



D'var Torah Parshat Sh'mini – April 6, 2024

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Early Acts of Audacious Autonomy: A Systems Analysis of Parashat

Parashat Shemini includes one of the Torah's more puzzling and dramatic episodes – the deaths of Aaron's sons. It is momentous – in some ways, just as there was a before and after the Garden of Eden, the Flood, and the Red Sea, there is a before and after the deaths of Nadav and Avihu – Acherei Mot - whose significance is explicitly enshrined at the outset of the Yom Kippur Torah reading.

For my first drash on this Parasha, 14 years ago, I processed this episode as a mourner, focusing on Aaron's silence, which still resonated for me 10-plus years after my father's death.

This time, I am drawn to it through the eyes of a now seasoned (if not expert) parent, teacher, trainer/supervisor, mentor, and advisor to many individuals at various personal and professional stages. And I find myself approaching it from a systems quality assurance perspective: If we accept that Nadav and Avihu perpetrated a serious irreversibly harmful act, was it preventable? As we retrospectively assess what might have been done prospectively to mitigate its likelihood, to what degree should we evaluate not only their individual responsibility, but also systems flaws where they operated, and lapses among their supervisor-mentors, their superiors within the hierarchy?

Let's explore these questions first as related to some other instances in which young adults in the Torah audaciously exert their autonomy for the first time, and where things go seriously awry.

The first is Adam, who made a historically bad decision to act against his supervisor's explicit instructions: *"Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die."* (Gen 1: 17-18). This missive could not have been clearer. Nevertheless, it assumes common understanding between God and Adam regarding what God meant. Even if we interpret God to mean, as some do, that Adam will not die immediately, but rather will become aware of his mortality, can we safely assume that the first human would have any real grasp of the concept? Adam has had no prior recorded experience with or observations of death and has been specifically forbidden by his superior from accessing the requisite ethical understanding.

So we may argue that we have a leadership problem here – misaligned expectations related to communication that the leader thought was clear, but perhaps was not. A familiar systems challenge...

The next young person who disastrously exerted their early autonomy was Cain. Cain had two potential mentors – Adam (whose judgement was frankly unreliable), and God, who offered him forthright advice: *"Surely, if you do right, There is uplift. But if you do not do right Sin couches at the door; Its urge is toward you, Yet you can be its master.(Gen4:7)"* Clear as day – right? To be generous to leadership here, let's assume that Adam's having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad results somehow in transference of that knowledge to Cain. Does that invalidate Cain's question: *"Am I my brother's keeper?"* Some commentators offer that, compared to Abel, Cain initially stood on higher moral ground, because his consciousness was such that he did not kill at all. The possibility exists then that Cain observed through God's favoring of Abel's animal offerings that sometimes killing was good. So any understanding that Cain had about killing was relative. Confusion he had regarding Abel's moral status relative to other sentient beings may have been legitimate, absent less cryptic leadership guidance.

For both Adam and Cain, the sins committed could potentially have been avoided if God had somehow been more concrete, less enigmatic or hierarchical, or, in today's parlance, had permitted safe space for clarifying questions.

Perhaps one reason God spared their lives in punishment is because God understood that suboptimal communication could have contributed to the adverse outcomes.

Let's turn now to Nadav and Avihu, whose lives went unspared after their transgression, the exact nature of which has been variously interpreted. Fundamentally, it involved a serious breach of highly prescribed, formal protocol. The sons' role in the ritual was repetitive and subservient. For energetic, ambitious young go-getters, the tasks may have seemed menial, even mind-numbing. This resembles early surgical training, where junior trainees may be required to stand for hours holding retractors or suction devices while the real surgical work is done by higher-ups. The surgical trainees must pay steadfast attention to details while performing unexciting yet fatiguing tasks under highly ritualized, formalized proceedings. Indeed, the protocols exist specifically to avoid errors. Even where the trainees feel quite capable of more demanding work – as Nadav and Avihu evidently did - the risks of transgressing protocol are high; the results of overconfidence may be disastrous.

Under such conditions, outcomes depend on healthy team relational dynamics. Communication lapses heighten risks for errors. Poor communication engenders misaligned expectations and creates distractions that undermine established protocols. Hierarchical superiors must be able to communicate clearly and respectfully, and to encourage cultures of speaking up across authority gradients about important procedural matters.

We do not see evidence for such a culture in the events preceding the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. One cannot conclude therefore that the deaths were unpreventable. Given that, three levels of hierarchy existed above the sons: God, Moshe, and Aaron. In the past, I've perceived Aaron's silence as reflecting his deep anger and mourning. Imagine now the pain of understanding that he himself, let alone the others, could somehow have intervened to prevent the tragedy. Or even that he knew to intervene but could not speak up across the power structure. When errors occur in medicine, such a combination of self-perceived complicity and powerlessness is a potent recipe for profound psychological distress. Thus Aaron remained silent in response to Moshe's words of attempted, if not feeble, consolation.

Moshe, too, once committed an ill-advised act of audacious autonomy in his young adulthood. His first exercise of self-determination was to kill someone and hide them in the sand (Ex 2:12). Moshe, like the others, could not restrain himself in a moment of passion that ends catastrophically. He then flees to the desert, exiled in [seclusion and isolation](#).

Moshe is redeemed, of course, but not overnight. A considerable amount of time passes between his arrival in the desert and God's reentry into the narrative. It is likely several decades; Moshe now has three sons.

Over the interim, both God and Moshe had abundant time for reflection. One net outcome is that Moshe is given substantial subsequent leadership training. He is presented with a comprehensive plan. He is permitted to speak up, and he does. He asks clarifying questions and offers challenges that require validation, respectful explanations, more concrete substantiation of the plan's viability, confidence building, and provision of accommodations to address reasonable concerns – all of which are granted. It is only after this training that he ultimately achieves the greatness for which he seemed predestined, but which he potentially undermined so severely in his first youthful act of autonomy.

This, of course, occurs well before Nadav and Avihu's tragic misadventure. Why Adam and Cain were permitted to live in permanent exile, and Moshe was permitted to evolve from exile to greatness, while Aaron's sons were killed instantly, is a topic for another drash.

For our purposes today, the contrasts in how these young adults were managed after their devastating errors provide compelling guidance to those of us who ultimately step into positions of power within a hierarchical system – whether that be parenting, coaching, training, teaching, or other supervisory roles. When a young person's misjudgment ends in catastrophe, our humility in asking ourselves where our responsibility may lie, how we handle the remediation, what supports, training, and encouragement we offer going forward, and the culture we establish for communication, may play crucial roles in whether they remain derailed in exile, or succeed. Who knows, if we do

it well, those under us who have failed miserably at one point may go on to save a life someday, and even possibly, the world.

Shabbat Shalom