

Shimon Maged

Nadab, Abihu, and the Second Passover

Among the best-known biblical holidays is Passover: the seven-day festival marking the Israelites' escape from Egyptian bondage. Among the least-known biblical holidays, meanwhile, is the substitute-festival celebrated exactly one month later: the so-called "Second Passover." Yet while the details of this latter holiday fill no more than a single paragraph in the corpus of biblical literature, beneath those details may lie one of the most poignant religious developments in the history of ancient Israel.

To trace this development, we need to piece together a series of subtle literary clues. Those clues will point us towards a conclusion formed long ago by the great Talmudic sage, R. Akiva: namely, that the anonymous men who petitioned Moses for a Second Passover may have been Mishael and Elzaphan, cousins of Nadab and Abihu. As we shall see, this possibility would render the backstory to our obscure biblical festival far more significant than we typically appreciate. In fact, when we unpack the full implications of this theory, the story of the Second Passover that emerges is one especially pertinent to our period—a period marked, as that one may have been, by home lockdowns, sanctuary shutdowns, postponed festivities, and even "social distancing" of a sort.¹

The Origins of the Second Passover

Exactly one month following the biblical holiday of Passover, some of the Israelites were invited to participate in a postponed-Passover of sorts—the "Second Passover." The origins of this substitute festival are first recorded in the book of Numbers:

The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: Let the Israelites keep the Passover at its appointed time. On the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, you shall keep it at its appointed time; according to all

1 The ideas presented in this paper were originally developed in 2017 as part of a lecture series delivered at Congregation Ahavas Achim in Highland Park, New Jersey, and were further developed for a lecture delivered remotely to the Young Israel of Brookline at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

its statutes and all its regulations you shall keep it. So Moses told the Israelites that they should keep the Passover. ... Now there were certain men who were unclean through a corpse, so that they could not keep the Passover on that day. They came before Moses and Aaron on that day, and said to him, “Although we are unclean through a corpse, why must we be kept from presenting the Lord’s offering at its appointed time among the Israelites?” Moses spoke to them, “Wait, so that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you.”

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites, saying: Anyone of you or your descendants who is unclean through touching a corpse, or is away on a journey, shall still keep the Passover to the Lord. In the second month on the fourteenth day, at twilight, they shall keep it; they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break a bone of it; according to all the statute for the Passover they shall keep it...²

This passage transpires in the second year following the Exodus from Egypt. As it recounts, certain men could not participate in the Paschal offering at its regularly scheduled time because they had come in contact with the dead. Per biblical law, such individuals remain impure for seven days, and are quarantined from the camp in the interim.³ Thus, the people in our passage would have been unable to participate in the Paschal offering on the fourteenth of the first month. They therefore turned to Moses, who presented their quandary before God, and who ultimately ruled that they could bring the offering one month later, on the newly instituted “Second Passover.”

The Identity of the Anonymous Men

The terse narrative of the Second Passover leaves readers with many unresolved questions. Perhaps no set of issues is more clamant than that involving the identity of the anonymous “impure men.” Who exactly were these men? How, exactly, did they contract corpse impurity? When, indeed, would *anybody* in the wilderness have come in contact with the dead, at this early point in the Exodus? The text does not explicitly address any of these questions.⁴

2 Num. 9:1-14.

3 See Num. 19:1-22.

4 Nor has contemporary literary scholarship on the Second Passover focused on the identity of its protagonists. Instead, most studies focus on connections between this narrative and later biblical narratives. See, e.g., Simeon Chavel, *Oracular Law and Priestly Historiography in the Torah*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014; Gad Eldad, “‘Why Should We Be Kept Back?’ Between the Second Passover and the Daughters of Zelophehad” (Hebrew), *Megadim* 54, 75-83, 5773; Gilad J. Gevrayhu, “The Root

Yet the narrative of the Second Passover does provide us with chronological coordinates that may enable us to solve this mystery ourselves. After all, the story opens “in the first month of the second year after the [Israelites] had come out of the land of Egypt.”⁵ Then, upon its conclusion, the Torah proceeds immediately to recount the events that took place upon the erection of the tabernacle: “On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant; and from evening until morning it was over the tabernacle, having the appearance of fire ...”⁶ This juxtaposition appears to suggest that the anonymous men of the Second Passover law contracted their “corpse impurity” around the time that the Israelites erected the tabernacle in the wilderness.

