

How Close is Too Close?

Jesse Grauman

April 14, 2003

1. Vayikra 16:1

XVI

1. And God spoke [as follows] to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon: "It was because of their drawing near before God that they died."

טז א וידבר יהוה אל-משה אחרי מות שני בני אהרן בקרבכם לפני-יהוה וימתו:

2. Vayikra 10:1-3

X

1. And Aharon's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his pan, put fire into them and placed incense upon it, and they brought near before God strange fire which He had not commanded them.

א ויקחו בני-אהרן נדב ואביהוא איש מחתתו ויתנו בהן אש וישימו עליה קטרת ויקריבו לפני יהוה אש זרה אשר לא

2. Then fire went forth from before God and consumed them, and they died before God. 3. And Moshe said to Aharon: "This is what God spoke, [saying]: 'I will be sanctified by those near to Me and thus I will be honored by all the people.'" And Aharon was silent.

צנה אתם: ב ותצא אש מלפני יהוה ותאכל אותם וימתו לפני יהוה: ג ויאמר משה אל-אהרן הוא אשר-דבר יהוה. לאמר בקרבי אקדש ועל-פני כל-העם אפבד ויידם אהרן:

3. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch on Vayikra 16:1

1. *It was because of their drawing near before God that they died.* The cause of their death was that they dared to draw so near to God. The subjective aspect of their sin, "drawing near (to God)," lay in their overweening estimation of themselves, which caused them to misunderstand the loftiness of the Jewish ideal and to fail to recognize their own inadequacy. That is why they died (see notes to Chapter 10:1).

4. Bamidbar 16:8-10

8. And Moshe said to Korah: "Hear now, O sons of Levi. Is it too little for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Yisrael, to have you come near to Him to do the service of the Dwelling Place of God and to stand before the community to minister before them? 10. And since He has thus brought you and all your brothers, the sons of Levi with you, near to Him, will you now seek the priesthood also?"

ו ויאמר משה אל-קרח שמעו-נא בני לוי: ט המעט מכם פיהו הברדיל אלהי ישראל אתכם מענת ישראל להקריב אתכם אליו לעבד את-עבודת משכן יהוה ולעמד לפני העדה לשרתם: י ויקרב אתך ואת-כל-אתיך בני-לוי אתך ובקשתם גם-כהנה:

5. Shmot 19:12

12. Set boundaries around the people and say to them: 'Be careful not to ascend the mountain or even to touch a part of it! Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.

יְבִי וְהִגַּבְלַת אֶת-הָעָם סְבִיב
לֵאמֹר הִשְׁמְרוּ לְכֶם עֲלוֹת בְּהָר וּבְנֹגַע בְּקַצֵּיהּ
כֹּל-הַנֹּגַע בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת:

6. Bamidbar 1:51

51. When the Dwelling Place journeys forth, the Levites are to take it down, and when the Dwelling Place comes to rest, the Levites are to set it up; any outsider who comes near is liable to the death penalty.

נָא וּבְנֹסַע
הַמִּשְׁכָּן יוֹרִידוּ אֹתוֹ קְלוּיִם וּבְקִנְחַת הַמִּשְׁכָּן
יָקִימוּ אֹתוֹ קְלוּיִם וְהָגֵר הַקָּרֵב יוּמָת:

7. Shmuel II 6:6-10

6. And when they came to the threshing-floor of Nacon, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen stumbled. 7. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God. 8. And David was displeased, because the LORD had broken forth upon Uzzah; and that place was called Perez-uzzah, unto this day. 9. And David was afraid of the LORD that day; and he said: 'How shall the ark of the LORD come unto me?' 10. So David would not remove the ark of the LORD unto him into the city of David; but David carried it aside into the house of Obed-edom the Gittite.

וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד-נָחוֹן נָכוֹן וַיִּשְׁלַח
עֲזָה אֶל-אָרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים
וַיִּאָחַז בּוֹ כִּי שָׁמְטוּ הַבָּקָר:
וַיִּחַר-אַף יְהוָה בְּעֲזָה וַיַּכְהוּ
שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל-הַשָּׁל וַיָּמָת
שָׁם עִם אָרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים: וַיִּחַר
לְדָוִד עַל אֲשֶׁר פָּרַץ יְהוָה
פָּרַץ בְּעֵינָהּ וַיִּקְרָא לַמָּקוֹם
הַהוּא פָּרַץ עֲזָה עַד הַיּוֹם
הַזֶּה: וַיִּירָא דָוִד אֶת-יְהוָה
בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיֹּאמֶר אֵיךְ יָבֹא
אֵלַי אָרוֹן יְהוָה: וְלֹא-אָבִיחָה
דָּוִד לְהַסִּיר אֵלָיו אֶת-אָרוֹן
יְהוָה עַל-עֵיר דָּוִד וַיִּטְהַר
דָּוִד בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עַבְד־אֱלֹהִים נִנְטִי:

