

For the past seven days Moses has consecrated Aaron and his sons, guiding them in the elaborate sacrificial rites establishing the priesthood and inaugurating the *mishkan*, the holy Tent of Meeting. Now, on this culminating eighth day, tragedy strikes. Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's eldest sons, rashly take it upon themselves to present their own fire offerings, and like Phaeton and Icarus, they overstep the boundaries of authority, overestimate their abilities, and end up destroying themselves and bringing the festivities to an abrupt and heartbreaking halt. Young people are by nature overenthusiastic and overconfident, prone to spontaneity and often oblivious to the warnings of their elders. In moderation, these are excellent traits which can spur people to great achievements, but unchecked they usually lead to disaster. Overconfidence can be as intoxicating as a drug. The euphoria felt by the people at this momentous juncture when Divine Presence flooded the *mishkan* and holy fire consumed the burnt offerings was tremendous. Research shows that euphoria is accompanied by a rush of hormones such as adrenaline and endorphins, which can profoundly distort judgement. Nadav and Avihu, overcome with enthusiasm, rush to the altar with their firepans aglow with incense, unbidden. Sadly, they are so besotted that they misjudge the power of HaShem's fire, and like the burnt offering just before, it consumes them. Today we might say that they were intoxicated to the point of overdose. Indeed, Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 12:1 teaches that the injunction against entering the *mishkan* after having drunk intoxicating wine stems from this incident. However, as anyone who has ever fallen in love or been caught up in the enthusiasm of a crowd can affirm, intoxication can also be emotional. Channeled, it can lead to long-term relationships or positive social movements; unrestrained it can end in jealous murder (Othello) and suicide (Romeo and Juliet), or to the zealotry of the November pogroms of 1938, and the storming of the US Capitol on January 6 of this year. Balance and discernment are the vital components of physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

Strength and discernment are the defining attributes of *gevurah*, the *sephirah* on the kabbalistic tree that influences this second week of Omer counting. The story of Nadav and Avihu ends with HaShem's admonition to discern between the sacred and the secular, between *tamei* (unclean, i.e., unsuitable) and *tahor* (clean, i.e., suitable). We end Shabbat and *chagim* with the ceremony of *Havdalah* – the act of separating between the sacred and the secular, between Shabbat/*chag* and everyday life. Like the beginning of Shabbat and *chagim*, this is done over wine. Nowhere in our sacred writings is wine prohibited; in fact, the Talmud often extols the virtues of wine. "Since the Temple is not standing and one cannot eat sacrificial meat, he can fulfill the mitzvah of rejoicing on a Festival only by drinking wine, as it is stated: 'And wine that gladdens the heart of man' [Psalms 104:15]" (Bavli, Pesachim 109a). We simply must summon the strength to practice balance and discernment.

Our parashah then turns to discernment concerning the creatures we are allowed to eat, establishing limits on our physical desires. Puzzling over these outwardly illogical statutes, some of our sages identified a basic principle: everything we eat affects us in ways we might not immediately realize. Prohibited animals are primarily carnivorous, which means they are predatory, while permitted animals are mostly herbivorous and usually domesticated. In light of this premise, predatory animals are not kosher, and because meat must be ritually slaughtered, we also do not hunt to kill – we are not predators. Permitted animals must have two identifying signs. Mammals must chew their cud and have split hooves, and fish must have fins and scales. Birds of prey are prohibited, but since birds are otherwise not easily identifiable, some prohibited ones are named, among them the *chasidah* (stork). Mammals like camels, rock-badgers, rabbits, and swine, and fish like sharks, sturgeon, and catfish, which exhibit only one kosher characteristic, are considered particularly unclean because at first glance they appear to be kosher. And the stork belies its name (from *chessed* – lovingkindness) because although it shows kindness by sharing food with other storks, it is aggressive toward other species. In a hasty attempt to sate his hunger, the undiscerning person may focus on the one kosher aspect of the animal whose meat he wishes to eat and overlook the fact that it is only an imposter, because it lacks the second trait.

Parashah Shemini establishes rules for balancing spiritual and physical desires. Sunday evening, we enter the third week of Omer counting – the week of *Tiferet*, the *sephirah* of beauty defined through balance. Just as the kindness of *Chessed* and the rigor of *Gevurah* are balanced in *Tiferet*, so must our desire to be physically and spiritually satiated be tempered with the discernment and strength of *Gevurah* in order to achieve the healthy, beautiful balance of *Tiferet*.

Shabbat shalom!