

Moshe said to Aharon: Of this did Hashem speak, saying: “I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me; thus, I will be honored before the entire people.” And Aharon was silent. (10:3)

What happened to Nadav and Avihu and the circumstances under which their deaths occurred are beyond us. *Chazal* present various reasons for their untimely deaths, but these reasons apply only to someone who, like them, had reached the capstone of closeness with Hashem. The higher one is, the closer one gets, the more Hashem demands of him. Aharon *HaKohen*'s reaction (or non-reaction) is equally beyond us. Anyone who has himself – or known someone who has – sustained such a mind-numbing tragedy, either stands in awe of Aharon or questions him. His muted reaction is mind-boggling. As soon as the tragedy occurred, Moshe *Rabbeinu* told Aharon, “Hashem said that He would be sanctified through those nearest to Him. I thought He referred either to you or to me. I see now that your two sons are greater than we are.” When Aharon heard this, he was silent. The narrative implies that, after Aharon witnessed his sons' deaths, he did not immediately accept Hashem's decree with love. Rather, he just stood there until Moshe told him, *b'Krovai Akadesh*, “I will be sanctified through those nearest to Me.” Why did he not immediately accept Hashem's decree? It is almost as if he waited for Moshe to instruct him concerning what he was supposed to do.

Horav Mordechai Zuckerman, zl (Rav of the *Perushim* in Givat Shaul), explains that Aharon certainly accepted Hashem's decree immediately with love. He was waiting, however, for an “all clear” signal concerning the *chillul Hashem*, desecration of Hashem's Name, which such a tragedy could provoke. Moshe told him that, on the contrary, it brought about an extraordinary *kiddush*, sanctification, of Hashem's Name. When people see how demanding Hashem is of those who are closest to Him, they begin to fathom what justice would be like for those who are not close to Him. When Aharon heard this, he was silent, openly accepting the Heavenly decree.

Aharon's reaction, his unusual muted response to the tragedy, grants us a window into understanding tragedy. Clearly, what we see as heartrending apparently is the result of our limited perspective. The various synonyms connected with tragedy are words we use to interpret human perspective, which, at best, is myopic. We neither know – nor can we understand – Hashem's ways. We scream, we weep uncontrollably, we mourn incessantly, because we neither know how – nor are we prepared – to do anything else. We are not on Aharon's level. We cannot be silent. We are human and human beings react to pain – especially emotional pain catalyzed by a grievous loss.

Let us look at the other side of the coin, the side to which Aharon was privy, a side that saw the deaths of Nadav and Avihu in a different light. We were not there. We can only believe, have faith, that much more was involved of which we are unaware. In his latest book on *Kaddish* (The Soul of

Kaddish), Rabbi Yechiel Spero relates a story which occurred concerning *Horav Menachem Yosef Heimlich, zl (Mishkoltzer Dayan, author of Minchas Yosef)*.

The Nazis wanted to transfer 100 head of cattle to an army base to feed their soldiers. They would never use their Aryan soldiers for such undignified labor. Instead, they selected a group of Jewish inmates of which *Rav Heimlich* was to be the leader, to shepherd these cows to the base. The heat was oppressive for both man and beast. No water was available for either of them. Ultimately, they would no longer need any water. The Jewish prisoners were skeletons walking, having slaved for the Nazis with hardly any food to sustain them. Furthermore, they had never shepherded cattle. They asked the Nazi commandant how he expected them to achieve such a difficult task. He replied that all they had to do was lead the first few cows; the rest would follow.

For two days, they trudged along. At one point, the Nazis gave them a few drops of water, and then it was back to business. Cows need water. They were given nothing. Why waste good water? At the end of the second day, they could not go on. Walking in the heat with nothing to drink takes its toll. To stop to rest means certain death. The men had no choice. The cows did not understand what was happening. They needed water. When they passed by a small brook, one of the lead cows broke rank and started for the brook.

Rav Menachem Yosef was in a quandary. On the one hand, the animal could not go on without water. On the other hand, if he allowed the animal to leave the herd to drink, he would likely be shot. When he saw how the cow gulped down the water, his compassion for the cow and his awareness that *tzaar baalei chaim*, insensitivity to an animal, is a transgression, he let the cow drink. *Baruch Hashem*, the other cows did not notice and kept on trudging forward. Suddenly, *Rav Menachem Yosef* heard a loud explosion and saw that the other animals had gone forward and unknowingly stepped into a minefield. Had this cow not strayed, had he followed along the path, he, too, would have become a casualty. He thought the cow was leading when, in fact, it was Hashem Who provided his salvation.

We see; we ask; we wonder. Only Hashem knows the answer. We must trust, maintain our faith and hope that one day soon, we, too, will know the answer.

An inspiring thought from the *Imrei Emes* comes to mind. When Moshe *Rabbeinu* related the incident in which he shattered the *Luchos*, he said, *V'eshbereim le'eineichem*, "And I broke them before your eyes" (*Devarim* 9:17). What is added with the word *le'eineichem*, before your eyes"? The *Rebbe* explained that the Torah records another instance of *le'eineichem* when Yosef imprisoned Shimon. (*Bereishis* 42:24) The Torah says, *Va'yeesor oso le'eineihem*, "He imprisoned him before their eyes." *Rashi* comments that, when the brothers left, Yosef took Shimon out, and gave him food and water.

The *Imrei Emes* explains that, just as it was with Shimon, his imprisonment was only *le'eineihem*. Likewise, the *Luchos* were shattered only "before their eyes." The *Luchos* appear broken, but, in

reality, they are whole. Life throws us curves. Things happen; all are decrees from Hashem. To our human eyes with their limited vision something may appear broken, but, in reality, it is not.

Perhaps we can add to this. *Chazal* (*Berachos* 8b) teach that a scholar who has forgotten his Torah learning is compared to the *shivrei Luchos*, broken shards, of the *Luchos*. As the *shivrei Luchos* were placed in the *Aron* next to the whole *Luchos*, likewise we must show respect to the *talmid chacham* who is only a fraction of his original self. I think the *Rebbe's* exposition applies equally to the *talmid chacham* who is in a state of brokenness. Prior to Moshe's dropping the *Luchos*, the letters fell off, so that all that broke was the stone. The *talmid chacham's* "letters" have flown. What we see is what is left of him. In another "place," his letters are waiting to be emblazoned in their original setting.