

What was so terrible about Nadav and Avihu making their own offerings in the *mishkan*, or Uzah's touching the Ark to steady it when the oxen pulling the cart that was transporting it caused it 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, it is the end of the eight-day festival for the inauguration of the *mishkan* and the investiture of Aaron and his sons; and in the Haftarah, David is moving the Ark from the house of Avinadav to Jerusalem. Both involve unbidden action in or with these holy objects, and in both, this action is punished by death. By designating and sanctifying times, places, and objects, we are able to approach HaShem from the safety of the inviolable boundary between HaShem's realm and ours. The *mishkan* and Temple with their vessels, garments, and offerings provided the carefully structured environment where this was possible. We reenact this today every time we recite "... Who sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us ..." before performing a *mitzvah*. Holiness is not arbitrary; it originates beyond us, and is expressed through our actions. And herein lies the crux of the matter: Nadav, Avihu, and Uzah violated sacred boundaries because of a false assumption that good intention creates authorization. In essence, this is another painful misunderstanding of the elusive concept of freedom. Freedom does not entail the right to ignore the law, even when intentions are good. The Torah emphasizes that our freedom is grounded in honoring our covenant by observing certain boundaries. Nadav and Avihu mistake spiritual ecstasy for divine permission. Uzah assumes that he is free to intervene when the Ark seems to be in danger. However, freedom is not limitless and self-authorized; it is bounded and disciplined – a concept we humans still have trouble understanding. Most midrashim condemn Nadav and Avihu for their arrogance in assuming roles for which they were neither qualified nor chosen. Uzah's story is similar. Uzah is the son of Avinadav, in whose home the Ark had been residing, and whose name seems to be not only a reverse composite of Avihu and Nadav, but also strikingly 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) Indeed, connections between these stories are obvious. Uzah 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. Uzah ignores the warning and is summarily punished. "... and Uzah put forth [his hand] and grasped hold of it, for the oxen swayed it." (6:6) In addition to grasping, the word *אָרָא* 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, this behavior may be understandable, although not excusable. A disagreement in Talmud Tractate Sotah 35a views Uzah's fate 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, Uzah entered the World-to-Come, as it is stated: 'With the Ark of God.' Just as the Ark exists forever, so too, Uzah 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 ... 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 Uzah 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 *בְּמִכְבְּדֵי* '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 stories neither deify human beings nor justify divine cruelty. They are a very human way of coping with trauma. To our 21st century minds, the deaths of Nadav, Avihu, and Uzah feel senseless. Sudden death, whether through illness, accident, violence, or war, leaves us grief-stricken, disoriented, and searching for meaning. Our sages knew persecution, plague, political upheaval, and personal loss. Their midrashim do not demand meek acceptance of whatever befalls us. They offer something far more compassionate: a timeless framework for making sense of the inexplicable and surviving the unbearable. They teach us that even in the face of tragedy we are obligated to keep choosing life so that we may continue the work of building, repairing, and doing our part to help create a better world.

Shabbat shalom!