

## Nadav and Avihu: Consumed by Divine Fire

### 1. Prof. Jonathan Grossman, “Taking Up and Taking Out the Ashes: Constancy and Change in Leviticus,” Tradition, Spring 2022

“Taking up the ashes” is a symbol representing the encounter between God and people that takes place on the altar. The ashes result from the encounter between the offering, brought by people, and God, who is revealed on the altar as the fire that consumes. This encounter between flesh and fire produces ashes, which the priest “takes up” each morning, and in so doing points to the covenant and grace that are present in this place. According to this understanding, taking up the ashes is connected to clearing off the altar, but the moment before removing the leftovers, there is a declaration regarding the unique encounter that takes place in this sacred spot by pointing to its results: an encounter between flesh and fire that produces ashes.

### 2. Exodus 24:17

וּמְרֵאָה כְּבוֹד יְהוָה כָּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בָּרֹאשׁ הַהָר לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Now the Presence of God appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain.

### 3. Deuteronomy 5:20-25

וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַעְכֶּם אֶת־הַקּוֹל מִתּוֹךְ הַחֹשֶׁךְ וְהָהָר בֵּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וּתְקַרְבוּן אֵלַי כָּל־רֵאשֵׁי שְׁבִטֵיכֶם וְזִקְנֵיכֶם וּתְאָמְרוּ הֵן הִרְאָנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת־כְּבוֹדוֹ וְאֶת־גְּדֻלוֹ וְאֶת־קוֹל שְׁמַעְנוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה רָאִינוּ כִּי־יִדְבֹר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וְחַי: וְעַתָּה לָמָּה נִמּוֹת כִּי תֹאכְלֵנוּ הָאֵשׁ הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת אִם־יִסְפְּיִם אֲנִי וְלִשְׁמַע אֶת־קוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ עוֹד וְנִמְתְּנוּ: כִּי מִי כָל־בָּשָׂר אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַע קוֹל אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים מְדַבֵּר מִתּוֹךְ־הָאֵשׁ כְּמִנּוּ וַיְחַי: קָרַב אִתָּהּ וְשָׁמַע אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יֹאמֵר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאַתָּה תְּדַבֵּר אֵלֵינוּ אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֵלֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְנוּ וְעָשִׂינוּ: וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה אֶת־קוֹל דְּבַרְיֶיךָ בְּדַבְּרְכֶם אֵלַי וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי שְׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־קוֹל דְּבַרְי הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרוּ אֵלַי הִיטִיבוּ כָל־אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרוּ:

When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, you came up to me, all your tribal heads and elders, and said, “Hashem our God has just shown us a majestic Presence, and we have heard God’s voice out of the fire; we have seen this day that humankind may live though addressed by God. Let us not die, then, for this fearsome fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of Hashem our God any longer, we shall die. For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living God speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived? You go closer and hear all that Hashem our God says, and then you tell us everything that Hashem our God tells you, and we will willingly do it.” Hashem heard the plea that you made to me, and the Lord said to me, “I have heard the plea that this people made to you; they did well to speak thus.”

### 4. Exodus 3:2

וַיֵּרָא מֵלֶאךֶּ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלַבַּת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסִּנֵּה בֵּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּנֵּה אֵינּוֹ  
אֵכֵל:

A messenger of God appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He saw, and behold the bush was burning in fire, but the bush was not consumed.

## 5. Rashi, Exodus 3:12

פי אהיה עמך – וזה המראה אשר ראית בסנה לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך, וכדאי אני להציל, כאשר ראית הסנה עושה שליחותי ואיננו אכל, כך תלך בשליחותי ואינך נזוק.

“I will be with you” ...And the vision you have seen in the Bush will be your sign that it was I who sent you, and I am capable of saving; just as you have seen the Bush fulfilling My mission without being consumed, so you will go on My holy mission without being damaged.