In fact, this theory works well for several reasons.

First, God explicitly commands Moses to erect the tabernacle “on the first day of the first month” of Israel’s second year in the wilderness⁷—the very same date on which Moses is commanded to review the Paschal laws, in the story of the Second Passover.⁸

Second, it so happens that the erection of the tabernacle was eclipsed by two of the most tragic deaths in the entire Torah. These were the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, sons of the High Priest, Aaron, who died while offering a “strange fire” at the climax of the inaugural festivities.⁹ Theirs are two of only three individual deaths recorded between Israel’s exodus, in Exodus 14, and the law of the Second Passover, in Numbers 9,¹⁰ and they are the only ones which the Torah explicitly dates within that timeframe.

G-R-A in the Bible: The Case of the Daughters of Zelophehad and Beyond,” *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41:2, 107-112, April 2013; Simeon Chavel, “The Second Passover, Pilgrimage, and the Centralized Cult,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102:1, 1-24, 2009. Some scholars do cite the Talmudic debate about the identity of the impure men in the Second Passover story. However, these scholars focus on other issues, such as the theological meaning of the Second Passover holiday, or the methods of midrash. They do not comment on the question of identity, nor do they explore biblical underpinnings for the positions presented in the Talmud. See Emanuel Feldman, “The Second Pesah: Mitzvah as Paradigm,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, 24:2, 38-43, Winter 1989; Ronald Goetschel, “The Midrash of the Second Passover” (French), *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 47, 2-4.

5 Num. 9:1.

6 Num. 9:15.

7 Exod. 40:2.

8 Num. 9:1.

9 See Lev. 10.

10 The only other individual is the son of Shelomit the Danite in Lev. 24. There were also many casualties in the war that followed the Golden Calf, but there are several reasons that the story of the Second Passover could not plausibly originate in this event. First, corpse impurity lasts only

Third, the Torah expressly identifies two men who were tasked with transporting the corpses of Aaron's deceased sons. These men are named as Mishael and Elzaphan, the first cousins of Nadab and Abihu.¹¹ From the Exodus onwards, they are the only individuals in the Torah, aside from Moses,¹² who are explicitly recorded as having transported dead bodies.

Fourth, the date on which the deaths of Nadab and Abihu reportedly took place—on the “eighth day,”¹³ apparently meaning the eighth day from the erection of the tabernacle, on the first day of the first month¹⁴—falls one week before the Passover offering, which occurs on the fourteenth of that month.¹⁵ As mentioned, biblical law assigns “seven days” of impurity to “anyone touching the corpse of a human soul,”¹⁶ and precludes such individuals from participating in the tabernacle rites during that

seven days. See, e.g., Num. 19:11. Yet the Golden Calf took place many months before Passover of the second year. See, e.g., Rashi, Exod. 33:11 (dating the Golden Calf to the fourth month of the first year); Ramban, Exod. 33:7 (same); R. Bachya, Exod. 32:1 (same); Bechor Shor, Deut. 10:10 (same); Samson Raphael Hirsch, Exod. 33:9 (same). Cf. b. Taanit 4:6 (dating the breaking of the tablets, which followed the Golden Calf, to the fourth month of the first year). Second, the narrative of the Second Passover describes “men”/ “the men” who were impure, a term which appears to imply that the group of petitioners was relatively small. See Num. 9:6-7. The description of these men “approaching” Moses and Aaron personally, and “standing by” while they awaited a ruling, likewise suggests a small, private audience. See Num. 9:7-8. Yet the casualties following the Golden Calf numbered 3,000 (Exod. 32:28). If these casualties occasioned the Second Passover petition, the group of petitioners would presumably have been quite large.

