

“A fire came down from before Hashem...and they died before Hashem...and Aharon was silent.” (10:2-3)

As the joy surrounding the inauguration ritual reached its zenith, tragedy suddenly struck. Aharon's two oldest sons died during their performance of an unauthorized incense service. Aharon's classic response – or lack thereof – attests to his greatness, his nobility and his resolute faith in Hashem. He accepted Hashem's Divine decree. He was silent. He did not exhibit any form of emotion. Hashem's decree is not to be questioned, because the answer is above us. Chazal tell us that misas tzaddikim, the death of the righteous, is “m'chaper,” atones for our sins. This idea is derived from the fact that the Torah juxtaposes the laws of the Parah Adumah, Red Heifer, to the death of Miriam. We infer from this that just as korbanos, sacrifices, atone, so does the death of a tzaddik. Horav Gedalya Eiseman, Shlita, commented on this Chazal, when he spoke shortly after a G-d-fearing woman was brutally murdered during an Arab terrorist attack.

If the Torah is conveying to us the idea that a tzaddik's death atones as completely as a korban, why did it not record Miriam's death in those parshiyos that address the laws of korbanos intended for atonement, such as the sin-offering or burnt-offering? Why is her death chronicled adjacent to the Parah Adumah, which serves essentially as a vehicle for taharah, ritual cleanliness? He explained that the Parah Adumah is the classic example of a “chok,” mitzvah whose rationale and meaning are beyond our understanding. We accept it just because it is Hashem's command. We do not ask, because we will not receive an answer. We accept the reality because that is part of being a Jew: we accept Hashem's decree – unequivocally.

This same idea applies to the death of a tzaddik. We hope that no one dies. We pray that tragedy not befall anyone, but when it occurs to a tzaddik — when someone who is devout, pious, virtuous and saintly is taken from our midst, usually under heartbreaking circumstances — we ask: Why does tragedy befall such a special person, such a young soul, such a saint who has already suffered so much? The only response is that it is a Divine decree, and we do not question the Almighty. The Parah Adumah is an anomaly. Just as it defies human rationale, so, too, do the deaths of the righteous raise questions for which there is no logical human response. It is a test of our faith and trust in the Almighty. That is the essence of Judaism.

Aharon HaTzaddik set the standard for response to tragedy. It was a day of heightened joy in which he, as Kohen Gadol, was intimately involved. Others have learned from him not to permit personal tragedy to override the joy and sanctity of Shabbos or Yom Tov, Hashem's days of joy. A very poignant example is provided by the following inspiring story:

The Rema in Orach Chaim 288:2 writes, “One who feels pleasure (i.e., finds relief) when he cries, in order to soothe his heart's pain, may do so on Shabbos.” Nonetheless, many great and simple Jews do not give into emotion and do not express their grief on Shabbos, so as not to disrupt the joy and sanctity of the holy day. Horav Rephael David Auerbach, Shlita, was one such person. A

terrible terrorist explosion rocked Yerushalayim. His son, Aharon Meir, and another young man, Arye Yosef Sheinfeld, were two of its victims. They were rushed to Hadassah Hospital on Erev Shabbos – both mortally wounded.

As night fell and the Shabbos Queen was ushered in, Ahraon Meir Auerbach lay in his bed suffering indescribable pain. Hundreds of splinters of glass riddled his body, terrible burns tortured his skin, as the blood so vital to life was continually ebbing from his wounded body.

In a nearby room, his father welcomed Shabbos with what seemed to be his usual serenity and joy. Earlier that day, his whole life had been shaken at its very core when he heard the news of the explosion.

Knowing that his son would be on his way home exactly at that time, he could barely control himself through the hours of worry and uncertainty. His worst fears were confirmed: his son lay mortally wounded in Hadassah. He rushed to the hospital, only to be told by the doctors that there was no hope for his son's life. Many yeshivah students came to give blood for their friend, but it was to be of no avail.

Shabbos arrived, and Reb Rephael David donned his Shabbos clothes to welcome the Shabbos with joy. "Shabbos is not a time for tears," he said, his voice filled with faith and reassurance. He ate his Shabbos meal, sang zemiros, the traditional Shabbos songs, his face radiating an inner glow, a joy endemic to one who serves Hashem with love.

The hospital staff peered into the room, shocked in disbelief. Here was a man singing Shabbos songs, while his son's life slowly ebbed away. Just minutes before he had been filled with worry and anguish over his son's condition. How could he have transformed so radically? They did not understand what Shabbos meant to Reb Rephael David.

He sat by his son's bed all through the night, praying silently – never weeping. In a nearby room, Aryeh Yosef Sheinfeld, the other victim, breathed his last breath. Everyone was in shock – except Reb Rephael David, who told them how to move the body and care for it on Shabbos. In the morning, Reb Rephael David and his wife stood by their son's bed, reciting Shema Yisrael as their son's holy neshamah, soul, rose and soared Heavenward. He did not cry – and he instructed all those present that it was Shabbos. One should not cry.

Suddenly, he began to sing Ein K'Elokeinu, There is no one like our G-d. As he sang, memories rose up before him. His son was only fifteen-years-old, but he had accomplished so much. An exceptional student, he was the apple of his father's eye. A budding Torah scholar, he had mastered hundreds of pages of Talmud. He had had a bright future, but now his brief life had come to a tragic end. Yet, Reb Rephael David's faith in Hashem was not shaken. He was resolute in his belief. His voice continued firmly: Mi K'Elokeinu, Who is like our G-d? Reb Rephael's older son arrived after a long walk. But it was too late. His father greeted him with the bitter news,

immediately adding, “Remember, you cannot cry. It is Shabbos Kodesh.”

The hours went by and Reb Rephael constrained himself. He did not allow his emotions to overwhelm him. He ate Seudah Shlishis, as he always did. After all, it was Shabbos. He waited a little longer. The Shabbos Queen withdrew: Shabbos was over. Only now did a fountain of tears stream forth, as fifteen years of love – pent up throughout the Shabbos – poured from him. This was Aharon’s student.