

Pesikta D’Rav Kahana and the Concept of the Mourning of God in Rabbinic Literature

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ABSTRACT

In the following article we will analyze the concept of the “mourning of God” in Pesikta D’Rav Kahana, a Rabbinical document dating to approximately late fourth century C.E. We will explore individual themes such as the “unauthorized worship”, the nature of the sin that caused the death of Nadab and Abihu – Aharon’s two sons, and the reaction of God toward the death of His people. The cultic context of Pesikta D’Rav Kahana is the celebration of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which, among other purposes, served as a day of national mourning. We will show how the Rabbinical interplay between the specific and the general/indirect biblical texts enhance our understanding of the socio-religious world behind the text of Pesikta D’Rav Kahana. The purpose of this article is to probe into what the audience would have possibly heard from the pulpit when the rabbis preached sermons like these. What was their situation? What did they need to hear in order to receive hope, or that their lives might be set on the right course and thus avoid the shortcomings of their predecessors.

KEY WORDS: Sacrifice, Sin, Nadab and Abihu, God, Mourning, Yom Kippur.

INTRODUCTION²

Pesikta d’Rav Kahana is a homiletical work that belongs to the larger genre of the homiletic Midrashim.³ It has 28 paragraphs or chapters, each in the form of a sermon inspired from different readings of the Scripture. Sermon number 26, entitled *מִוֹת אַחֲרֵי מוֹת פְּרִשָׁה* falls under the theme of (Lev. 23:27) *יּוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים* (The Day of Atonement). The entire document has eleven chapters, organized around the exegetical verse from Leviticus 16:1. Although the author quotes only the first verse of chapter 16 in his sermon, the theme of the Day of Atonement

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² This article is based on the project *Pesikta D’Rav Kahana. Piska 26*, that I wrote for Dr. Goldman’s Midrash 515 class at Hebrew Union College, December 2/2000.

³ For an analysis of Pesikta’s historical, social and religious context in the fourth century C.E., see Rachel Anisfeld, *Sustain Me With Raisin Cakes. Pesikta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), especially Part Four: “PRK [Pesikta D’Rav Kahana] in Historical Context,” 147-162.

presupposes – among others – verses 1 through 5.⁴ Notice too that not only did the author rely on a vast selection of Scriptural materials, but he also used numerous citations from the rabbinic literature. Part of the literary structure of the sermon is the fact the theme will not make full sense until the very end. Throughout the eleven chapters, then, we witness the unfolding of different ideas that may not seem to have any direct relevance for the theme of the Day of Atonement. The audience hears from Qohelet, Psalms, Job, and the Prophets in parallel with the theme verse, but as the sermon builds up each chapter seems to open a new window into an unexpected reality.⁵ We may never be able to reconstruct fully the specific background that motivated the authors of Pesikta D’Rav Kahana. Yet, it is conceivable that the Rabbis may have had in mind the dramas of the Roman-Jewish war in 67-70 C.E., the Bar Kochba Revolt 132-136 C.E., and other political and social upheavals that Palestine went through in the 3rd and 4th centuries. If the general theme of our text is that of the “mourning of God,” then it is possible that the Rabbis sought to present God as One who understands the suffering of His people because He himself mourned after the death of Nadab and Abihu. The history of the first four centuries of the Common Era was one of turbulence and upheaval.⁶

EXEGETICAL VERSE: Leviticus 16:1

To begin with, a “petihta” – or a proem - is a literary device that the rabbis used at the beginning of a larger sermon in order to interpret a verse by “reference to a second remote verse.”⁷ The term derives from the verb פתח (to open) and the

⁴ In fact, he will use several quotations from other chapters of Leviticus along with texts from Numbers which refer to the incident of Nadab and Abihu (among others, see Lev. 10:1, 9; 16:30, and Num. 3:4).

⁵ Notice Shmuel Safrai, Michael Stone, *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part: Midrash and Targum* (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 2:117, as the “verse from Ketuvim is usually interpreted in sundry ways until the link is finally made to the verse from the Tora lectional reading (*seder*) of the day.”