11 Lev. 10:4.

12 See Exod. 13:19.

13 Lev. 9:1.

14 See, e.g., Exod. 40:2, describing that the Tabernacle is to be erected on the first of the first month; Lev. 8:10, describing Moses inaugurating the already-erect Tabernacle with anointing oil; and Lev. 9:1 et. seq., describing the inauguration ceremony on the “eighth day,” which includes, in Lev. 10:1, the deaths of Nadab and Abihu on that same day. Among biblical commentators, Ibn Ezra is most frequently cited for the view that the “eighth day,” on which Nadab and Abihu died, was the eighth of the first month. See Ibn Ezra, Lev. 9:1. Before Ibn Ezra, Mizrachi defended this interpretation, and even cited in its support a non-extant edition of the Midrash Sifre attributing that interpretation to R. Akiva. See Mizrachi, Lev. 8:2. Following Ibn Ezra, others who defended this view include Shadal and Malbim. See Shadal and Malbim to Lev. 9:1. Note, however, that the majority of biblical commentators interpret the “eighth day” as occurring on the *first* of the first month—i.e., coincidental with the inauguration of the Tabernacle. This dating would undermine R. Akiva's position, as well as our analysis which builds upon that position.

15 See, e.g., Num. 9:3.

16 Num. 19:11.

time.¹⁷ Thus, those who handled the corpses of Nadab and Abihu, on the eighth of the first month, would have faced precisely the predicament attributed to the anonymous men from the story of the Second Passover: they would have been ineligible to bring the Passover offering on the fourteenth of that month.

Fifth, it hardly seems coincidental that the Torah's laws of corpse impurity are addressed particularly to Aaron and to his surviving sons—Elazar in particular.¹⁸ Nor would it appear accidental that the paradigm case used to illustrate the laws of corpse impurity involve, most specifically, “a man who shall die in a tent.”¹⁹ There is only one narrative in the Torah wherein “men” die in a “tent,” and must be ritually removed from the camp by the family of Aaron. This, of course, is the story of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's oldest sons, who die in the tabernacle—otherwise known as the “Tent of Meeting”²⁰—and who are transported out by their surviving relatives as a result.²¹

17 Num. 9:13.

18 See Num. 19:3-4. Remarkably, in this regard, one Talmudic sage appears to suggest on *Gittin* 60a-b that the law of corpse impurity was taught on the same day that Nadab and Abihu died. See, however, Yehudah Shaviv, “On the Place of the Red Heifer Passage” (Hebrew), *Megadim* 12, 31-39, 5751, where the author reviews and proposes various alternative explanations for the literary context of this law. Proposed triggers include the deaths of Korah and his faction (see Num. 16-7), or of Miriam and Aaron (see Num. 20), but not of Nadab and Abihu. Interestingly, if Korah's rebellion occurred in the second year of Israel's wilderness travels, and the deaths of Miriam and Aaron occurred in the fortieth, then the only text corresponding to the thirty-eight years in the interim is the law of corpse impurity—as if to suggest that those years were defined by the experience of death. In some sense, they were, for per divine decree, all members of that generation were to die in the desert following the sin of the spies. This may offer yet another approach to the literary context of the red heifer ritual. See Shimon Maged, “Interrupting Cow (Chukkat),” *What's Pshat?*, June 18, 2018, <https://whatspshat.org/2018/06/18/and-now-cows-chukkat/>.

19 Num. 19:14.

20 See, e.g., Lev. 9:5, 23; 10:7-9.

21 Remarkably, Jewish law calls for reciting the passage related to corpse impurity each year prior to Passover. The timing of this practice could hardly prove more apropos: per our analysis, it was an incident of corpse impurity occurring prior to Passover which provided the original catalyst for teaching these laws. See also Mishnah Berurah 685:1 (explaining that the passage is recited prior to Passover because the ritual for removing corpse impurity was required “in the desert, close to Nissan [=the first month]... immediately after erection of the Tabernacle, so that they could be pure and could make the Passover sacrifice at its designated time”).

