

A fire came forth from before Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem. (10:2)

The *Talmud* enumerates a number of deficiencies in the elevated rectitude of such *tzaddikim* as Nadav and Avihu, which led to their untimely tragic passing. One of the comments which begs elucidation is that they would walk behind Moshe *Rabbeinu* and Aharon *HaKohen*, with the rest of the nation following them, and they would say, “When will those two elders pass away, and you and I will lead the generation?” Hashem responded, “We will see who will bury whom.” Are we to believe that they were so callous as to “wait” for their father’s and uncle’s deaths; so that they could ascend to the helm of leadership? Obviously, the true intent of their statement is cloaked in deep esoteric meaning.

The commentators, each in his own manner, offer explanations to illuminate their words. *Horav Efraim Zalman Margolis, zl* explains this based on the well-known *Chazal*, “Everyone is obligated to say, ‘When will my actions reach the level of my forbears, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?’” The Patriarchs serve as the apex of spiritual achievement – a level to which we should all strive. While, understandably, no one will achieve their level of devotion, integrity and virtue, their lives nonetheless should serve as our lodestar. We should always look to the previous generations and use their way of life to motivate us to push ourselves to aim higher.

With this in mind, *Rav Efraim* suggests that they were intimating, “When will we reach their level? Will we be worthy of stepping into their shoes and leading the nation?” So why were they punished? They spoke decisively, as if to imply that Moshe and Aharon would surely precede them in death.

Horav Yitzchak Aharon Rappaport, zl (Maggid of Vilkomir), explains that their statement was one of worry. They were anxious that Moshe and Aharon would pass away and they, who would (probably) be their successors, would be unworthy of these positions. They “expected” that great men of such unparalleled, righteousness would receive a “pass” on aging. The Almighty would provide them with the physical strength and mental agility to guide the nation for years to come.

Perhaps we may add that while Nadav and Avihu might have been thinking practically – which in and of itself does not apply to such leaders as Moshe and Aharon – they did err in one area. Moshe and Aharon represented two different aspects of leadership. Aharon was the *Kohen Gadol*, the spiritual leader of the nation. Moshe was the *Rabban Shel Kol Yisrael*, our quintessential *Rebbe*. He was also the *Melech*, King, who guided the nation in accordance with Hashem’s instruction. While one or both of Aharon’s sons could expect to succeed him, Moshe was out of their parameter of succession. Hashem would choose his successor, just as he had chosen Moshe. Indeed, Moshe, too, would have liked for his sons to ascend to the leadership of the nation. Hashem did not agree, and, instead, He selected Yehoshua. We often make a decision based on personal bias and hope that our decision is correct. We have no room for error in such decisions;

prejudice and calling in favors do not serve the benefit of a community. Hashem's criteria are based upon a different scale. Neither Nadav nor Avihu were destined to assume Moshe's position – so Hashem decided.