⁶ Notice Rachel Anisfeld, *Sustain Me With Raisin-Cakes. Pesikta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 67, for the view that Pesikta deRav Kahana sought to establish the vision of “a relationship between God and Israel that is down-to-earth and indulgent as God responds to every concern of the Israelites, speaking to them in a tender, colloquial voice,” a view that did not always prevail in previous texts of Rabbinic literature. In Part 4 of her work, “PRK [Pesikta D’Rav Kahana] in Historical Context” (esp. pgs. 147-162), Anisfeld also argues that PRK was edited and circulated during a time of upheaval in the life of Palestinian and diaspora Jews. The expanse of Christianity as the new religion of the Roman Empire meant that the Jews had a harder time of defending their identity. Among other purposes, PRK attempted to present God as personal and loving as possible in order to help the Jews not to abandon their religion.

⁷ *The Literature of the Sages: Second Part*, Shmuel Safrai ed. (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 2:117, and H.L. Strack, Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and*

noun פתיחה (opening), signifying the “introduction to a lecture”, in general, and in particular the proems of longer literary works such as Pesikta de Rav Kana.⁸ The proem contains a verse:

In turn, a Pesikta is a section or a “portion” of the collection of Midrashim, exegetical commentaries on different readings of Scripture associated with special festivals.⁹ As we already mentioned, the *petihhta* to Leviticus 16:1 shifts the discourse to different readings from Tanakh in order to set the wider context for the interpretation of the death of the two sons of Aaron. Before we focus on the interpretation given by the rabbis, it is important to read the passage from Leviticus 10:1 which describes the cause of the death of Nadab and Abihu.

וַיִּקְחֵהוּ בְנֵי־אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחַתְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂמוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֹת וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them (English Standard Version).

The biblical context for the sin of Nadab and Abihu is given in Exodus 30:9. One will notice that the Exodus text does not include the phrase אֵשׁ זָרָה (“strange/unauthorized fire”). It only includes the word זָר (“strange, illegitimate, unauthorized”), and thus concept of the illegitimacy of certain things, human beings, or actions which can render a cultic act invalid.¹⁰

Midrash (Minnesota, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 52-53, for *petihah*, “as a complete short sermon itself.”

⁸ Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1991), 1253.

⁹ Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1196.

¹⁰ The Bible uses the term זָר with the sense of (1) “unauthorized (a person other than a Levite trespassing the holy perimeter [Num. 1:51], or a non-Israelite roaming the desolate fields of Israel [Isaiah 1:7]), (2) “prohibited” or “that which does not belong” (of cultic items/actions [Lev. 10:1], Gentiles marrying/loving an Israelite person (Jer. 2:25), (3) “idolatrous” (i.e., new gods whom Israel must not worship [Deut. 32:16], (4) “adulterous/unchaste” (woman [Prov. 5:3]). Thus Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, זר, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the OT* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), L.A. Snijders, זר/זור, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, H. Ringgren ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 4:52-58, D.K. Stuart, Exodus (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 635. Of interest here may also be the verb זור, with the sense of a breath that “is abhorrent” (Job 19:17). Thus D.J.A. Clines, זור, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. III (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). For the Rabbinic meaning of זר, Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 411, applies it only to human persons, not to objects. Thus, a זר could be a “non-priest, layman” or even “an outcast” or a “shunned” person, as a leprous. Note also Y. Frank, *The Practical Talmud Dictionary* (Jerusalem: Ariel Press, 1994), 101, for a “non-kohen” (non-priest) accepted by Talmudic authorities to slaughter an animal.

לֹא־תֵעָלוּ עָלָיו קִטְוֹת זָרָה וְעֹלָה וּמִנְחָה וְנִסֵּךְ לֹא תִסְכוּ עָלָיו: (Exod. 30:9)

You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it.

