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Shmini: Connection to the Collective

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And Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it, and they brought before the Lord foreign fire, which He had not commanded them. And fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, [when He said], 'I will be sanctified through those near to Me, and before all the people I will be glorified.' " And Aaron was silent (Vayikra 10:1-3).

It was to be a day of rejuvenation and reconciliation. The dedication of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) symbolized the return of the Divine Presence to the camp of the Jewish nation (after the separation caused by the sin of the Golden Calf). But alas, it was not to be. The death of Aharon's two sons transformed this day of joy into a day of pain, grief and loss. But was their sin? What was the nature of their "foreign fire?"

The commentaries provide many different interpretations and insights. The Talmud (Eruvin 63a) explains that Nadav and Avihu decided on matters of Jewish law in the presence of their teachers, Moshe and Aharon. This fundamental lack of respect and breakdown of authority led to their deaths. Others explain they were inebriated when serving in the *Mishkan*. The Midrash writes that Nadav and Avihu ventured into the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, the *Holy of Holies* and were punished as a result. Other rabbinic commentaries explain that they took fire from outside the confines of the Temple to offer the incense instead of taking from the Divine fire that descended from the Heavens.

Perhaps, there is another insight into their sin which can be gleaned from the Haggadah. In the beginning of the Seder we recite *Ha Lachma Anya*, this is the bread of affliction.

*This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry, come and eat. Let all who are needy, come and celebrate Passover (partake of the Paschal lamb). This year we are here - next year, may we be in the Land of Israel.
This year we are slaves - next year, may we be free.*

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau (former Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, current Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv) provides a beautiful insight into this paragraph by sharing a moving story. During his tenure as Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Lau was conducting a communal Seder on an air force base. There were over 1,000 people in attendance from all walks of life. Rabbi Lau began the Seder with reading and translating *Ha Lachma Anya*. As he concluded, a young pilot stood up and said, "Rabbi, I feel these words, this text – has lost its meaning. Why should we say this year we are here, next year may we be in the Land of Israel? I was born here, I am a sabra. Why would I say, this year we are slaves, next year may we be free? I was born free and I have always been free?"

Rabbi Lau provided a dramatic and beautiful answer: "In my youth I had the privilege to study under many great teachers. Great men like, Rav Elazar Man Shach, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and I was privileged to spend Yom Kippur with each of them. I stood next to these great men as they recited the *Al Cheyts* (list of sins for which we repent on Yom Kippur); I heard their muffled cries and saw the tears stream down their face. I often wondered – did these great rabbis commit these heinous acts which they were confessing? It couldn't be. Even "regular" people don't commit half of the sins outlined in the list. Why would these great rabbis confess sins they had not committed? Truthfully, the *Baal Shem Tov* also beat his chest while confessing this list, the *Vilna Gaon* cried out when enumerating these sins. Surely, these giants of our past had not committed these transgressions! And then it dawned on me. These great rabbis were not confessing their sins – they were confessing and seeking forgiveness for sins of the nation. These great men realized that although they had not committed these aggrieved acts – there were Jews who did. Perhaps, those Jews would not or could not confess and repent. These holy rabbis decided that we will do *teshuva* (repentance) on their behalf. We will cry their tears, we will utter their apologies, we will beg for their forgiveness. I realized that the true mark of greatness is the ability to think beyond one's self and to connect to the plight, circumstances and reality of the other."

Rabbi Lau then turned to the young pilot and said: "You are truly privileged to be here and free. But what about all of your brothers and sisters who are not? What about your fellow Jews who are suffering and enduring persecution? What about those who are not able to celebrate Pesach either because they don't have or they don't know? You may be here – but they are not. You may be free – but they are not. Let us be their mouthpiece. Let us utter these words on their behalf. Let us ask Hashem on this sacred night to bring all of those who are there – here. Let us supplicate before God and beg Him to allow all of those who are slaves to taste the sweetness of freedom."

Perhaps, this was the mistake of Nadav and Avihu. If one looks closely at the verse – it says, *V'Yikchu Bnei Aharon, Nadav V'Avihu Ish Machtaso, And Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his pan*. The Torah goes out of its way to state "Ish, each man" and "Machtaso, his pan" (possessive); identifying Nadav and Avihu as individuals. The job of the Kohen is to represent the nation; the mandate of the Kohen is to be the embodiment of the collective. Perhaps, the mistake of Nadav and Avihu was that they acted as individuals. What they did was to satisfy their own needs and wants. They served God the way they deemed fit without regard for the needs of the collective. They were not acting as the emissaries of the Jewish people – they were each an *Ish, an individual*. When we stop thinking about the collective and only think about ourselves – we end up making terrible mistakes.

This Shabbos we will IYH announce the arrival of month of Nissan. For many of us this signals the beginning of our preparation for the Yom Tov of Pesach. We will clean, search and cook. We will dust of the Haggadahs and prepare for a meaningful Seder experience. But there is another important form of preparation. Pesach is the Yom Tov on which we became a nation. Being part of a nation means feeling and caring for the other. In these preparatory days let us work to feel more connected to our nation and find empathy for those who are struggling. In these upcoming days let us find a way to be the mouthpiece or extra set of hands for those who cannot help themselves. As the month of Nissan approaches let us try to emulate the beautiful example of those who came before us and carry the nation of Israel in our heart and in our soul.