

Acharei Mot: A Modern Midrash
Sarah Pincus, Class of 2026

Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam z"l (1905-1994), known as the Sanz-Klausenberger Rebbe, lost his wife, eleven children, and most of his *chasidim* during the Holocaust. Against all odds, the Rebbe survived the war and even in the DP camps, he continued teaching his Torah. He eventually founded Kiryat Sanz in Israel, remarried, and had seven more children.

Still today, and particularly as we approach Yom Hashoah, we find ourselves amazed by peoples' abilities to rebuild their lives after the Holocaust. One of the Rebbe's *chasidim* asked him how he was able to continue on and find hope after having experienced such a tragedy. The Rebbe responded: "It is in the two words, '*b'damayich chayi*' (because of your blood you should live—Yechezkel 16:6)."¹ The Rebbe explained that the word *damayich* (your blood) also alludes to Aharon's reaction to the death of his two eldest sons Nadav and Avihu. The Torah records, "*vayidom Aharon*," Aharon became silent after the death of his sons (Vayikra 10:3). With this interpretation, connecting *dam* (blood) and *vayidom* (silence), the Rebbe understood the verse in Yechezkel as "we will survive because of our silence." The Rebbe was not justifying the deaths of those killed as the reason why he survived, but he understood that his ability to continue dedicating his life to the service of God is what allowed him to merit the life he led after the Holocaust.

What is the meaning of the Klausenberger Rebbe's message? Though at this point we read about the deaths of Nadav and Avihu many weeks ago, this week's *parsha* begins with the words "*acharei mot*—after their death" harkening back to these tragic deaths. Many commentators understand this as an indication that this section occurred immediately following the deaths. In *Acharei Mot*, God details the *avodah* (service) in the *Kodesh Kodashim* (Holy of Holies), which we will come to know as the *Avodat Yom Hakippurim* (the Yom Kippur Service).

Even without the explicit connection, the service of Yom Kippur is eerily similar to the *korbanot* that were brought on *Yom HaShemini*,² the day of the inauguration of the *mishkan*, the day that Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu tragically died. In some sense, God is commanding Aharon to relive the series of events preceding the recent death of his sons. That must have been impossibly hard for Aharon.

¹ <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/876900>.

² I first noticed the similarities while reading a dvar torah by Rav Yoel ben Nun on Parashat Shemini.

Below is the conversation that I imagine might have taken place between God and Aharon, bridging the tragic divide between the death of Aharon's sons and the Temple service going forward:

“Aharon, you alone will enter the *mishkan* to do this *avodah*,” says God.

“But Hashem, it’s so soon. My sons just died. Please give me time to grieve.”

“I know you are mourning, and you deserve the time to grieve the loss of your precious sons. If you were anyone else, you would be required to observe all the laws of *aveilut*. But Aharon, you are the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest), and there is no one else who can fill this role.”³

“You’re right. I must be silent and accept what has befallen me.”

“Now, where were we?” Overwhelmed by sorrow God was causing Aharon, for a moment, God loses track of the instructions.

“Oh yes. I recall. Last time you brought an *egel* (a one year old calf). Today you will perform the same process but on a *par ben bakar* (bull son of cattle), a young calf, only three years old.”

“Hashem, You took Nadav ben Aharon Hakohen and Avihu ben Aharon Hakohen from me, and I am left without any words to even express my sadness. How could I do that to a Mama or a Papa *bakar*?”

“I know you don’t understand, and if I’m being completely honest, I don’t totally understand. But if you stay close to me and listen to what I am instructing, you will be holy and maybe, just maybe, your sadness will subside.”⁴

“Okay, Hashem, if you say so...I remember there was more that I did last time. Is there more today, as well?”

“Yes, Aharon, good remembering. Last time you brought a calf and sheep as *olot* (offerings). This time you will bring an *ayil* (ram) instead” (9:2, 16:3).

“I see” Aharon replies, hoping that was the last of God’s instructions.

“That’s not all though. Even though today you might feel small and unable to fully express yourself, Aharon, you are a leader and you must bring *korbanot* on behalf of the people. For them, you will bring two *se’irim* (goats) as a *chatat* (sin offering). One of the goats will be designated as a *korban*, and the other will be marked as an *Azazel* and will be sent out into the wilderness as an additional means of atonement for the nation.”

So Aaron brings the *par* as a *chatat* to “atone for himself and his household” (16:11). Last time, he brought *chatat* to atone for his sins alone (“*asher lo*,” 9:8).

³ Typically when a person is mourning, the individual is forbidden to study Torah. The Shulkhan Arukh seems to understand this to mean that a person is not permitted to lead davening. However, the Shulkhan Arukh makes an exception when the mourner is the only person who is capable of leading in the community, and as a result, helping others fulfill their obligation (SA YD 384:3). I extend this to imply that even though Aharon is correct in thinking he is meant to observe mourning practices, because he is the Kohen Gadol and the only person who is able to perform this service, he is required to do so.