Taken together, then, the evidence adduced here all seems to point towards the same conclusion. In fact, it is a conclusion reached long ago by the great Talmudic sage, R. Akiva:

“There were certain men who were impure by the corpse of a person” (Num. 9:6) ... R. Akiva says: They were Mishael and Elzaphan, who had handled Nadab and Abihu.²²

R. Akiva states explicitly what our analysis appears to suggest—namely, that the impure men ineligible to bring the Passover offering in Numbers 9 are not anonymous after all. Rather, they may have been none other than Mishael and Elzaphan, the cousins of Nadab and Abihu, who perished on what ought to have been one of the most joyous dates in Israel’s early history. That date was the final day of festivities celebrating the inauguration of the tabernacle: very possibly, the eighth day of the first month, in the second year following the Exodus from Egypt.

Although R. Akiva does not explain his position in the Talmud, the series of textual considerations we have catalogued here may offer us a window into his thinking. As we shall see, in fact, R. Akiva’s theory offers us much more to think about than he himself articulated.

The Inauguration of the Tabernacle and the Inaugural Passover

According to the literary evidence that we have pieced together until this point, the dedication of the tabernacle—and the concomitant deaths of Nadab and Abihu—may well have occurred in the same week that the Israelites began preparing for the Passover offering, in the second year following their exodus. That, in fewer words, is the conclusion urged by R. Akiva, generations ago. The immediate benefit we derive from this analysis is that we can now possibly identify the otherwise anonymous men who clamor for the right to celebrate the Passover ritual in Numbers 9. Of course, by situating the deaths of Aaron’s sons as the backdrop of the Second Passover law, our analysis also exposes a tragic drama motivating that law—one which might otherwise elude us entirely.

22 b. Sukkah 25a-b. R. Yosei the Galilean disagrees, contending that the impure men were the bearers of Joseph’s coffin. R. Yitzchak challenges both views based on chronology, but later commentators defend R. Akiva. See, for example, *Hiddushei ha-Tzlah*, Sukkah 25a. See also Mizrachi, Lev. 8:2, where the author cites a defense of R. Akiva’s position provided by a non-extant text of the Midrash Sifre. For a summary of relevant sources, cf. supra n. 16.

Yet having come this far, we would be remiss to conclude our analysis here. For if indeed the dedication of the tabernacle was scheduled in the same week as the second Passover offering, then we must naturally wonder why the Torah chose to conflate these two events, in the first place. That is: Why did God command Moses to complete the inauguration of the tabernacle “on the first day of the first month”—the very date on which, a year earlier, God had commanded Moses to first teach the laws of Passover to the Israelites?²³ Such calendrical coordination should hardly strike us as the product of mere happenstance.²⁴

In fact, carefully comparing the original Passover offering in Egypt with the ceremony of the tabernacle’s inauguration celebrated a year later appears to suggest precisely the opposite—namely, that in all of its salient details, the latter ceremony is deliberately patterned upon the former. After all, both the inauguration of the tabernacle in the wilderness, and the command to bring the Passover offering in Egypt, occur on the first day of the first month.²⁵ In both cases, participants are required to bring offerings²⁶ that are accompanied by unleavened bread²⁷ and that are eaten while “girded.”²⁸ These participants are to sprinkle blood around their dwelling—their homes, or the Tabernacle—for atonement or protection.²⁹ They are prohibited from “exiting the entrance” of that dwelling.³⁰ They receive specific assurances against death,³¹ and their ritual is described as a “safeguard.”³² Upon completing this ritual, they are to “burn” any “leftovers.”³³ Finally, at the conclusion of each ceremony, the participants are to celebrate a seven-day festival³⁴—a festival which, in both cases, climaxes at its culmination in national song.³⁵

23 See Exod. 12:2-3.

24 On the literary chronology of the Tabernacle’s inauguration more generally, see Yoninah Dison, “The Erection of Moses’ Tabernacle Until ‘The Day of its Completion’” (Hebrew), *Megadim* 43, 39-71, 5765.