8. Dvarim 30:20

20. to love God, your God; to hearken to His voice and to cling firmly to Him; for that is your life and the length of your days—to dwell upon

כ לְאַהֲבָה
אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשִׁמְעַע בְּקוֹלוֹ וּלְדַבְּקָה-בּוֹ כִּי
הוּא חַיֶּיךָ וְאַרְךְ יָמֶיךָ לְשִׁבְתָּ עַל-הָאָדָמָה
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק
וּלְיַעֲקֹב לְתֵת לָהֶם: פ

the soil that God, your God, swore to your fathers, Abraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov, to give to them.

9. Tehillim 27:4

4 One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,

אַחַת שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת יְהוָה
אַחַת אֲבַקֵּשׁ
שִׁבְתִּי בְּבַיִת-יְהוָה כָּל-יְמֵי חַיִּי

To behold the graciousness of the LORD, and to visit early in His temple: לַחֲזוֹת בְּנֹעַם-יְהוָה וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהַיְכָלֹו:

10. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra 10:1

Above and beyond all else, however, the Word of God describing this ill-fated offering stresses that it was one which God had not commanded Aaron's sons to make. Even if the individual phases of the offering as such had not been illegal (and we have seen that they were indeed unlawful) the mere fact that this offering had not been expressly commanded by God would have been sufficient to make it forbidden. Offerings made in the Sanctuary of the Law are not subject to personal preference. Even the free-will offerings, which are voluntary, must comply strictly with specified forms and qualifications. For the nearness of God and the approach to God, both of which are symbolically sought through the קָרְבָּן [offering], can be found only through obedience to, and compliance with, the will of God; through complete personal submission to God's will.

11. Maimonides, Introduction to Pirkei Avot, Chapter 5

It is fitting for a person to control all the powers of his soul by his thought, as we mentioned in the previous chapter. He should place one goal before his eyes: the comprehension of God - glorified be He - to [the full extent of] mortal potential.¹ This means to know Him.

One should direct all of his activities, endeavors, and [even] his relaxation toward that goal, to the extent that none of his activities is purposeless - i.e., that they do not lead to this goal.

12. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot, 1:10

10. [If so,] what did Moses, our teacher, want to comprehend when he requested: "Please show me Your glory" [Exodus 33:18]?

He asked to know the truth of the existence of the Holy One, blessed be He, to the extent that it could be internalized within his mind, as one knows a particular person whose face he saw and whose image has been engraved within one's heart. Thus, this person's [identity] is distinguished within one's mind from [that of] other men. Similarly, Moses, our teacher, asked that the existence of the Holy One, blessed be He, be distinguished in his mind from the existence of other entities, to the extent that he would know the truth of His existence as it is [in its own right].

He, blessed be He, replied to him that it is not within the potential of a living man, [a creature of] body and soul, to comprehend this matter

in its entirety. [Nevertheless,] He, blessed be He, revealed to [Moses] matters which no other man had known before him - nor would ever know afterward - until he was able to comprehend [enough] from the truth of His existence, for the Holy One, blessed be He, to be distinguished in his mind from other entities, as a person is distinguished from other men when one sees his back and knows the structure of his body and [the manner in which] he is clothed.

This is alluded to by the verse [Exodus 33:23]: "You shall see My back, but you shall not see My face."