## 6. Leviticus 9:23-10:3

ויבא משה ואהרן אל-אהל מועד וינצאו ויברכו את-העם וירא כבוד-יהוה אל-כל-העם: ותצא אש מלפני יהוה ותאכל על-המזבח את-העלה ואת-החלבים וירא כל-העם וירצו ויפלו על-פניהם: [פרק י'] [ויקחו בני-אהרן נדב ואביהוא איש מחמתו ויתנו בהן אש וישימו עליה קטרת ויקריבו לפני יהוה אש זרה אשר לא צוה אתם: ותצא אש מלפני יהוה ותאכל אותם וימתו לפני יהוה: ויאמר משה אל-אהרן הוא אשר-דבר יהוה | לאמר בקרבך אקדש ועל-פני כל-העם אפכד וידם אהרן:

Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of God appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before God and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and exulted, and fell on their faces. [Chapter 10] Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before God strange fire that was not commanded them. And fire came forth from before God and consumed them; and they died in the presence of God. Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what God meant by saying: Through those who are close to me I shall be sanctified; in the presence of the whole people I shall make my gravity felt.” And Aaron was silent.

## 7. Rashbam, Leviticus 9:24

ותצא אש מלפני ה' - מבית קודש הקדשים דרך מזבח הזהב להקטיר קטורת... ושם מצא בני אהרן אצל מזבח הזהב ושרפם ואח"כ יצא ובא לו על המזבח ותאכל את העולה ואת השלמים.

“Fire came forth from before God”: from the Holy of Holies first to the golden altar, in order to burn the incense of offering there... The fire found Aaron's two sons there, near the golden altar, and it burned them to death. Then the fire went out of the Tabernacle to the copper altar where it “consumed the burnt offerings and the fats on the altar.”

## 8. Rashi, Leviticus 10:3

הוא אשר דבר וגו'. היכן דבר? ונעדת שמה לבני ישראל ונקדש בכבדי (שמות כ"ט), אל תקרי בכבדי אלא במכבדי; אמר לו משה לאהרן, אהרן אחי, יודע הייתי שיתקדש הבית במידעיו של מקום, והייתי סבור או בי או בך, עכשיו רואה אני שיהם גדולים ממני וממך (ספרא):

THIS IS WHAT GOD SPOKE, etc. — Where had He spoken this? In the statement (Exodus 29:43), “And there I will be met by the children of Israel and it (the Tabernacle) shall be sanctified by My glory (בכבודי).” Read not here בכבודי, “by My Glory” but במכבדי, “through My honored ones” (Zevachim 115b). Moses here said to Aaron: “My brother, Aaron! I knew that this House was to be sanctified by those who are beloved of the Omnipresent God and I

thought it would be either through me or through you; now I see that these (your sons who have died) are greater than me and than you!” (Leviticus Rabbah 12:2).

9. **Novalis** (1772-1801)

“In a work of art chaos must shimmer through the veil of order.”

10. **Rashbam, Leviticus 10:3**

אין זה לפי הפשט וכי היה מבשר הקב"ה למשה: עשו לי משכן - ובו ביום ימותו הגדולים שבכם!?!  
ויאמר משה אל אהרן - אל תתאבל ואל תבכה ואל תחדל מן העבודה, כי הדבר הזה אשר אני אומר  
לך: הוא אשר דבר ה' בקרובי אקדש - בכהנים גדולים הקרובים אלי לשרתני אני רוצה להתקדש  
ולא שיתחלל שמי ועבודתי...

ועל פני כל העם אכבד - זהו כבוד השכינה, שרואה בניו מתים ומניח אבלו בעבודת בוראו.

וידום אהרן - מאבלותו ולא בכה ולא התאבל.

This is not according to the *peshat* (the simple meaning of the verses). Would God have announced to Moses: “And let them make Me a Sanctuary” – and on that very day the greatest among you will die

Moses said to Aaron: “Do not mourn nor weep, and do not desist from carrying on with your priestly duties; I am telling you “This is what God meant by saying: Through those who are close to me I shall be sanctified” - I want to be sanctified by the High Priests, the ones who are “near” to Me and who perform the service for Me. I do not want them to desecrate My name and My holy service.