25 Exod. 40:2; Exod. 12:2.

26 See, e.g., Lev. 8:15; Exod. 12:6.

27 Lev. 8:2; Exod. 12:8

28 Lev. 8:7, 13; Exod. 12:11. In addition, Ezra Sivan noted in personal correspondence that on both occasions, the participants receive new clothing. See, e.g., Lev. 8:7-13; Exod. 12:35-36.

29 See, e.g., Lev. 8:15; Exod. 12:13. Compare also Lev. 8:10 with Exod. 12:7.

30 Lev. 8:33; Exod. 12:22.

31 Lev. 8:35; Exod. 12:23.

32 Lev. 8:35; Exod. 12:6.

33 Lev. 8:32; Exod. 12:10.

34 See, e.g., Lev. 8:33; Exod. 12:15.

35 Lev. 9:24; Exod. 14:31-15:1.

Taken together, these connections suggest strongly that the ceremony of the tabernacle's inauguration was purposely intended to evoke the inaugural Passover offering in Egypt. This dedication ceremony, which immediately presaged the one-year anniversary of the original Passover offering, involved only the second instance of commanded collective sacrifice in Israel's history,³⁶ and mirrored the experience of that original offering in most of its myriad legal details. Surely the Israelites participating in the tabernacle's inauguration, or witnessing it from the sidelines, could not have missed such a blatant connection.

But what larger meaning were they supposed to draw from this connection?

The Evolution of God-As-Sustainer³⁷

Upon close reflection, it appears that the two ceremonies of the "first month"—the Passover offering, in the first year, and the tabernacle's inauguration, in the second—bookend a gradual evolution in Israel's conception of its God. For while the night of the original Passover offering is widely regarded as one of the high points in Israel's relationship with God, the text makes clear that, from the perspective of the people,

36 Although there were other offerings presented between the Passover offering and the tabernacle's inauguration offerings (e.g., Exod. 18:12, 24:5, 32:6), those offerings were not formally commanded by God.

37 I have borrowed the helpful terminological distinction between "God-as-Destroyer" and "God-as-Sustainer" from Ezra Sivan, "Why Do We Deserve God's Favor?" *The Lehrhaus*, November 12, 2019, <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/why-do-we-deserve-gods-favor>. Sivan notes that Israel would have experienced God on the night of the Exodus primarily as a "destroyer," and he identifies God's provision of the manna as the critical moment when Israel began relating to God primarily as a "sustainer." See also Shimon Maged, "Manna as Mnemonic (Beshalach)," *What's Pshat?*, February 6, 2017, <https://whatspshat.org/2017/02/06/remember-the-manna-beshalach/>, arguing that the manna may have served as a substitute for the Passover offering during Israel's wanderings in the desert. This theory helps explain the pervasive similarities between the laws regulating these two edibles. It also lends additional meaning to: the date of the Second Passover, which coincides with the one-year anniversary of manna's first falling; the people's complaints against the manna, which surface shortly after the Passover offering is re-introduced, in the second year; and the cessation of the manna, in the days of Joshua, on the very same day that the Passover offering is brought again following a long hiatus during the remaining wilderness years. See also R. Yonatan Grossman, "The Manna and the Paschal Sacrifice," *The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash*, July 5, 2017, <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-beshalach/beshalach-manna-and-paschal-sacrifice>, where R. Grossman similarly notes parallels between the manna and the Passover offering to help explain the multiplicity of miracles God performs in response to the people's complaints about lacking food.

what God represented more than anything on that night was, in fact, destruction.³⁸ To these Israelites, the God of the Exodus was most recognizable as a retributive force, which they actively sought, through the ritual of the Passover offering, to keep *outside* of their homes. In other words, the God of the Exodus is conceived above all else of as a source of danger, which His adherents attempt to *avoid*. Surely this is not the most sublime way to conceive of one's creator!