מהו זה שבקש משה רבנו להשיג כְּשֵׁאֵמַר: "הֲרֵאֵנִי נָא אֶת כְּבוֹדְךָ" ? -
בְּקֵשׁ לִידַע אֱמֶתֶת הַמְּצֵאוֹ שֶׁל הַקְּדוֹשׁ-בְּרוּךְ-הוּא, עַד שִׁיִּהְיֶה יָדוּעַ בְּלִבּוֹ
כְּמוֹ יָדִיעַת אֶחָד מִן הָאֲנָשִׁים, שֶׁרָאָה פָּנָיו וְנַחֲקָה צוּרְתוֹ בְּלִבּוֹ, שֶׁנִּמְצָא
אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ נִפְרָד בְּדַעְתּוֹ מִשְׁאֵר הָאֲנָשִׁים.
כֵּן בְּקֵשׁ מֹשֶׁה רַבְּנוֹ לֵהִיּוֹת מְצִיאוֹת הַקְּדוֹשׁ-בְּרוּךְ-הוּא נִפְרָדֶת בְּלִבּוֹ מִשְׁאֵר
הַנִּמְצָאִים, עַד שִׁיִּדַע אֱמֶתֶת הַמְּצֵאוֹ כְּאִשֶּׁר הִיא.
וְהִשִּׁיבוֹ, בְּרוּךְ הוּא, שְׂאִין כֹּחַ בְּדַעַת הָאָדָם הַחַי, שֶׁהוּא מַחְבֵּר מִגּוֹף וְנֶפֶשׁ,
לְהִשָּׁג אֱמֶתֶת דְּבַר זֶה עַל בְּרִיּוֹ.

וְהוֹדִיעֵנו, בְּרוּךְ הוּא, מַה שְׁלֵא יָדַע אָדָם לִפְנֵי וְלֹא יָדַע לְאַחֲרָיו,
עַד שֶׁהִשָּׁג מֵאֱמֶתֶת הַמְּצֵאוֹ דְּבַר, שֶׁנִּפְרָד הַקְּדוֹשׁ-בְּרוּךְ-הוּא בְּדַעְתּוֹ מִשְׁאֵר
הַנִּמְצָאִים, כְּמוֹ שִׁיִּפְרָד אֶחָד מִן הָאֲנָשִׁים שֶׁרָאָה אַחֲרָיו וְהִשָּׁג כָּל גּוֹפּוֹ
וְמַלְבוּשׁוֹ בְּדַעְתּוֹ מִשְׁאֵר גּוּפֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים.
וְעַל דְּבַר זֶה רָמַז הַכֹּתוּב וְאָמַר: "וְרָאִיתָ אֶת אַחֲרַי, וּפְנֵי לֹא יֵרְאוּ."

13. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra 10:1

To be sure, their intention was praiseworthy. Even after their sin God Himself refers to them as "those near to Me." *Torath Kohanim* describes their intention as follows: "But in their joy, when they beheld a new fire, they wished to add one love to another." But the fact that, at their moment of greatest delight, when God's Oneness was demonstrated to the entire nation, they could feel the urge to make a separate offering on their own shows that they were not imbued with the spirit that Judaism requires of its priests. In Judaism, the priest is completely identified with the nation. His position is in no way set apart from his nation; only within and through his nation does he have standing before God. Hence, the very fact that the two youths presumed to "come near" to make such an offering bespeaks sinful arrogance.

14. Or HaChayim Vayikra 10

Scripture tells us that they had not actually entered the innermost chamber but that they pressed forward, and died. We are thus taught

to reject the notion of a violent bid for closeness to the Divine even at life's expense. This occurs when man has set his heart and soul on the attainment of a goal even if it entails the loss of one's life. The apparently unnecessary repetition of "and they died" emphasizes that Aaron's sons perished without achieving this goal. This is a lesson to be mastered.

15. Talmud, Tractate Sotah, page 14a

R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: What means the text, *You shall walk after the Lord your God?*⁶ Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the *Shechinah*; for has it not been said, *For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire?*⁷ But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written, *And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them,*⁸ so do thou also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written, *And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre,*⁹ so do

thou also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written, *And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son,*¹ so do thou also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written, *And He buried him in the valley,*² so do thou also bury the dead.

ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא (ה) מאי דכתיב ארתי ה' אלהיכם תלכו וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה והלא כבר נאמר כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלת מה הוא מלביש ערומים דכתיב ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם אף אתה הלבש ערומים הקב"ה יביקר חלים דכתיב וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא אף אתה בקך חלים הקב"ה נותן סניאבלים דכתיב והיה ארתי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו אף אתה נותן סניאבלים הקב"ה קבר מתים דכתיב ויקבר אותו בניא אף אתה קבר מתים :--

Acharei Mot @ the DC Beit Midrash

Monday, April 14; 13 Nisan

Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. This Shabbat, we will be reading Parshat *Acharei Mot* from the book of *Vayikra* (Leviticus). Tonight, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study of this portion. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion.

Below you will find a summary of this week's *Torah* portion, along with brief biographies of the commentators cited. The presentation will be followed by *chevruta* (paired) study on a subject of your choice.

