



PROBING

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THE PROPHETS

Like the episode found in our parasha, our haftarah relates the story of a very special day, a day of celebration for Israel, when a place of worship to Hashem is being prepared. The parasha speaks of the day when the Mishkan was dedicated, while the haftarah relates the story of the transfer of the Aron (Holy Ark) to Yerushalayim. In both stories a terrible tragedy occurs in the midst of the celebration. In the Torah we read of the death of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, the Kohen Gadol and in the haftarah we learn of the death of Uzzah, the son of the person who had “housed” the Aron on his property.

Both stories are troubling as we struggle to understand the severity of Hashem’s reaction to what seems to be mistakes, “slip-ups”, unintentional trespasses by righteous individuals. Or so it appears to us. And, certainly, the great gedolim of the Talmud and beyond suggest several underlying reasons why our Merciful G-d, the Rachum v’Chanun, visited these severe punishments on these men. With humility, I would like to suggest that Hashem’s punishment was not “payment” for one momentary lapse but, rather, part of an ongoing, repetitive pattern of behavior that reflected an unacceptable attitude toward kedusha, sanctity, and toward HaKadosh Baruch Hu. But to understand what I

mean, let us return to Parashat Mishpatim and the events at Har Sinai.

There, Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu (Shmot 24; 1) “Aleh ehlei hahara”, “Come up the mountain to Me”, “atah, v’Aharon, Nadav va’Avihu v’shiv’im miziknei Yisrael”, “you and Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, as well as seventy of Israel’s elders”, and there they would worship Hashem from afar. Afterwards, Moshe alone would continue to draw closer to Hashem while the others would not. A simple, clear directive from G-d. And, indeed, (as the ninth pasuk attests) that is exactly what they did. But as the story proceeds, the Torah states (psukim 13-14) that Yehoshua accompanied Moshe (part of the way up the mountain) and the elders were told to stay back with Aharon and Chur who would remain to attend to the people.

HaRav Amnon Bazak of Yeshivat Har Etzion asks: Where are Nadav and Avihu? Why have they suddenly disappeared and been replaced by Yehoshua and Chur-individuals who were not part of the original command? The answer, Rav Bazak proposes, is found in the previous verses (11-12) where the Torah tells us that the “nobles” of Israel “beheld” Hashem, and then “ate and drank”- certainly improper behavior - yet G-d did not harm them. Rav Bazak turns our attention to Rashi’s comment that identifies the “nobles”

of Israel as...Nadav and Avihu! Is it not logical to suggest, therefore, that the sons of Aharon, future kohanim who would serve in the Sanctuary yet showed such disrespect to the sanctity of that moment, be replaced and returned to the camp? And could not such an attitude, then, explain their behavior in offering an uninvited ketoret at a most holy time - which would explain the severity of Hashem's reaction?

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And the same might be true of the incident we read in our haftarah. Who was Uzzah? He was the son of Avinadav, the man who, for twenty years (see Shmuel A 7; 2) "hosted" the Aron in his field, and the brother of Elazar, who was charged with guarding and tending to the Holy Ark. As Levites, it was understandable that they would guard the Holy Ark, as the Levi'im were given the responsibility of shielding and protecting the Mishkan (B'midbar 18; 2-5). Likewise, as Levi'im, we would also assume that they knew full well how careful they had to be in dealing with "kodosh", holy objects – including the warning given to them (B'Midbar 7; 9) "ki avodat hakodesh aleihem – BAKATEF yisa'u"– the Kehat family were not given wagons with which to transport the Holy Ark because, due to its sanctity, it could be carried only by shoulder and NOT by cart.

If so, we may rightfully ask if these sons of Avinadav would allow the Aron to be transported on a cart and NOT on their shoulders? How could Uzzah dance in front of the Holy Ark instead of "shouldering" his responsibility? And if he acted this way during a public celebration, in the presence of the King – couldn't he also have failed to be as careful as he should have been over the 20 years that he served the Aron? Did he allow his familiarity breed, even somewhat, contempt for holiness?

So, perhaps Uzzah's act of grabbing the Aron was not the only cause of Hashem's severe punishment. Perhaps it was the culmination of a long period of his lack of respect and over-familiarity that caused it. That seems to be the reason for the punishment in the eyes of David (see Divrei HaYamim A 15; 12-15).

Dealing often with holiness and sanctity may have a negative effect on one's attitude toward it. As we return to the Bet Knesset after a long absence, shouldn't we wonder if, perhaps, we were too "familiar" with the shul, with our tefillot, with OUR Holy Ark? Perhaps we, like Uzzah, "laid a hand" on G-dliness and piety? And perhaps now is the time to take more care in dealing with the holiness that surrounds us.

That is what the Holy One desires from us.

And what He expects from us as well. ■

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