In fact, it is in this context, it would seem, that we can best understand the meaning of the tabernacle's inauguration. One year earlier, on the first of the first month, the Israelites were warned to keep God *out* of their homes, as it were. One year later, on that very date, they moved their relationship onto a higher plane, by inviting God *into* the home they had built for Him. After spending a year travelling through the wilderness at God's guidance—a year in which God fed them, clothed them, and sheltered them—the people no longer related to God as a source of danger or destruction. Now, for the first time, they could recognize God as a source of love, support and sustenance, and could feel comfortable dwelling with Him side by side.³⁹ Thus, the dedication of the tabernacle parallels the original Passover offering—and immediately precedes the second Passover offering—in order to mark this transition: the transition towards an elevated relationship with God, in which the goal is no longer to keep God at a safe distance, but rather, to draw close to Him.

Indeed, God appears to allude to this connection early on. After all, God's very first instructions concerning the tabernacle—instructions related to the collection of building funds—open with an apparently odd promise that “no plague [גגג]” will come upon those who partake in the census that is associated with contributions to the tabernacle.⁴⁰ Taken in isolation, God's assurance that those who contribute to the building of the tabernacle will be spared from an unspecified “plague” seems out of place. It is by no means clear, in abstraction, what collective fear this promise may be responding to.

In light of our analysis, however, the need for such guarantees is readily apparent. After all, “plagues,” in the Torah, first appear in the context of the “ten plagues.” In fact, the most recent mention of a “plague,” in the Torah, had occurred on the night of the Passover offering, during the “plague” of the firstborns.⁴¹ Only twelve months prior,

38 Cf. Exod. 12:23.

39 Cf. Exod. 25:8 (“They shall make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them”).

40 Exod. 30:12.

41 Exod. 12:13. Note, however, that the root ג.ג.ג, meaning “to strike,” appears in several interim contexts to describe various tort cases (Exod. 21:22, 35). The root also appears as a verb after the sin of the

the Israelites were cautioned to keep distant from God, in order to escape the “plague” that befell their slave masters. They were even commanded to mark a yearly festival in “remembrance” of that plague. Therefore, as God invites them, one year later, to dwell alongside Him, He evokes the memory of that plague once again, and pledges that those who now seek closeness with Him will be “remembered” for life. Put otherwise, God’s opening commitment, as He initiates the construction of the tabernacle, is that those who participate in its rites will *not* meet the fate of those who fell in the firstborn plague.

Tragically, however, the commitment appears to unravel almost immediately.

The Deaths of Nadab and Abihu and the Firstborn Plague

By all accounts, the deaths of Nadab and Abihu constituted a national calamity. Yet in light of our analysis, the impact of this calamity would have been even more jarring than we traditionally appreciate. Here, after all, stood a nation whose members, on our reading, were celebrating how comfortable they now felt in God’s presence, relative to a year ago. And yet, at the apex of this festivity, two priests, stirred by the spirit of their newfound closeness to their God, reached out to that God of their own initiative—and fell dead as a result.⁴² Suddenly, and against all their recent expectations, God revealed Himself to the Israelites not as a sustainer, but once again as a force of destruction. For the stunned onlookers, the fears of the original Passover night were materializing all over again.

In fact, the pain of these latest deaths likely stung even deeper than the trauma sustained one year earlier. For whereas the plague of Passover struck the firstborns of their slave masters, the fire God dispatched at the inauguration of the tabernacle claimed the sons of Israel’s own priestly family. Nor were these just any sons of Aaron. They were, more specifically, Aaron’s *eldest* sons—his *firstborns*, as the Torah later emphasizes⁴³—and, as Levites, they hailed from the tribe which God had chosen to

Golden Calf (Exod. 32:35), which follows our verse, but which precedes the account of Nadab and Abihu’s deaths.

