

Still in question and answer mode from last week's two Sederim, I continue to grapple with those perplexing stories of seemingly senseless deaths at the hand of HaShem in our Torah and Haftarah readings. What was so terrible about Nadav and Avihu making their own offerings in the *mishkan*, or Uza's touching the Ark to steady it when the oxen pulling the wagon carrying it caused the wagon to sway? The two stories have much in common. Both take place during joyous occasions celebrated in the presence of holy objects: In the Torah portion, the eight-day ceremonies for the inauguration of the *mishkan* and the investiture of Aaron and his sons are ending; and in the Haftarah, David is moving the Ark from the house of Avinadav to Jerusalem. Both involve independent action in or with these objects. And in both, this action is punished by death. Obviously, the offense has to do with the holy objects themselves. We know that in addition to time, places and objects are separated into sacred and ordinary. Of course we worship neither places nor objects, but we do use them to mark and honor sacred times. Our ancient ancestors drew the same inviolable line between sacred and ordinary places and objects as they did between the realm of HaShem and our earthly home. So it stands to reason that they devised complicated laws to govern the handling of sacred objects and decorum in sacred places. And herein lies the crux of the matter. In earlier commentaries I cited a number of midrashim on the story of Nadav and Avihu, most of which treat the pair unfavorably. The common denominator is their arrogance in assuming roles for which they are neither qualified nor chosen. The tragic story of Uza (sometimes spelled Uzza or Uzzah) is similar. Uza is the son of Avinadav, in whose home the Ark had been residing, and whose name seems to be a reverse composite of Avihu and Nadav. And Uza's name is similar to Uziel, the brother of Aaron's father. It is Uziel's sons Mishael and Elzaphan whom Moses summons to carry their cousins' bodies outside the camp. (10:4) Connections between these stories are obvious. Uza too, is seen as arrogant. He and his brother are leading the cart, which means they are walking in front of the Ark, and the action of the oxen is a warning from HaShem that this is disrespectful. Uza ignores the warning and is summarily punished. "... and Uza put forth [his hand] and grasped hold of it, for the oxen swayed it." (6:6) In addition to grasping, the word *תָּקַח* means overpowering or taking possession – clearly a violation. But since the Ark had been stored and guarded in their home for the past 20 years, (I Samuel 1-2) this behavior is at least understandable, if not excusable. A disagreement in Talmud Tractate Sotah 35a views Uza's action in delightfully fanciful Talmudic style as a sort of mixed blessing: "One says, God smote him for his forgetfulness, because he did not remember that the Ark can carry itself. And one says, God smote him because he lifted the edges of his garment in front of the Ark and relieved himself in its presence. ... Rabbi Yochanan says, Uza entered the World-to-Come, as it is stated: 'With the Ark of God.' Just as the Ark exists forever, so too, Uza entered the World-to-Come." Indeed, there is a positive side to these tragedies. Midrash Tanchuma Beshalach 21: "This was one of the three things that Israel complained against, saying they were instruments for punishment. These are: the incense, the Ark, and the staff. The incense was an instrument of punishment, for it brought distress to Nadav and Avihu. This is why He informed them that incense was to be used for atonement, ... . They said that the Ark was a tool for retribution, for He killed Uza and the men of Beth-Shemesh there ... . But He revealed to them that it was also an instrument of blessing, as it is written, 'And the Ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite three months; and the Lord blessed Obed-Edom and all his house.' (II Sam. 6:11) The sapphire staff with which He brought the plagues upon the Egyptians in Egypt and killed them at the Red Sea was an instrument for punishment. But they knew that it was an instrument that performed miracles as well." Paralleling Rabbi Yochanan's pronouncement above, Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 12:2 sees the death of Avihu and Nadav in unusually positive light: "There I will arrange meetings with the children of Israel, and it will be sanctified through My glory. [Exodus 29:43] Do not read *בְּכְבוֹדִי* as 'through My glory,' but *בְּתִכְבְּדִי* 'through my honorable ones.' Moses said to Aaron: Aaron, my brother! I knew that this House was to be sanctified through the beloved ones of the Omnipresent, but I thought it would be either through me or through you. Now I see that they [Nadav and Avihu] were greater than I or you." These interpretations are in no way to be seen as deifying human beings, or as human sacrifices. They are simply a means we human beings have created to help us understand, or at least deal with the inexplicable. The news of sudden death, whether through medical incident, accident, violence, or war, is deeply shocking. Tragic events in our own circles along with media reports from around the world leave us grief-stricken and incredulous. Like the writers of our midrashim, we search for answers and console ourselves as best we can. But we do not have to emulate Aaron's silence (10:3). When hearing of a death, we say *baruch dayan ha-emet*, blessed is the True Judge (HaShem), those powerful words of consolation that can ignite the first tiny spark in the long process of healing.

Shabbat shalom!