed one dimension of the *haftara*, one that relates most directly to the *parasha*. There are, however, other points to which attention should be paid, but we are unable to do this in the present framework, and so we will merely list them as additional points for further thought.

First, the *parasha* deals with the dedication of the *Mishkan*, whereas the *haftara* deals with the ark. Should this effect man's attitude or not? In this context, it should be mentioned that, on the one hand, the ark is ordinarily located in the Holy of Holies, hidden from man's view and unique with

respect to the *Shekhina's* resting within it. But on the other hand, it goes out to war with the people of Israel and rests in the midst of the camp.

Second, are David's reign and his status as king important elements in the story? The reaction of Mikhal, daughter of Shaul, seems to suggest that they are, and the opening verse as well might possibly allude that David's status as king must be considered when analyzing the issue.

And furthermore, the *haftara* according to the Ashkenazi rite continues with the next chapter which deals with David's plans to build the Temple, thus opening up a new front, which does not necessarily exist according to the Sefardic rite which does not include these verses. The order of the chapters in the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim* also suggests that these are two distinct issues, and does not connect David's conduct during the transport of the ark with God's refusal to allow him to build the Temple. The *haftara* according to the Ashkenazi rite, however, alludes to an essential connection between the two chapters, and thought must be given to the nature of that connection.

As stated above, these are all important questions, which we present to the reader for further study and analysis.

(Translated by David Strauss)