42 Many suggestions have been raised to explain why Nadab and Abihu died, but that question falls outside the scope of this article. The text merely states that they “took each his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered strange fire before God, which He had not commanded them” (Lev. 10:1). For a concise overview and analysis of the major exegetical approaches to this issue, see Neima Novetsky, “Why Were Nadav and Avihu Killed?”, *Al HaTorah*, https://alhatarah.org/Why_Were_Nadav_and_Avihu_Killed/1/en.

43 Num. 3:2. The reference is specifically to Nadab, but the verse groups Nadab and Abihu together through selective use of the term “and.” “These are the names of Aaron’s sons: the firstborn Nadab,

replace the firstborns as His ministers in the year following the Exodus.⁴⁴ In a sense, then, Nadab and Abihu were no less than the firstborn sons of Israel's "firstborn" tribe. On the date of their deaths, they served as the literal stand-ins for the firstborns of the previous year.

But whereas those firstborns were narrowly spared, these firstborns were inexplicably stricken.

The Request of Mishael and Elzaphan, Revisited

With this background in mind, the narrative of the Second Passover told in Numbers 9 suddenly assumes far profounder significance. At first glance, this text tells a story about a few anonymous men, who contracted some mysterious form of "corpse impurity," and who simply wanted the chance to participate in the holiday festivities like everybody else. Their request, on this reading, is not all that remarkable.

Yet when we dig deeper, we discover that these probably were not just any men. They were—per R. Akiva, and the literary evidence we adduced in his footsteps—very likely Mishael and Elzaphan, nephews of Aaron, the High Priest. Nor did these men merely happen to stumble across some anonymous corpse. It was, in fact, their own first cousins whose deaths they had likely been exposed to. Nor did this exposure occur at some unidentified point in the past. It was, very possibly, on that very day—the same day they had retrieved their deceased cousins from the tabernacle—that they petitioned Moses for permission to participate in the upcoming Passover offering. Nor did the date of this Passover offering merely happen to fall out in the near future as a matter of calendrical coincidence. On the contrary: The inauguration of the tabernacle—during which Mishael and Elzaphan lost their firstborn cousins—had, it seems, been deliberately scheduled to precede the Passover offering, precisely because the ceremony was intended to assure the nation that the divine danger which their

and Abihu; Elazar, and Ithamar." More fundamentally, reference to Nadab as the "firstborn" is extraneous in context. Cf. also Lev. 10:16, wherein Elazar and Ithamar are described as Aaron's "leftover" or "remaining" sons. For the interesting suggestion that Nadab and Abihu were twins, see Yonah Bar-Moaz, "Were Nadab and Avihu Twins?" *Bar Ilan University*, April 2, 2005, <https://www2.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/shmini/bar1.html>. To be sure, under the plain sense of Num. 3:2, only Nadab was a firstborn. Moreover, the cantillation notes traditionally ascribed to Num. 3:2 divide between "the firstborn, Nadab," and Aaron's three other sons.

44 See Num. 3:10-13. Remarkably, in this regard, m. Zevahim 14:4 teaches that the day of the tabernacle's inauguration was the day that the priests formally assumed the functions previously reserved for the nation's firstborns.

firstborns barely evaded a year prior would not materialize now, as they took steps to draw God closer into their community.

Under the weight of such loss, the survivors of Nadab and Abihu might rightly have been excused had they sought to withdraw from their priestly functions. Indeed, that is exactly the impulse exercised by the boys' father, Aaron, and their brothers, Elazar and Ithamar, in the immediate aftermath of their deaths:

Moses spoke to Aaron and to his remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar: Take the grain offering that is left from the Lord's offerings by fire, and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy... Then Moses made inquiry about the goat of the sin offering, and—it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and said, "Why did you not eat the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and God has given it to you that you may remove the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement on their behalf before the Lord. Its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary. You should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded." And Aaron spoke to Moses, "See, today they offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord; and yet such things as these have befallen me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would it have been agreeable to the Lord?" And when Moses heard that, he agreed.⁴⁵