This week's parsha (Torah portion): Acharei Mot, Vayikra (Leviticus), 16:1-18:30

Parshat Acharei Mot, which means "after the death of," recalls the death of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's sons. It describes the rituals for the sin offerings that Aaron is to present in the sanctuary for himself and the people. Mention is made of Yom Kippur, of "Day of Atonement." Laws regarding forbidden sexual relations are also presented.

(Adapted from Harvey Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, p 127)

This week's sources:

Talmud Bavli, Sotah (c. 500)

The Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli) is a compilation of discussions on the *Mishna*, which had been going on some three hundred years already at the time they were written down. The Talmud's discussions are recorded in a consistent format: A law from the *Mishna* is cited, which is followed by rabbinic deliberations on its meaning (known as *Gemara*). This *masechet* (tractate) deals specifically with the trial of a woman who is accused of infidelity. However, as with all *masechets*, it covers other topics as well.

(Adapted from Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, p 150-153)

Rambam (1135-1204)

Shemonah Perakim, Mishneh Torah

If one did not know that Rambam (Maimonides) was the name of a man, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, one would assume it was the name of a university. The writings and achievements of this twelfth century Jewish sage seem to cover an impossibly large number of activities. Maimonides was the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*; he produced one of the great philosophic statements of Judaism, *The Guide to the Perplexed*; published a commentary on the entire *Mishna*; served as physician to the sultan of Egypt; wrote numerous books on medicine; and, in his spare time, served as leader of Cairo's Jewish community.

Maimonides' major contribution to Jewish life remains the *Mishneh Torah*, his code of Jewish law. His intention was to compose a book that would guide Jews on how to behave in all situations without having to expend large amounts of time. Despite sometimes-intense opposition, the *Mishneh Torah* became a standard guide to Jewish practice, later serving as a model for the *Shulchan Arukh*, the 16th century code of Jewish law that many Jews still regard as authoritative. *Shemonah Perakim* (Eight Chapters) is Maimonides' introduction to the *Pirkei Avot*. It has long been lauded as the best introduction to Maimonides' philosophy, perhaps the best introduction to medieval Jewish philosophy as a whole.

(Lawrence Kaplan's Introduction to Maimonides' "Eight Chapters," *The Edah Journal*, 2:2 and www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html)

Rabbi Chaim ben Moshe ben Atar (1696-1743)

Ohr HaChaim

Also known by the name of his most famous commentary, *Ohr HaChaim* (Light of Life), Rabbi Chaim ben Mosheh ben Atar was born in Morocco in 1696. He eventually moved to Italy and later to Jerusalem, where he opened a school. His commentary, *Ohr HaChaim* combines Talmudic and mystical interpretations.

(Adapted from Harvey J. Fields' *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, p 127, and www.kolel.org/pages/glossary/O.html)

Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888)

One of the most important nineteenth-century European Jewish leaders, Hirsch was born in Hamburg and raised in an "Enlightened" environment. He had a full secular education at a German public school, and studied Talmud at home with his grandfather. Hirsch worked for the legal emancipation of Austrian and Moravian Jewry, and in 1851 he began thirty-seven years of service as a rabbi in Frankfort. In his *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, Hirsch defends the rationality of traditional Judaism in the form of a fictional dialogue between a rabbi and a young intellectual. Though in some senses a reformer himself, Hirsch ultimately became a harsh critic of developments in the Reform Jewish community of his time. Hirsch's *Torah* commentary seeks to derive the explanation of the text from the words themselves. He emphasized the divinity of the *Torah* text, and vehemently opposed the notion that the *Torah* tradition was subject to historical development or change.

(Adapted from Harvey J. Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, p 13, and the Jewish Virtual Library: www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Hirsch.html.)

This week's teacher:

Jesse Grauman

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Jesse Grauman originally hails from the Upper West Side of Manhattan and enjoys reminiscing about the days before the neighborhood was invaded by an army of Jewish singles. After 13 years at Ramaz School in New York and one year at *Yeshivat Hakotel* in Jerusalem, Jesse attended Yale University, where he majored in Computer Science and Psychology. In order to ensure that his major had no relation whatsoever to his career path, Jesse moved to Washington to do the Capitol Hill thing. When he's not ranting about baseball or singing, Jesse spends his days impersonating (via mail) Senator Chris Dodd of Connecticut.

This week's food sponsors and shleppers:

All of you!

Wanna teach, think about teaching, or suggest a teacher? jnovey@post.harvard.edu

Wanna sponsor food? Ariellabock@hotmail.com

Questions, feedback, wanna join our email list? Anything else? Email DCBeitMidrash@hotmail.com

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