In the presence of the whole people I shall make my honor felt.” This is the “honor” accorded to God’s Presence that even when one sees one’s sons dying one ignores one’s grief and continues with the service to one’s Creator

And Aaron was silent” - he desisted from his mourning, did not weep and did not perform the rites of mourning

11. **Joshua 10:12**

אָז יְדַבֵּר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ לַיהוָה בַּיּוֹם תָּתַתְּ יְהוָה אֶת־הָאֲמֹרִי לְפָנָי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר ׀ לְעֵינַי יִשְׂרָאֵל שָׁמַשׁ  
בְּגִבְעוֹן יוֹם וַיָּרֶם בְּעַמְקֵי אַיָּלוֹן:

On that occasion, when the LORD routed the Amorites before the Israelites, Joshua addressed the LORD; he said in the presence of the Israelites:

“Stand still, O sun, at Gibeon,  
O moon, in the Valley of Ayalon!”

12. **Kings I, 19:21**

וַיֹּאמֶר צָא וְעַמְדָתְךָ בְּהָרֵי לְפָנָי יְהוָה וְהִנֵּה יְהוָה עֹבֵר וְרוּחַ גְּדוּלָּה וְחֹזֶק מְפָרֵק הָרִים וּמְשַׁבֵּר סְלָעִים לְפָנָי  
יְהוָה לֹא בָרוּחַ יְהוָה וְאֶחָר הָרוּחַ רָעַשׁ לֹא בְרֵעַשׁ יְהוָה: וְאֶחָר הָרָעַשׁ אִישׁ לֹא בָאֵשׁ יְהוָה וְאֶחָר הָאֵשׁ  
קוֹל דְּמָמָה דִּקְקָה:

And He said: 'Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD.' And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

### 13. R. Eliezer Lipman Lichtenstein - Shem Olam, Leviticus 10:3

לא אמר "וישתוק", כי הבדל בלשון הקודש בין הפעלים הנרדפים "דממה", "שתיקה": "שתיקה" אינו מורה אלה שתיקה לבדה מדיבור או מבכי ואנחה וכן הפסקה משאר תנועות חיצוניות, כמו: אחר שאמר (תהלים קז, כז): "יחגו וינעו כשכור", אומר אחר כך (שם שם, ל): "וישמחו כי ישתקו": אבל דממה מורה גם שקט הלב ומרגוע הנפש בפנימיות, כמו שביארו חוקרי הלשון: לכן העיד הכתוב על אהרן קדוש ה' שלא שתק לבד, אלא "וידום", שגם לבו שקט ונפשו הרגיעה בפנימיותה, כי לא הרהר אחר מידותיו של הקדוש-ברוך-הוא כלל, אלא צידק עליו את הדין.

Scripture chose "*vayidom*" rather than "*vayishtok*," because there is a difference in the holy language between these similar verbs [denoting silence]. *Shetikah* only signifies the abstention from speaking, weeping, moaning or any other outward manifestation as "They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man" (Ps. 107:27), followed by, "then are they glad because *yishtok*" - they are quiet" (ibid., 30). The verb "*domem*" however, connotes inner peace and calm, as the researchers of the language explained. Accordingly Scripture describes Aaron, holy to God, that he was not simply "quiet" (*vayishtok*) but actually "*vayidom*" emphasizing that his heart and soul were at peace within, that he did not engage in questioning the standards of the Holy One of Blessing at all, rather he justified the Divine verdict.

### 14. Isaac ben Judah Abravanel, Leviticus 10:1

פירוש וידום אהרן הוא שנהפך לבו והיה כאבן דומם ולא נשא קולו בבכי ובמספד כאבל אב על בנים. גם לא קבל תנחומים ממשה כי לא נותרה בו נשמה והדבור אין בו.  
"And Aaron was silent" - His heart turned to lifeless stone (*domem* - mineral), and he did not weep and mourn like a bereaved father, nor did he accept Moses' consolation for his soul had left him and he was speechless.