Aaron and his sons react to the deaths of Nadab and Abihu by stepping back from the ritual service. When reprimanded by Moses for their failure to partake in the ritual offering, Aaron responds, quite justifiably, that he cannot possibly continue to lead God's worship on the very day that his sons were taken from him. This is the natural response that we might expect from anybody in Aaron's position. It proves agreeable to Moses presumably for that reason—and that, we typically assume, is how the story ends.⁴⁶

45 Lev. 10:12-20.

46 Since antiquity, biblical scholars have been fascinated by the biblical stories in which Moses is presented with a legal question or challenge for which he does not know the correct ruling. Traditionally, this list includes the account of the blasphemer, in Lev. 24; the Second Passover, in Num. 9; the man who collected wood on Shabbat, in Num. 15; and the petition by Zelophehad's daughters to inherit land, in Num. 27. See, e.g., Targum Yonatan, Lev. 24:12; Philo. "On the Life of Moses." *On Abraham. On Joseph. On Moses*. Translated by F. H. Colson. Harvard University Press, 1929; Simeon Chavel. *Oracular Law and Priestly Historiography in the Torah*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014. Yet the first instance wherein Moses apparently misinterprets the applicable law—at least initially—occurs immediately following the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. See Lev. 10:16-20. Of course, according to our analysis, this story is directly connected to the story of the Second Passover.

Except, of course, that the story does not end in Leviticus 10. It ends, our analysis suggests, in Numbers 9. For aside from Aaron, Elazar, and Ithamar, there are two other Levites who appear to respond to the tragedy of the tabernacle's inauguration. Those relatives are Mishael and Elzaphan. They, too, confront Moses in the aftermath of this tragedy, it seems. They, too, allude to the recent deaths of their kinsmen. They, too, insist that the ritual order cannot proceed as usual. They, too, propose religious innovations as a result. Yet unlike those who precede them, Mishael and Elzaphan do not seek permission to *abstain* from God's worship. In fact, they demand just the opposite: permission to *participate*.

The Enduring Meaning of the Second Passover

In the end, then, the story of the "second Passover"—or rather, its untold backstory, as pieced together in the wake of R. Akiva—offers one of the Torah's most profound models for responding to tragedy from a religious perspective.

For the night of Passover in Egypt constituted perhaps the most explicit example of overt providence in Israel's history. It was to be memorialized, for generations, as the "night of safeguarding"⁴⁷—the night on which God miraculously rescued Israel from slavery.

Yet celebrating this night for posterity is sometimes easier said than done. It is not on every night, after all, that divine deliverance is so easily discernable. It is not on every night that God so clearly spares us from the dangers threatening to do us harm. Sometimes, in fact, God seems to let us down—to turn against us even—*even* as we are engaged in efforts to draw closer to Him.

Such was the tragedy of Nadab and Abihu. It was a tragedy which caused the entire nation to reconsider how, under such circumstances, its collective relationship with God could continue. How, indeed, does a people celebrate God's sparing of their firstborns, right after He has claimed the lives of the most prominent of those firstborns?

Here, on R. Akiva's reading, Mishael and Elzaphan may offer us an enduring model. Perhaps we cannot, under conditions like theirs, worship in the ordinary fashion. With the pain of loss so fresh, with the impurity of death so raw, we may simply be unable to relate to God as a source of strength and comfort in the way we would ideally hope to. Yet the pain of present suffering does not preclude the possibility of future redemption. Mishael and Elzaphan understood this. They recognized that while they

47 Exod. 12:42.

were in no state to serve God on that particular Passover, this did not mean that they would never be able to do so again at some future point; that, in a month hence, they would not be ready to relate to God once again as the source of hope and salvation.

Hence, God offered them another chance: He offered them the Second Passover. And they, as it were, offered another chance to Him. By petitioning for this Second Passover, Mishael and Elzaphan taught their nation that even though God may not rescue them from every difficulty or danger in a manner as direct, manifest, or immediate as He did in Egypt, they must always preserve faith in His promise for the brighter future that ultimately awaits.