

When they approached before Hashem, and they died. (16:1)

Chazal (*Vayikra Rabbah* 20:6; *Eiruvim* 63a) enumerate a number of errors/sins attributed to Nadav and Avihu which precipitated their tragic, untimely deaths. One of these infractions is *moreh halachah bifnei rabbo*; “renders a *halachic* ruling in the presence of his *rebbe*” (in this case, Moshe *Rabbeinu*). We have no question that to *paskin*, rule *halachically*, in front of his *rebbe* is disrespectful and interrupts the chain of transmission/*Mesorah* from *Sinai*, but does it warrant such a devastating punishment? Furthermore, the Torah alludes to the reason for their deaths.

B'karvasam lifnei Hashem va'yamussu, “When they approached before Hashem and they died.” It appears that their sin was in being in the wrong place at the wrong time, entering the *Kodesh HaKodoshim*, Holy of Holies (the place where the *Kohen Gadol*, holiest man, entered only on *Yom Kippur*, the holiest day of the year) without prior authorization.

Undoubtedly, overlooking one's *rebbe*, even to the most minor degree, is a sign of disrespect, but does it warrant such punishment? *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl*, explains that, on the contrary, the punishment teaches us the gravity of the sin. When one is in the presence of his *rebbe*, he remains still until he is asked to speak. When one is with his *rebbe*, he should sense a feeling of unobtrusiveness, as if he does not exist. His total subjugation to his *rebbe* defines his relationship as a *talmid*, student, vis-à-vis his mentor. This is the meaning of *b'karvasam lifnei Hashem*; being in a place where they did not belong. They crossed the boundary of the student/*rebbe* relationship.

All this is good and well and explains their infraction, but does it warrant such punishment? Veritably, their deaths were a *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctification of Hashem's Name. It taught the nation that Hashem is exacting with those closest to Him. While the lesson is obvious, did no other way exist to teach the lesson? This question applies to all the other infractions *Chazal* cite which were considered inappropriate behavior for men of such noble standing. But does the punishment match the sin? Was it critical that such extraordinary *tzaddikim*, righteous men, die such a bizarre death on what was to be their family's and *Klal Yisrael's* most festive and joyous day, as they celebrated the inauguration of the *Mishkan*?

Horav Gedalyah Eisman, zl (*Mashgiach Kol Torah*), cites a well-known *Chazal* in the *Talmud* (*Bava Metzia* 85b) in which Rabbi Chiya claims that he is acting to ensure that the Jewish People will not forget the Torah. (This means that they are on the verge, and he is acting to prevent it.) “What do I do?” Rabbi Chiya explains, “I go and sow flax seeds, and with the flax seeds, I make twine nets, which I use to hunt (and trap deer), which I slaughter and feed the meat to orphans. I then use the skins to make parchment, upon which I write the five books of *Chumash*. I teach one entire book to a child, and then I take six (more) children with whom I study *Mishnah*. I then say to them, ‘Each of you study with the rest until all of you are proficient in the Torah.’”

The question that glares at us is: Rabbi Chiya was a Torah teacher to thousands. During the time that he was spending preparing the crude materials, he could have been learning and teaching. Why did he choose this “hands on” approach to teaching Torah? Why did he not visit his local

Judaica store and purchase parchment – or a Torah scroll, for that matter?

We derive from here a powerful lesson with regard to successful teaching: every step of the way must be pure. Any flaw impairs the Torah that he teaches. Rabbi Chiya made sure not to waste the meat of the deer; instead, he gave it away to orphans. He understood that if the meat were not used for a noble purpose, the parchment would be rendered less than perfect.

There is more. This was no simple Torah lesson. This was a lesson upon which the entire future would rely if Torah were in danger of being forgotten. If so, this was the new beginning from which Torah would be disseminated to all of *Klal Yisrael*. The first is most significant, because the future is riding on it.

We now understand why Hashem meted out such punishment to Nadav and Avihu. They were the first. So, too, was that day – *Rosh Chodesh Nissan*. It was the inauguration of the *Mishkan*, the *Nesiim*, the *korbanos*. Everything was beginning on that day. The slightest flaw would undermine the future. It would never be the same. It is not that the sin was great – it is the fact that it was a day upon which the entire future would be based. They had no room for error.

Returning to the *rebbe/talmid* relationship, we cite vignettes that evidence the reverence which permeated the bond that existed between *Horav Chaim Brisker, zl*, and his *talmid*, *Horav Baruch Ber Lebowitz, zl*, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Kaminitz and one of the *yeshivah* world's greatest Torah luminaries. *Rav* Baruch Ber was a student in Volozhin when *Rav* Chaim was senior *maggid shiur*. (It was there that he formulated and expounded his innovative approach to the complexities of the *Talmud* and *Rambam*. Rather than focus on *pilpul*, which builds complex arguments based upon passages in the vast corpus of *Talmud*, *Rav* Chaim resolved issues by focusing on the basic categories of the law in order to explain the specifics of its application. In other words, he demonstrated that there was no contradiction, because they had been comparing apples to oranges. This became known as the *Brisker derech*, which has been the anchor upon which the *yeshivah* world has established its *derech ha'limud*.) When *Rav* Baruch Ber needed to speak with his *Rebbe*, he would tremble with fear. Indeed, as he walked to *Rav* Chaim's house, he just stood by the door, afraid to knock. It was only when someone in the house walked by and saw him that he was motivated to enter.

Horav Eliezer Palchinsky, zl (quoted in *L'sitcha Elyon*), related that he heard from the *Brisker Rav, zl*, that the reason *Rav* Baruch Ber would cite *Rav* Chaim in a terse, abridged form, followed by his own exegesis into what his *Rebbe* taught and how he understood it, was that this was how *Rav* Chaim spoke. *Rav* Baruch Ber manifested extraordinary awe for his *Rebbe*, which prevented him from asking *Rav* Chaim to elucidate the statement. *Rav* Baruch Ber did this on his own. The *Brisker Rav* concluded, "Father would render a subject with such clarity that we were embarrassed to ask him to elucidate further."

Rav Baruch Ber visited his *Rebbe* during *Rav* Chaim's illness, when he was in excruciating pain.

Every once in a while, *Rav* Chaim would cry out in pain. *Rav* Baruch Ber said, "If only I could have the *Rebbe's* pain" (thereby alleviating the *Rebbe's* pain). *Rav* Chaim immediately countered, "I do not want to hear such words which contradict an explicit *Mishnah*." *Rav* Chaim did cite the *Mishnah*, and *Rav* Baruch Ber accepted the rebuke, but he was too meek to ask to what *Mishnah* his *Rebbe* was referring. When he related the incident (to his peers and students), he conjectured that it was a reference to the *Mishnah* in *Bava Metzia* (2:11) that teaches one to return to his own lost article prior to returning his *Rebbe's*. This indicates that one's own material needs precede those of his *Rebbe*. If this is true concerning material needs, it certainly holds true concerning physical needs (pain).