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News

Parashat Shemini 5780

Rabbi Benji Stanley – 17 April 2020

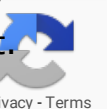
I am thinking of Ismail, of Ismail Mohamed Abdulwahab, who at age 13 is surely one of the youngest to lose his life from Covid 19. Ismail, who had no underlying health conditions, lived in Brixton. His family said they were “beyond devastated”. In a later statement they said: *“Ismail was a loving son, brother, nephew to our family and a friend to many people who knew him. His smile was heartwarming and he was always gentle and kind.”*

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/18/not-ready-to-go-tributes-paid-to-uk-first-named-victims-of-coronavirus>

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I am thinking of Ismail, and his family. As the world’s death toll rises, I want to acknowledge the real individuals who have been lost, and those who are mourning.

Our Torah opens our eyes to catastrophe, urging us to look at loss, pain and confusion, though we might wonder how to then respond. In this week’s *parsha*, in the very middle of the *Chumash* (in the *Talmud*, Tractate *Kiddushin* 30a, the middle word and middle letter of the *Torah* are both located in *Shemini*) Nadav and Avihu, two sons of Aaron, two children, are suddenly killed. The Tabernacle has been built. Aaron and his sons have just followed the instructions for their 7 day ordination as



priests. Then comes the 8th day, the

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The combination of sacred space and painstaking sacred preparation brings the Divine. Fire comes forth. *"Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense in it; and they offered before the Eternal alien fire... And fire came forth from the Eternal and consumed them... thus they died... And Aaron was silent"* (Leviticus 10:1-3, adapted from JPS translation).

There is such devastation at the heart of the *Torah*, and how might we respond? We could turn away; be utterly devastated ourselves; we could explain it away. For the deaths of Nadav and Avihu there are many possible explanations. In a moment Aaron will be warned against drinking in sacred space; were they drunk?

They brought foreign fire, and we know from Prometheus that fire might be divinely guarded; were they too creative, playing with fire, usurping the Divine? Perhaps we should surrender our agency. There are many possible explanations, but none that remove the severity and pain.

There is a response to this episode that we ourselves have taken on, and take on every week, on Saturday night. In response to the devastation, the Eternal speaks to Aaron, telling him *"lehavdil bein ha'kodesh u'vein ha'chol"* (Levit. 10:10) to distinguish between the sacred and the profane. We more or less quote this line on Saturday night when we do *Havdallah*, as we separate between *Shabbat* and the week by blessing the One that separates between *kodesh* and *chol*, along with wine, fire and spices. Reuven Kimelman has taught:

"[T]he meaning of the liturgy exists not so much in the liturgical text per se as in the interaction between the liturgical text and the biblical intertext. Meaning, in the mind of the reader, takes place between texts rather than within them."
(*"The Shema' Liturgy"* in *Kenishta*, Vol. 1 (2001) p. 28).

What meanings emerge between the devastation on that 8th day and our Saturday night ritual? They may at first seem like incongruous images, inexplicable darkness on one hand, and us gathered together singing, on the other.

Yet, we look more closely at the two images and we can begin to see that in *Havdallah* we are bringing them closer to each other. They brought fire and incense, just before, and Aaron is warned regarding drink just after the catastrophe. We

then bless fire, and spices, and drink- as well as quoting that line regarding separating sacred and profane, invoking the scene. What is this response? It is a creative repair. On one hand, we bring the scene to us: as we enter the week, we acknowledge the world we live, one of loss, confusion and hurt. In lighting up the scene, we also conversely bring ourselves to Aaron and to this world, with our compassionate witnessing. We do this all, with a liturgical act of creativity, invoking that which is painful and frightening, and lighting a fire just after it is prohibited, just after *Shabbat*, and so we subtly re-light the significance of fire too; creativity is now shared between us and the Divine through a careful combination of stepping back, when right, and then bringing our light.

Our Rabbis tell another story of the first *Havdallah* that teaches us what true light is (it can be found in Bereishit Rabba (Vilna) Parsha 11.2 and elsewhere).

In this story, another Promethean inversion, Adam, the first human, sees it getting dark at the end of *Shabbat*, and he fears this darkness may bring his death, and it will bring his exile. He shivers with fear. The Holy Blessed One, seeing this, and seeing the person in front of him, invites him to rub two flints together. Fire, light. Adam blesses. Fire is re-moulded as the light of compassion, of seeing, empowering and coming together.

So, we come closer. We see Adam, we see Aaron. We see Ismail's family. With so many. We stand on the edge of devastation. We might surrender. Instead we are urged to look, and to see the darkness, and to respond with carefulness, with as much discernment as we can, and with creativity, and with compassion. This Saturday night maybe light an extra candle.

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