In commenting on the incident, Rabbinic literature proposed “twelve theories to justify their deaths,..., six of which are ritual and are grounded in the biblical text.”¹¹ The six theories are:

- (1) [Nadab and Abihu] entered the adytum,
- (2) Their incense offering was illicit,
- (3) They offered incensed on unauthorized coals,
- (4) They officiated while drunk (Lev. 10:9),
- (5) They neglected to wash their hands and feet,
- (6) They lacked one of the required priestly garments.

Given the wide semantical range of the term זָרָה, we may never know with absolute certainty the specific details of the Nadab and Abihu’s offence. Snijders suggests the fact that Nadab and Abihu violated the sacred order “because they are acting on their own initiative disregarding the cultic regulations governing time and place.”¹² Jacob Milgrom views theory number 3 as the most likely offence that Nadab and Abihu committed: Nadab and Abihu offered incense on 'unauthorized coals', in other words, not from the sacrificial altar but from a profane source. The problem may not have been the fire itself, but most likely the source outside of the holy perimeter from which the fire came.¹³ We will revisit the Rabbinic interpretations of this aspect of the text later. For now, however, the text of Pesikta D’Rav Kahana Leviticus 16:1 reads:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אֹהֶלן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי־יְהוָה וַיָּמָתוּ:
(Lev. 16:1)

Now the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they had approached the presence of the LORD and died.

¹¹ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 633ff.

¹² זר/זר, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 4:55.

¹³ Note also Aaron Rothkoff, “NADAB,” *Encyclopedia Judaica: Mel-Nas* (Farmington Hills, MI: Keter Publishing, 2007), 721-722. the Rabbinic scenario where Nadab and Abihu’s death may have been “a vicarious punishment for their father’s sin with regard to the golden calf,” as with Deuteronomy 9:20, “Moreover the Lord was very angry with Aaron to have destroyed him.” And destruction “means extinction of offspring (Lev. R. 10:5).”

Chapter 1

הַכֹּל כַּאֲשֶׁר לְכֹל מִקְרָה אֶחָד לְצַדִּיק וְלָרָשָׁע לְטוֹב וְלַפְּהוֹר וְלַטָּמֵא וְלִזְבַּח
(Eccl. 9:2)
וְלַאֲשֶׁר אֵינְנו זֹבַח כְּטוֹב כְּחַטָּא הַנְּשַׁבֵּעַ כַּאֲשֶׁר שְׂבוּעָה יֵרָא:

It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath.

The Petihta begins with citing Qohelet 9:2 in order to affirm that both the righteous and the wicked suffered the same fate, i.e., dying “maimed.”¹⁴ Specifically, the rabbis point here to (tannaitic interpretations of the fate of) Noah and Pharaoh Neco – the righteous and the wicked. In what follows the rabbis will cite more opposing examples that will support this conclusion. Moses and Aaron, who were the “good” and the “clean,” as well as the spies (the “unclean” ones) failed to enter the land. Josiah and Ahab died because of wounds suffered in the battle, although they could not have been farther apart in the eyes of God. David and Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah and Samson, Aaron and Korah – all these, in spite of the differences that separated them, suffered the same fate. In the rabbis’ view, the fate of Aaron’s two sons perhaps resembles the fate of the people mentioned above. Hence, one might ask, with the audience listening to this sermon, “did his sons die unnecessarily, or not?” In the next chapters the rabbis will offer an answer and a Scriptural proof for this question as well.

Chapter 2

לְשִׁחּוֹק אָמַרְתִּי מִהוֹלֵל וְלִשְׂמֹחָה מִה־זֶה עֲשֵׂה: (Eccl 2:2)

Of laughter I said, “Madness,” and of enjoyment, “Why are you doing this?”

The rabbis introduce here a second verse from Qohelet, namely Qohelet 2:2. In order to obtain a more creative reading of the verse, they will offer an alternate reading of the form מִהוֹלֵל. In Qohelet 2:2, the root הלל means “to be” or “behave like a mad man.”¹⁵ But R. Abba b. Kahana does not read the verb as a

¹⁴ For the Hebrew text of Pesikta D’Rav Kahana see https://www.sefaria.org/Pesikta_D'Rav_Kahanna.26.1?lang=bi.