### 15. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Hidden Order of Intimacy: Reflections on the Book of Leviticus*

God's violent gesture is intended to regenerate the religious sense of the incalculable gravity of His presence. The only words of explanation He offers are the enigmatic: "Through those who are close to me I shall be sanctified; in the presence of the whole people I shall make my gravity felt (*ikaved*)" (Lev. 10:3). The death of the young priests is a reminder of **the dangers of everyday life with God...**

This is a story that has generated many stories of meaning. But Aaron's response is silence: "And Aaron was silent." Perhaps this is the appropriate response. In itself, it bears many possibilities. Does Aaron's silence signify assent to God's enigmatic summation: "Through those who are close to Me I shall be sanctified"? Or resignation? Or tight-lipped self-control?

Silence holds many possibilities... The narrative of Nadav and Avihu gives us perhaps too many possibilities with an unresolved gap in the midst of each. What is not explained or reduced to narrative order is the divine itself. What cannot be fully known ("I shall become what I shall become" [Exod. 3:14]) makes us both hopeful and hopeless.

16. Blu Greenberg, from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008)

[The Deepest Response of Love | My Jewish Learning](#)

When my husband and I sat shiva, most people came with no forethought agenda or explanation, though a few—out of good intention and compassion—tried to justify God or soften the loss by giving it some meaning. “He was so good that God needed him by His side” was one such attempt, to which on one occasion — unable to hold back my words — I responded, “But we on Earth need him more!” Most people understood at the deepest level that there was nothing that could justify, nothing that could offset the pain or soften the blow, and they wisely remained silent. And we ourselves were silent, as there were no words we could speak that would make any sense of it...

The Jewish laws of bereavement, so exquisitely tuned to the needs of the mourners, stipulate that the shiva visitor should not speak until the mourner speaks. I had always thought that the point of that precept was to ensure that the conversation would flow to the place the mourner needs it to reach. But I now understand that the halacha (Jewish law) enjoining the comforting visitor to hold back in silence serves a different function: To caution against offering a rationale for the decree of death. The deeper human religious response is to be silent, to live with the contradiction, and to affirm that we need not force meaning into tragedy. **Sometimes, the deepest response of love is to be silent.**

17. Leviticus 10:4-20

וַיִּקְרְבוּ וַיִּשְׁאַם בְּכַתְּמָתָם אֶל־מַחְוֵז לְמַחְנֵה פֶּאֶשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְלֹאֲלֻעֶזֶר וְלֵאִיתָמָר | בְּנֵי־וְרָאִשֵׁיכֶם אֶל־תִּפְרְעוּ | וּבְגַדֵיכֶם לֹא־תִכְרְמוּ וְלֹא תִמְתּוּ וְעַל כָּל־הָעֵדָה יִקְצָף וְאַחֲיֵיכֶם כָּל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל יִכְפוּ אֶת־הַשְּׂרֵפָה אֲשֶׁר שָׂרַף יְהוָה: וּמִפְתָּח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא תִצְאוּ פֶן־תִּמְתּוּ כִּי־שָׁמַן מִשְׁחַת יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כַּדְּבַר מֹשֶׁה: {פ}

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: יִזוּ וְשִׁכְּרָר אֶל־תִּשְׁתֶּה | אֶתְּהָ | וּבְגֵיךָ אִתְּךָ בְּבֹאֲכֶם אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְלֹא תִמְתּוּ חֲקַת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם: וְלֹהֲבִדִּיל בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּבֵין הַחֵל וּבֵין הַטָּמֵא וּבֵין הַטְּהוֹר: וְלִהְיוֹרֶת אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת כָּל־הַחֲקִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֲלֵיהֶם בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה: {פ}

