

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

Portion of Shemini

From Rav Binny Freedman

There is a little known test that officer cadets undergo in one form or another during Infantry Officer's training that they almost always fail; which is precisely the point. It takes many forms so that one class will never be forewarned by the previous one. Mine was administered near the midpoint of a horrible experience known as bochan Aricha.

We were dropped in the middle of the desert and after a ten kilometer run (more like a jog), within sight of a tent we presumed to be our objective, we were suddenly told we were under chemical attack and made to don our gas masks. Our commanders would often change the rules of the game and throw unexpected surprises at us, to test our resiliency and ability to cope with unexpected situations.

It is hard to describe what it is like to run and fight in a gas mask; you are already exhausted, running on little sleep and in the heat of the desert the gas mask makes it difficult to breathe. The plexi-glass visor very quickly steams up making it difficult to see which made the sudden order to turn and climb the steep mountain that seemed to rise endlessly in front of us all the more difficult. But you are in Officer's course, so that's what you do. Halfway up they yelled that two of our number were injured (we were a squad of eight) so that in addition to our exhaustion, our inability to breathe properly, and the steep climb, we now had to divide up all our gear to allow for two 'bodies' to be carried.

As we neared the top, I found myself in the lead and heard one of the commanders yelling: "Come on! You're almost there!" Mustering up my last reserves and feeling the passion of leading the squad up the hill, I grabbed and pulled the guy behind me and with a yell started moving as fast as I could up the last ten yards to the top.

Suddenly, three red smoke grenades popped, and two commanders acting as 'the enemy' took us out from close range. Five yards from the top, we had let our passion get ahold of us, and forgotten the cardinal rule of always making sure we took pause to gain perspective. So they sent us back down to the bottom, to do the whole thing again...

We had forgotten a cardinal rule, and learned a second: The first is to always consider the best place for an ambush, because that is usually where the enemy will be waiting. (They waited till we were almost at the top, when we least expected it...)

And the second, is that you have to be careful never to let passion get in the way of the pause that allows for a healthy perspective.

This week's portion (outside of Israel) *Shemini*, contains one of the most tragic and challenging episodes in the Torah: the deaths of *Nadav* and *Avihu*, the sons of Aaron. In the midst of the dedication of the Tabernacle (*Mishkan*) as the Jewish people are celebrating the consecration of the

Mishkan, and the initiation of the Kohanim (the priestly caste) along with the installation of the Jewish people's beloved Aharon as the *Kohein Gadol*, the High priest, Nadav and Avihu, his two oldest sons, offer up a strange fire, of which they had not been commanded. (*Vayikra* (Leviticus) 10:1)

Suddenly (ibid. v. 2) a fire comes from before G-d (possibly from the Holy of Holies) and consumes them in front of the entire Jewish people. In a moment, joy has been transformed into tragedy, and Aaron, on what should have been the greatest day of his life is left speechless in the face of such an overwhelming tragedy.

The commentaries offer many different opinions as to what exactly happened here. Did they ignore their teacher Moshe? Were they drunk? Perhaps their transgression was one of arrogance? Interestingly, the language of the verse ("And fire came from before G-d and consumed them..."), mirroring exactly the words two verses earlier describing the acceptance by G-d of the people's offering over which the Jewish people rejoiced en masse (ibid. 9:24), suggests that there was something positive in what they were doing despite their tragic end; they were somehow accepted by G-d as opposed to a standard transgression that would more likely result in a distancing from G-d.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that they were too caught up in the passion of the moment. Think about it: according to some commentaries (most notably Rashi) the building of the Mishkan was a direct consequence of the debacle of the Golden calf. Indeed, it appears in the Torah that the Jewish people were distant, even estranged from Hashem (G-d) after the Golden Calf. In fact, it seems that in the half a year it takes the Jewish people to build the Mishkan, Hashem stops speaking with them, which must have been extremely painful for a people that had become so close to G-d they actually heard Him speak the Ten Commandments.

So when a fire comes from before G-d and consumes their offering, the Torah tells us (ibid.) "*the entire nation rejoiced and fell on their faces...*" It was a moment of extreme joy; of pure rejoicing, even love. And in the midst of all this, Nadav and Avihu, who actually represent the future leadership of the Jewish people, and who themselves have just been consecrated as Kohanim, are totally caught up in the moment. They are so full of joy, suggests Rav Hirsch, that their passion gets away from them; the offering of the people is not enough; they want to offer even more. So they take incense and attempt to offer up an additional offering which has not been commanded.

But true leaders should not need to be **more** passionate and rejoice more than the people, they should rather, exult in the joy of the people, **with** the people. And this is their undoing. They let their passion get away from them, when they should perhaps have used the opportunity for a pause, allowing a healthier perspective.

One wonders, in the moment before it all came apart, what the people felt, seeing these two young Priests grabbing their own fire and leaping forward in front of and seemingly above, everyone else.

I recall once at a wedding seeing something that really bothered me. The bride and groom had just re-entered the wedding hall after the ceremony and the entire hall erupted in song and dance in an expression of pure joy. The groom grabbed his father and then a couple of his brothers and they were

dancing with the most wonderful expressions of happiness on their faces when a well-known rabbi who had missed the ceremony arrived, pushed his way through the outer circles of dancing into the middle, grabbed the father and the groom and started madly dancing with them.

It took me a while to realize what had bothered me about the moment (though of course only Hashem knows what is in the hearts of men; so this about my perception more than whether it is really true). His excitement had been so great he missed the fact that he was interrupting what might have been a really beautiful moment. His passion had carried him away when perhaps a pause might better have been in order.

And this is true not only in positive experiences but in the midst of negative moments as well. As an example, it is no accident that Maimonides, immediately after describing in his laws of character traits (*Hilchot Deot* 2:3) how anger is an extremely negative quality that must be avoided at all costs, begins to describe the value of silence.

“A person should always practice a healthy and abundant modicum of silence...” (ibid. 2:4). Implying that the first way to deal with anger is silence. Words spoken and actions taken in anger are almost always regretted. We usually are sure, later upon reflection, that we could have done a better job if we had waited till we were no longer angry, before responding.

Words spoken in anger never come out right. They are always better served after a healthy pause. Imagine how much better life would be if we simply made it a habit never to speak (or text) in anger; **always** to wait until we are no longer angry, or at least no longer in the heat of the moment. How many foolish and hurtful words would be avoided, and how much better we would be at expressing our thoughts...

Perhaps this is one of the messages we can take away from the painful episode of Nadav and Avihu: to temper our passions with healthy pauses, which will most always result in better perspectives.

Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman