

After the death of Aharon's two sons. (16:1)

Nadav and Avihu were great *tzaddikim*, righteous and pious persons. Indeed, Hashem attests to their virtue when He says, *Bikrovai akadesh*, "I will be sanctified through those who are nearest to Me" (*Vayikra* 10:3). The average person taking a cursory look at this tragedy will, no doubt, have pressing questions that challenge the core of his faith in the Almighty. After all – why? The question screams out at us. Let us posit that, indeed, Nadav and Avihu erred by getting so carried away by their consummate love for Hashem that they just had to go into the *Mishkan* and offer *ketores*, incense, without first being commanded to do so. Is this a reason, however, for their sudden, untimely, tragic deaths? Did Aharon *HaKohen*, a man who was the essence of goodness, a man who loved every Jew, whose love for Hashem was boundless, deserve such a *klop*, punishment?

When the *Aron HaKodesh* was being pulled along in a wagon it was about to fall, and Uzah took hold of it, thereby preventing it from falling. Nonetheless, when he touched the sacred Ark, which he was not supposed to do, he immediately died. Did he deserve such severe punishment? "David (*HaMelech*) was upset (with himself) because Hashem had inflicted a breach against Uzah" (*Shmuel* 2, 6:8).

During the Counting of the *Omer*, we are careful not to make joyful public celebrations, such as wedding feasts. This is out of respect for Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students, who perished during this period. These were not simple Jews. They were *Klal Yisrael's* spiritual elite, but they had not manifest proper respect toward one another. So, they were punished. Did it have to be so final? It is true that Hashem has a different standard for those close to Him. Did they have to die? Imagine a Torah world with 24,000 Torah giants!

It is very difficult to understand the death of the righteous. Obviously, we are not privy to the larger picture, the Heavenly perspective, where it all makes sense. We look at the vicissitudes of life through our one-dimensional outlook. We see only the here and now. We have no clue concerning the yesterday and tomorrow. We certainly do not have any idea concerning Hashem's viewpoint and all that He factors in before He makes a decision. Yet, we ask; we have complaints. It is because we are short-sighted, stigmatized by our own myopic perception of life.

The **Melitzer Rebbe, Shlita**, suggests the following analogy to address some of the questioning. A villager who lacked education and culture, as well as all of the accoutrements and perspective that comes with proficiency in these areas, was broke. He had lost his house in a fire; all of his material belongings had gone up in smoke. The last few months he and his wife and family had been living in absolute, abject poverty. He simply could not go on. He decided to travel to the big city. Perhaps he would meet a wealthy man who would be kind and generous enough to help him in some way.

Hashem listened to the villager's pleas, and the man met a wealthy individual who took pity on his plight and offered to help. He gave the man a fine home outfitted with the necessary furniture and appliances. They now had a place to live. In addition, he gave the man a stipend of four thousand

dollars a month! All of this was for nothing in return. He told the poor man, “Get back on your feet. You are my welcome guest.” The man could not believe his good fortune. The family moved in, and life was good.

Three years passed, and the wealthy benefactor decided that it was time to give his home a makeover. The man lived in an elegant mansion, but, with time, even mansions require some fixing up, a little modernization. Never leaving well enough alone is a way of life. It was time for an upgrade. He put ads in the local paper and hung posters all over the city seeking architects, carpenters, plumbers, painters, specialists in every field of construction. This was going to be a makeover to end all makeovers. Money was clearly no object. The very next day, the poor man, who had been living off the dole on the benefactor’s property, presented himself at the man’s door: “I can do it all. I am proficient in all of these professions. “Wonderful,” replied his benefactor. “Get to work, and we will work out the payment.”

The poor man was assiduous and quite adept at what he was doing. He went to work immediately. A month went by, and the benefactor was at the point of settling a business deal concerning a large parcel of land which he owned. This was a real estate deal in the millions of dollars. Everything was all set. The buyer was there with his lawyers; the seller was there with his attorneys. It was all about to go down, when the poor man burst in: “Mr. Benefactor, I have completed my job. I want payment – NOW!” Obviously, the man’s lack of culture was showing. He should have realized that the benefactor was in the middle of an important meeting. He was nice to him, but could he not have waited a little bit longer until the meeting was over, and the money had changed hands?

Despite all of this, the benefactor was a real *mentch*, decent human being, who understood his worker’s background. “Ok, let me pay you. How much do I owe you?” he asked. “Six thousand dollars, and I must have the money now.” The benefactor was slightly taken aback, but he took it all in stride. “Fine, come back a little bit later, and I will pay you.”

“Absolutely not!” the worker replied emphatically. “I worked for a month. I did the carpentry, painting, everything that you requested of me. I worked from early in the morning until late at night. I demand my money – now!”

The businessman who was about to purchase the real estate parcel became agitated, thinking, “What is this man’s [the benefactor’s] problem? This poor man worked from day to night for an entire month. All he is asking is six thousand dollars, which is probably nothing more than a drop in the bucket for this wealthy man. Why does he not pay him outright and move on?” The question gnawed at him until he decided that he really did not want to do business with such a person.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to the owner of the real estate, “I am not feeling well right now. I would like to rest, do a little thinking, and perhaps later I will sign the papers. Forgive me now, I must go to my hotel.”

On the way to the motel, he met the city's banker, an individual who was well aware of the financial portfolios of his customers. Plus, he was a very good judge of character – both in business and otherwise. The businessman shared with the banker his current hesitations concerning closing the deal with the land owner. The banker assured him that he had nothing to worry about. The man was the paradigm of integrity. Feeling reassured, he returned and closed the deal.

The wealthy landowner was no fool. He understood what had taken place. He felt that he owed the businessman an explanation: "My friend, you probably had questions concerning my behavior vis-à-vis my worker. Let me share a bit of history with you. I took in this man and his family three years ago. I gave him a monthly subsidy of four thousand dollars. During the past three years, I have never once asked him to do a thing for me. Yet, when he completed a job, he demanded to be paid immediately! This took place while I was involved in a major business transaction, and, if I tarried momentarily, he would scream at me!"

Let us ask ourselves how far removed we are from this villager, how different is our lack of *hakoras hatov*, gratitude. The poor man was taken in off the street. For three years he had been supported by the wealthy landowner. During this time, he obviously had forgotten the meaning of the term, "thank you." Yet, he had the audacity to demand payment immediately – if not sooner – or else he would slander the landowner!

Now, let us examine ourselves with a critical eye. Our heart beats approximately seventy beats per minute, over one hundred thousand beats a day. Do the math and calculate how many beats per year. Then calculate the amount of beats experienced by the heart of a thirty-year-old person in his lifetime. Do we ever say, "Thank you, Hashem," for that beating heart? One missed beat means a visit to the emergency room – if we are lucky! Yet, as soon as something goes awry- we do not feel well, our day is not perfect – we ask, "Why is Hashem picking on me? Why should I be in such pain?" The complaints come one after another. It is always Hashem – never us. The nature of man is to see the negative, notice what is missing – rarely to observe, appreciate and pay gratitude for what is good. Therefore, the moment that we are challenged, we should ask ourselves: "What does Hashem want? Why?" And then thank Hashem for all the good that we have already received from him.

Every time something occurs which takes us out of our comfort zone, we should not immediately complain to Hashem. We are no different than the uncultured, ungrateful villager who did not appreciate a good thing when he had it.