¹⁵ Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, הלל, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the OT*, for the sense of “making a mockery”, “foolish” or “senseless.”

Poal form of הלל, but rather as the verb מהל, that is, “to mix,” or “dilute.”¹⁶ He has in mind not only the attraction of king Solomon to wives, horses and silver, but also the heathen of the world whose laughter in their theaters is mixed or mingled (perhaps with “grief”).¹⁷ As for the words וְלִשְׂמֹחָהּ מִהֲיָה עֲשֵׂה, the rabbis read them as advice for the disciples of the sages: the joy of studying the Torah is unmixed; why, then, would they be in the theaters? To do what?¹⁸

The rabbis employ here another “word-play” device in order to apply Qohelet 2:2 to king Solomon. They establish a link between the form שחוק, “laughter,” and the Syriac שחקא, “punishment.”¹⁹ Secondly, in order to arrive at the interpretation that they had in mind, the rabbis appealed to the alternate meaning for the root הלל, that is, “to be bright.”²⁰ The new interpretation, then, reads: “Things which are punishable by the measure of judgement are bright.”

In their view, Solomon saw that which is prohibited as being “radiant,” and this unacceptable “mixture” led to his fall. Another case in point where laughter is mixed with the grief of a father is in the death of a young man on the day of his wedding.²¹ Rejoicing is also contrasted with the grief of God over the fact that he had to destroy the generation of the flood, the very people for whom he had provided abundantly.²² Finally, the rabbis tie the petihta verse back to the theme verse by recalling the experience of Elisheba, the mother of Nadab and Abihu. On the one hand, she rejoiced over seeing her husband and other sons honored, while on the other hand she grieved following Nadab and Abihu’s death. Her

¹⁶ Thus Braude and Kapstein, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975), 529. For the root מהל - to “mix” or “dilute wine,” see Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 554; Koehler, Baumgartner, מהל, *HALOT*, to “water down; Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 737. Thus Isaiah 1:22 – כֶּסֶף הָיָה לְסִינִים סָבָאךָ מִהוֹל בְּמַיִם: (“Your silver has become dross; your wine mixed with water”).

¹⁷ The editors suggest the word אבל, i.e., “mourning;” thus Mandelbaum, *אוקספורד פסיקתא דרב כהנא*, 2 volumes (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987), II, 385.

¹⁸ See Braude, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, 394.

¹⁹ Braude, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, 529.

²⁰ Thus Koehler, Baumgartner, אהל, *HALOT*, for אהל – to be bright, to shine (Job 25:5) – a “by-form of הלל”.

²¹ Braude, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, 530.

²² To illustrate the people’s lack of gratitude, the rabbis quote from Job 21:14, “Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what profit is there for us if we pray to him?” God answers with the petihta verse, Qohelet 2:2, “and joy, what use is it?” Since the word שמחה (joy) can be vocalized as a verb (i.e., מוחה, to “wipe out”), we may have here a word play here. On the one hand, “joy” signifies the abundance God had bestowed upon the people, while on the other hand, their rejection of God compelled him to “wipe them out.” See also Braude, *Pesikta De-Rab Kahana*, 396.

“rejoicing was turned to mourning. As Scripture says, ‘After the death of Aaron’s two sons.’”

The rabbis found a rich source of exegesis in the interplay between Leviticus and Qohelet 2:2. Though not fully stated until later in the sermon, the possibility that grief transcends human experience is implied here. Suffering also occurs with God. As painful as parental grief is, the thought that the Creator himself should suffer have may come as a profound realization on the part of the audience. In itself, the notion of divine suffering would be nothing astounding for a biblical culture like fifth century Palestine. The comforting news, however, was the fact that God would understand the grief of those listening as well, just like it happened before.

