

For the past seven days Moses has performed the inauguration rites for the *mishkan* and consecrated Aaron and his sons, teaching and guiding them as they assume their priestly roles. Now, at the climax of this final eighth day, Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's eldest sons, rush forward to present their own, unauthorized fire offerings. Like Phaeton and Icarus of Greek mythology, they overestimate their abilities, ignore boundaries, 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 impulsiveness, and blithely oblivious to the warnings of their elders. In moderation, these are excellent traits which can lead to great achievements, but unchecked they often end in disaster. Overconfidence can be as intoxicating as any drug. The people who witnessed HaShem's glory and saw HaShem's fire consume the burnt offerings were overwhelmed with euphoria and awe. Research shows that euphoria produces neurobiological reactions that can profoundly distort judgement. Besotted with ecstasy, Nadav and Avihu each present their own incense offering, and tragically, HaShem's fire now consumes them (same word in both instances). On the incongruity of their being carried out by their tunics (10:5), Midrash Tanchuma Shimini 12 explains, "[HaShem] sent fire like two strings to each and every one, in their nostrils, and burned their souls; but He did not touch their flesh or their garments." Today we might attribute their deaths to accidental overdose. Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 12:1 teaches that the injunction against entering the *mishkan* after having drunk intoxicating wine stems from this incident. Indeed, as anyone who has ever fallen in love, experienced runners' high, or been caught up in the enthusiasm of a crowd can affirm, intoxication is both emotional and physical. Long-term relationships, healthy lifestyles, and positive social movements are based on appropriately channeled emotion, but uncontrolled emotion can lead to jealous murder (Othello) and suicide (Romeo and Juliet), to serious injury, and to the horrific excesses of racial, religious, and political fanaticism. We all know how difficult – and how important – it is to be able to manage our emotions. We are in the second week of Omer counting, the week of *gevurah*. This *sephirah* on the kabbalistic tree is defined by strength, restraint, and discernment – attributes that are vital to maintaining our physical, mental, and spiritual health. Still new to the concept of freedom and blissfully unaware of the responsibilities it entails, the Israelites need well-defined rules and clear boundaries. And they need to be taught that these restrictions are there for their benefit. The story of Nadav and Avihu ends with HaShem's admonition to differentiate between the sacred and the secular, between *tamei* (unclean, unsuitable) and *tahor* (clean, suitable). We end Shabbat and *chagim* with *Havdalah* – the ceremony of separating sacred from secular times, of differentiating 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. Tractate Pesachim 109a teaches: "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]." It is up to us to avoid intoxication by practicing restraint and discernment. Our parashah uses this tragic opportunity to further define the priestly rules for presenting and eating the offerings, and then, to delineate which creatures we all are allowed to eat. Trying to understand these outwardly puzzling rules, our sages identified a basic principle: everything we eat affects us in ways we might not immediately realize. Prohibited animals are primarily carnivorous and therefore predatory, while permitted animals are mostly herbivorous and usually domesticated. Consequently, predatory animals are not kosher, and the meat we eat must be ritually slaughtered, not hunted. To avoid error, permitted animals must exhibit two identifying signs. Mammals must chew their cud and have split hooves, fish must have fins and scales, and birds of prey are prohibited. Because they may appear to be kosher, animals with only one characteristic are considered particularly abhorrent. These include rock-badgers, rabbits, and pigs; sharks, sturgeon, and catfish; and the stork (*Chasidah* – from *chessed*), who shares its food with its fellow storks, but is aggressive toward its own, as well as other, species. Talmud Tractate Rosh HaShanah 16b teaches that the prohibition against touching the carcasses of non-kosher animals applies for ordinary people only during the Pilgrimage Festivals (11:8), and Rashi rules that although we may not eat their flesh, using their bones, horns, hooves, and sinews is permitted. With the *mishkan* inaugurated and the priests installed, it is time for the people to learn how to restrain and balance their physical and spiritual desires. After all, apart from the obvious benefits of doing so, HaShem reminds them: "... because I am God, who brought you up from Egypt to be your God. Therefore you must be holy, because I am holy" (11:45). Our sages see this unique deviation from the usual who took you out of Egypt as the spiritual elevation provided by the new laws of *kashrut*. Sunday evening we enter the Omer week of *Tiferet*, the *sephirah* of beauty and balance. Just as the compassion of *Chessed* and the restriction of *Gevurah* are balanced in *Tiferet*, so must our desire to be physically and spiritually fulfilled be tempered with the discernment and strength of *Gevurah* in order to achieve the healthy, beautiful balance of *Tiferet*.

Shabbat shalom!