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֵל־אֲלֻעֶזֶר וְאֵל־אִיתָמָר | בְּנֵי־הַנְּוֹתְרִים | קָחוּ אֶת־הַמִּנְחָה הַנּוֹתֶרֶת מֵאִשֵּׁי יְהוָה וְאֶכְלוּהָ מִצֹּת אֶצֶל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כִּי קֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים הוּא: וְאֶכְלָתֶם אֹתָהּ בְּמָקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ כִּי חֲקֵה וְחֵק־בְּנֵי־הָהוּא מֵאִשֵּׁי יְהוָה כִּי־יִכּוּ צְוִיִּתִי: וְאֵת חֲזֵה הַתְּנוּפָה וְאֵת | שׂוֹק הַתְּרוּמָה תֹּאכְלוּ בְּמָקוֹם טְהוֹר אִתְּהָ וּבְגֵיךָ וּבְגֵיךָ אִתְּךָ כִּי־חֲקֵה וְחֵק־בְּנֵי־הָהוּא נִתְּנוּ מִזְבְּחֵי שְׁלָמִי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: שׂוֹק הַתְּרוּמָה וְחֲזֵה הַתְּנוּפָה עַל אִשֵּׁי הַחֲלָבִים יָבִיאוּ לְהַגִּיף תְּנוּפָה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְהָיָה לָךְ וּלְבְנֵיךָ אִתְּךָ לְחֵק־עוֹלָם כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה: וְאֵת | שְׂעִיר הַחַטָּאת דָּרֹשׁ דָּרֹשׁ מֹשֶׁה וְהִגֵּה שָׂרַף וְעַל־אֲלֻעֶזֶר וְעַל־אִיתָמָר בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן הַנּוֹתְרִים לֵאמֹר: מִדּוּעַ לֹא־אֶכְלָתֶם אֶת־הַחַטָּאת בְּמָקוֹם הַקֹּדֶשׁ כִּי קֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים הוּא וְאִתְּהָ | נָתַן לָכֶם לְשֵׂאת אֶת־עוֹן הָעֵדָה לְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: הֵן לֹא־הוּבָא אֶת־דָּמָהּ אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ פְּגִימָה אֲכֹל תֹּאכְלוּ אֹתָהּ בְּקֹדֶשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר צְוִיִּתִי: וַיְדַבֵּר אַהֲרֹן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הֵן הַיּוֹם הַקָּרִיבֹו אֶת־חַטָּאתֶם וְאֶת־עֲלָתֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְתִקְרָאנָה אֹתִי כְּאֵלָה וְאֶכְלָתִי חַטָּאת הַיּוֹם הַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה: וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינָיו: {פ}

Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, “Come forward and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp.” They came forward and carried them out of the camp by their tunics, as Moses had ordered. And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Elazar and Itamar, “Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and anger strike the whole community. But your kin,

all the house of Israel, shall bewail the burning that God has wrought. And so do not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die, for God's anointing oil is upon you." And they did as Moses had bidden.

And God spoke to Aaron, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages, for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the impure and the pure; and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which God has imparted to them through Moses.

Moses spoke to Aaron and to his remaining sons, Elazar and Itamar: Take the meal offering that is left over from God's offerings by fire and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy. You shall eat it in the sacred precinct, inasmuch as it is your due, and that of your sons, from God's offerings by fire; for so I have been commanded. But the breast of elevation offering and the thigh of gift offering you [and your wife], and your sons and daughters with you, may eat in any pure place, for they have been assigned as a due to you and your sons from the Israelites' sacrifices of well-being. Together with the fat of fire offering, they must present the thigh of gift offering and the breast of elevation offering, which are to be elevated as an elevation offering before God, and which are to be your due and that of your sons with you for all time—as God has commanded. Then Moses inquired about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Elazar and Itamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and said, "Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and it is what was given to you to remove the guilt of the community and to make expiation for them before God. Since its blood was not brought inside the sanctuary, you should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded." And Aaron spoke to Moses, "See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before God, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would God have approved?" And when Moses heard this, he approved.