Chapter 3

אֶמְרָתִי לַהוֹלָלִים אֶל-תִּהְיוּ וְלַרְשָׁעִים אֶל-תִּרְיֵמוּ קֶרֶן: Psalm 75:5

I say to the boastful, “Do not boast,” and to the wicked, “Do not lift up your horn;”

The rabbis continue to focus on the notion of “mixing” by citing another verse where the bible uses the verb הָלַל. In its original setting Ps. 75:5 reads, “I said to the arrogant, ‘do not act arrogantly’...” But the rabbis read הָלַל just like they did in chapter 2: replacing the root הָלַל with מָהַל, which means “to mix.” Based on the association he created earlier, R. Levi’s new petihta reads now like an admonition for those who let their negative thoughts affect the entire world: “I say unto those whose joy has become mingled [with joy].”²³

The rabbis apply the petihta verse to a second group of people as well. This time the verse אֶל תִּרְיֵמוּ קֶרֶן (do not lift up your horn) comes as an admonition against the arrogant who seek the experience of joy in spite of their indifference to God’s moral precepts. The authors do not really argue against “rejoicing” here. Rather, they look back at Israel’s ancestors and acknowledge that God allowed the experience of both joy and grief in their lives. This transition allows the rabbis to remind their listeners about the circumstances faced by Adam, Abraham, Elisheba (daughter of Amminadab who gave birth to Nadab and

²³ Braude, *Pesikta D’Rab Kahana*, 533. Playing on the same form, R. Levi also derives the expression אֶלֵּיא, “wow-makers” (from the root אָלֵּי, woe), producing the new sense of: “these are the ones who bring woe to the world.” Thus Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 70.

Abihu), and Israel.²⁴ Unlike the wicked ones, Israel’s ancestors walked with, and knew God intimately. And yet each one of them experienced the unsettling paradox of joy and tragedy. What we see here is not a complaint against the unfairness of suffering on the part of Israel. On the one hand, the rabbis assure the people that God knows about their grieving; he allowed Adam, Sara, and Abraham to grieve as well. Grieving, then, is a part of the mystery of the providence of God. It defines the experience of God as well. On the other hand, if the present historical circumstances seem to favor the wicked, our text has a warning for them: your rejoicing, as well as Israel’s grieving, is only *temporary*. Genuine and lasting happiness will only come in the *messianic future*, when the Holy One and Israel will rejoice in each other’s works. Until then, in spite of the reality of suffering, avoid becoming “grief-mongers, spreading your gloom everywhere you go in the world.”²⁵

Chapter 4.

(Job 39:27-30) אִם-עַל-פִּיךָ יִגְבִּיֶה נֶשֶׁר וְכִי יִרִים קִנּוֹ:
 סָלַע יִשְׁכֵּן וַיִּתְלַנֵּן עַל-שֵׁן-סָלַע וּמְצוּדָה:
 מִזֶּשֶׁם חִפְר־אֶכֶל לְמַרְחֹק עֵינָיו יִבִּיטוּ:
 (וְאַפְרָחֹ) [וְאַפְרָחִיו] יַעֲלֶוּדָם וּבְאִשֶׁר חָלְלִים שָׁם הוּא:

Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes his nest on high?
 On the rock he dwells and makes his home, on the rocky crag and stronghold.
 From there he spies out the prey; his eyes behold it from far away.
 His young ones suck up blood, and where the slain are, there is he.

Chapter four introduces a new *petihta*, this time from Job 39:27-30. Using another word-play, the rabbis read the word נֶשֶׁר (“eagle”) as the verb יִשֵּׁר (to “dwell”). The new meaning points to the dwelling of the presence of God upon the ark and to Aaron’s role in eliciting the arrival or departure of the Presence.²⁶ The step-by-step exegesis transforms the “eagle” metaphor into a historical reality: the *presence of God* upon the first and the second temple. The *petihta* passage is also connected to the Second Temple, and in particular to the Day of Atonement, by quoting from the Oral Torah.²⁷ Here, the rabbis recall the prayer

²⁴ For example, Elishaba had the joy of four children, two of whom served as “adjutants to the High Priest,” Braude, *Pesikta D’Rab Kahana*, 535. Her joy, however, was turned to mourning when Nadab and Abihu were burned by fire.