⁴ Based on the wording in Vayikra 10:3 “*bekirbi akadesh*- through those near to Me, I show Myself holy.”

“Hashem, why ask me to do this now? They have already died. It’s too late to atone for their sins. Why didn’t you give me the opportunity to do so before, when it wasn’t too late?”

“My dear Aharon, I don’t have all the answers. What I can say for now is ‘*b’damayich chayi*.’ Now, you will do something new. You will take a pan of glowing coals and bring them on the *mizbeach* (altar), and fill both of your hands,⁵ one hand for Nadav and one for Avihu, with *ketoret* (incense) and bring them behind the curtain (16:12). Then you will put the *ketoret* on the fire before Me, so that the incense screens the cover of the *Aron Ha’edut*. Doing this will protect you from dying.⁶ This haze will give you some privacy to weep, for you will likely remember that bringing a *ketoret* is the last thing that your sons did (10:1). They brought a *ketoret*, but something about it wasn’t quite right, and they died. I know it must feel so scary for you Aharon, but please don’t forget ‘*b’damayich chayi*.’”

As tears well up in his eyes, Aharon says, “Hashem, just as smelling the *b’samim* (spices) brings me comfort at the conclusion of Shabbat when my *neshama yetera*⁷ (extra soul) departs, I pray that this sweet smell of the *ketoret* will bring me some comfort as I mourn the ultimate departure of the *neshamot* of my dear, dear sons.”

“Aharon, you will now gently dip your finger into the blood of the *par*, and place some blood on the east side. In front of the cover, you will sprinkle the blood seven times. It’s a little different this time. Last time, your sons brought you the blood. This time, you must get it for yourself. Their absence must be jarring. And this time you are instructed to sprinkle more blood. A lot more blood.”

Aharon repeats to himself over and over in his head, “*b’damiach chayi, b’damiach chayi*. Because of their blood I will live. Because of my silence, I will survive.”

“You are doing great, my dear Aharon, but the work is not yet done. You will bring the people’s *se’ir* as a *chatat*, bring its blood behind the curtain, and repeat the same process as you did with the blood of the *par*. This process will atone for the sins of the Israelites. You may notice that something is different. Now you are doing the process of sprinkling for the *korban* you are bringing on behalf of the people, a step you didn’t do last time. But Aharon, don’t you know that a sacrifice brought without the blood isn’t *mechaper*⁸ (effective)? Did you forget “*b’damyach chayi*”? What were you thinking? Did I mislead you?”

“Aharon, when you bring the *chatat* to atone for your sins and those of your household, and the *chatat* for the Israelites, you will be alone. It will be silent. Then you will go out to the golden *mizbeach* and combine the blood of the *par* and the *se’ir*⁹ and apply it to the corners of the

⁵ Ibn Ezra on Vayikra 16:12

⁶ Allusion to Rashi 16:1.

⁷ Beitza 16a, Arukh Halshulkhan OC 297:1.

⁸ Sanhedrin 4a.

⁹ Rashi on Vayikra 16:18

altar. With the remaining, combined blood, you will repeat the process you already did with the blood of the bull and the blood of the goat.”

“When I brought the *egel*¹⁰ on *Yom Hashemini*, I was so focused on atoning for my sins in the *egel hazahav* (the golden calf). I led my people astray and I thought that I alone had to atone. I took all the responsibility for the mistake. It didn’t even occur to me to grant Bnei Yisrael the full opportunity to atone.”

“Aharon, just as you are their leader, they are your followers. You would be nothing without them, and they would be nothing without you. ”

“Is that why you wanted me to combine the blood of the *par* and *se’ir*? To remind me that even though different *korbanot* are brought to atone for different groups, we are all interconnected. Even though the animals brought are different, the blood is the same?”

“Yes, my dear Aharon. That’s exactly correct. Now, you will take your two hands, but instead of putting your hands on the heads of Nadav and Avihu on Friday night before *kiddush*, you will lean on the *Azazel*, and confess all the sins of the people on its head. And then you will send it away to the desert. You will wash up and change your clothes, and all the remains of the *korbanot* will be brought outside of the camp and will be consumed in fire. There are no *mincha* or *shelamim* today, no *korbanot* for you to enjoy eating today. Please know, my dear Aharon, that I did not wish for your sons to be consumed by a fire. It brought me no joy, but I will enjoy the sustenance of these *korbanot* for I will know that you brought these because you wanted to remain close to Me.

Unlike *Yom Hashemini*, today’s service isn’t a one time thing. For eternity, this process will be repeated on the 10th day of the seventh month. It will be a day of rest for all in your community. It will be a day when all will be forgiven. Through the *dam* (blood) of the *chatat*, and the *demama* (silence) as you find yourself alone in the *Kodesh Kodashim*, life will be granted. *B’damayich chayi.*”

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¹⁰ Rav Yoel ben Nun points out that this is the only time in the Torah that the term “*egel*” is used for a specific sacrifice, hinting at its role in atoning for the sin of the golden calf.