²⁵ Braude’s own understanding of the text, *Pesikta De-Rab Kahana*, 397.

²⁶ As it shall become evident later, the status given to Aaron here is not accidental.

²⁷ The most direction here comes from Mishnah Yoma 5:2. The key word in both *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* and *Mishnah Yoma* is “the ark.” Again, this is not accidental, since the rabbis have just mentioned Aaron’s name in connection to the Ark. Since Aaron is also mentioned in the

of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. From the Temple, he intercedes with God on behalf of the people so that the entire land will have a year of blessing. But the readers cannot miss the reference to yet another High Priest; namely, Aaron, who officiated on the Day of Atonement in the wilderness. This beautiful interplay allows the authors to apply the *petihta* verse not only to God and Aaron, but also to Aaron's two sons. From the verse **וְאֶפְרָחוּ יַעֲלֵעוּ-דָם** (His young ones suck up blood) we are to understand that “his young rolled convulsively on the ground.”²⁸ This reinterpretation serves as a description of what in fact happened when Aaron's two sons were punished. The second part of Job 38:30 is even more illustrative: “and where the slain are, there is he.” For the rabbis the meaning here is quite clear: God himself was present when Aaron's sons died! This interpretation is also supported by the next verse, namely Leviticus 10:4 - “Come, take up your brothers from before the **קֹדֶשׁ**,” where **קֹדֶשׁ** is nobody else but the Holy One. In what follows the listeners will understand that the reason for the command to “take up your brothers” (i.e., Aaron's two sons) was so that the *mourner* would not suffer anymore “after the death of the two sons of Aaron” (Lev. 16:1).

Through this sermon, the audience realized how close was the relationship between God and his High Priest, Aaron. The word of Aaron was decisive in bringing in or dismissing the very presence of God in the sanctuary. The High Priest was endowed with a special prerogative to pray for the welfare of the land. In the end, the tragic death of Aaron's sons affected not only their parents, but God himself, who mourned their death. It is true that in Palestine *mourning* was an everyday reality. What is unusual, and yet uplifting for the audience here, is to hear that God shares in this very painful reality, just as he did when Aaron's sons died.

Chapter 5

אֵיךְ לְזֹאת יִחַרְדַּר לִבִּי וַיִּתֵּר מִמְּקוֹמוֹ: (Job 37:1)

The new *petihta* verse reads, “at this my heart *trembles* and *leaps out* of its place.” The verb **וַיִּתֵּר** is further defined in light of its occurrence in Leviticus 11:21, where it describes the *leaping* of an animal. Furthermore, we learn that

seder passage, we have here a nice interplay between the *seder* and *petihta* verses, and the Mishnaic passage.

²⁸ The biblical meaning is “[the eagle’s] young suck up blood.” For the alternate translation I relied in part on Braude’s interpretation, *Pesikta*, 400. He believes that the word **דָם** can also be translated as “ground,” that is, an apocopated form of **אֲדָמָה**. However, what Braude does not explain is the fact that the rabbis may have read the Hebrew root **עֲלַעַל**, to “sip up [blood],” as **עֲלַעַל**, that is, “to be whirled,” or to “hurl” (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1085. We can now understand that the two sons of Abraham in fact “rolled on the ground.”

Job’s heart leaped because the sons of Aaron were punished for a deed for which neither Aaron’s sons, nor Titus – the Roman emperor who transgressed the same law and entered the sanctuary – were held accountable. In effect, the question now becomes: Why were Aaron’s two sons punished?

Chapters 6-7

גַּם עֲנוּשׁ לַצַּדִּיק לֹא טוֹב לְהַכּוֹת נְדִיבִים עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל (Prov. 17:26)

To impose a fine on a righteous man is not good, nor to strike the noble for their uprightness.

Through the new petihta verse, the rabbis will explore the reason for the punishment of Nadab and Elihu – a theme only alluded to in chapter 5. As Proverbs 17:26 becomes God’s statement on the punishment, we learn that God regrets punishing Aaron and taking his two sons away from him (part *a* of Prov. 17:26). R. Berechia uses the text in Proverbs to suggest that punishing the righteous – that is, Aaron – beyond measure – that is, measuring his guilt by the offence of his sons – is not good. But what then is the right way to do it?

To solve this dilemma, R. Berechia does not read verse 26a and 26b as synonymous parallelism, but interprets part *b* as a separate reality, not a parallel reality to part *a*.²⁹ In this context, verse 26b becomes the explanation: [the reason for their death was in fact] “to strike the nobles for the sake of uprightness.” The audience, then, realizes two things: on the one hand, God regrets the death of Nadab and Abihu. This message, which they heard before, is reaffirmed in chapter 6. On the other hand, they also understand that divine punishment is for the sake of uprightness; never arbitrary. As we explained in the beginning, Pesikta D’Rav Kahana never absolves Nadab and Abihu of guilt. And it does not portray Him as a strict punisher either. God loves and God is just and holy. God cannot truly love without being just.³⁰

²⁹ From a poetic perspective, Proverbs 17:26 has a “synonymous parallelism” structure: the second line repeats the theme of the first line in a different manner. Notice that the words “the righteous” and “nobles” function as a word-pair in this arrangement; thus G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: a Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 131. This means that line *b* of verse 26 parallels line *a*. The rabbis, however, interpret part *b* as a separate statement which reads something like “to punish the nobles for the sake of uprightness.”

³⁰ On the manner in which Rabbinic literature understood the love of God see Peter Knobel, “Love,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Jewish Religion*, R.J. Zwi Werblowsky ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 425, John. J. Collins, Daniel C. Harlow, *Early Judaism: a Comprehensive History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 126; Safrai, *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part: Midrash and Targums*, 51 (even God’s attitudes toward non-Jews), George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 272.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 continues the theme of guilt expressed in chapter 6. Instead of a new *petihta* verse, the rabbis begin here by quoting a Tannaitic statement: “Nadab and Abihu died only because they gave halachic instructions in the presence of Moses, their master.” The rabbis seem to read the Leviticus narrative in light of post-biblical prohibitions that read: “anyone who teaches a law in his master’s presence is liable to the death penalty.”³¹ We do not know the extent to which this was observed in practice, but the point made here serves as an explanation for the death of Aaron’s sons.

Chapter 8

The text continues the argument introduced in chapter 6 by mentioning *four scriptural passages* which describe the death of the sons of Aaron: Leviticus 10:1-2, 16:1; Numbers 3:4, 26:61. Each text mentions the offense of Nadab and Abihu. With one exception, the key phrase here is “unauthorized fire” (אֵשׁ זָרָה (אֵשׁ זָרָה)).

They... offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them (Lev. 10:1).

... the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died (Lev. 16:1).

... when they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD (Num. 3:4).

... died when they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD (Num. 26:61).

In the view of the rabbis, mentioning four times the death of the two brothers was not accidental. One reason for selecting the passages was to state clearly that they were not guilty of multiple sins. The rabbis would ask for what reason? “In order not to give the earth’s inhabitants an occasion for loose talk and not to give people a chance to say: Aaron’s sons were guilty of dissolute practices in secret, and it was because of these that they were brought to death.”³² A second reason for this apparent “repetition” might have been to serve as an indication of how much God suffered even when he allowed their death. Regardless of how serious their sin was, it would be even more distressing to degrade the two by accusing them of secret sins. Finally, Bar Qappara identifies the four sins of Nadab and Abihu. These were: drawing near to the holy place, the offering they

³¹ Braude and Kaupstein cite B.Yoma 53a to indicate the obligation of Nadab and Abihu to “bring fire made in an ordinary way.” However, “they incurred the death penalty for presuming to render such a decision in the presence of Moses their master instead of requesting him to render it for them” (*Pesikta*, 402).

³² Braude, *Pesikta De-Rab Kahana*, 540.

made, bringing strange fire, and failing to take counsel with one another. We have already summarized some of the Rabbinical views on the reason why Nadab and Abihu died. It is important now to see how Pesikta D’Rav Kahana dealt with this aspect in chapter 9.

Chapter 9

Following Bar Qappara, chapter 9 lists several Rabbinic interpretations regarding the sins Nadab and Abihu may have committed.³³ Considerations of space limit a thorough analysis of all the views expressed in chapter 9, but here are some of the more important ones. It appears that some of the offences listed here were strictly cultic, while others may have involved moral/ethical sins³⁴. Besides Bar Qappara, the tradition behind R. Levi mentions *drunkenness* (while officiating - prohibited in Lev. 10:9), *unwashed hands* (Ex. 30:20-21), *wearing improper vestments* (Ex. 28:43), and *lack of wives and children* (Lev. 16:6; Num. 3:4). On the other hand, other traditions saw them as *arrogant* and *hungry for power*; some even as “feasting their eyes on the Presence of God” (R. Hoshai, R. Yohanan, and R. Tanhuma).³⁵ In spite of their offences, the text makes it clear that their death was mourned not only by their parents, but also by God. This conclusion is warranted by Numbers 3:4, which reads:

וַיָּמָת נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא לִפְנֵי יְהוָה בְּהִקְרָבָם אֲשֶׁר זָרָה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי
_(Num. 3:4)

But Nadab and Abihu died before the LORD when they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD in the wilderness of Sinai,

The expression לִפְנֵי יְהוָה (“before the LORD”) appears twice in one verse. Since there is no other place where the words “before their father” occur twice, the rabbis conclude that God suffered *twice as much* as did Aaron, their father.³⁶ Chapters six through nine deal exclusively with the reason for the death of Nadab and Abihu. For the rabbis, that episode may have raised a series of

³³ Judging from the effort and space given to this topic, we suspect a considerable debate must have been going on in rabbinic circles regarding the sins of Nadab and Abihu.

³⁴ Our separation between cultic and moral is obviously *artificial*. Suffice it to say that in ancient Israel, issues related to religion, morality, law, and even economics formed a continuum which seems foreign to modern Western societies.

³⁵ R. Joshua of Sikhnim compares them with Moses, “who did not feast his eyes on the Presence of God, but he benefited from the Presence:” Braude, *Pesikta D’Rav Kahana*, 541. One consequence of their arrogance was that they thought the women around them were unworthy to marry them; hence they died childless (R. Abba Hanin, R. Menahem, R. Joshua bar Nehemiah).

³⁶ Braude, *Pesikta D’Rav Kahana*, 544.

questions that could not be always reconciled with each other. But what did the audience need to hear? The rabbis made it clear that Nadab and Abihu had died as a result of sinning before God. Some traditions were more forgiving with their sins; others, less. But the authors also proved – scripturally – that God mourned their death to an extent that even Aaron could not experience. Essentially, what we witness here is a tradition doing its best to present human life in all its forms, even those we like the least. The compassion of God does not contradict his justice, and neither does misfortune minimize the human inclination for sin. Still, if there were any doubts left about what those who suffer should expect from God, the answer was: he understands even more than earthly parents can.

Chapter 10

The present chapter deals with the issues of sons inheriting the priestly prerogatives from their father (or brothers from their brothers), and whether it was possible that one may or may not serve as a High Priest while his father was still alive. This concern seems to fall outside the subject matter of the sermon so far. As usual the rabbis give reasons in support of both positions. For example, R. Hiyya b. R. Abba argued that Eleazar and Ithamar ministered only after the death of Aaron (see Gen. 23:3, offered as proof for this position). On the other hand, R. Isaac believed that Aaron suffered a cultic disqualification, which made Eleazar legible to serve while Aaron was still alive.³⁷

Chapter 11

In the last chapter the rabbis make a clear connection between the death of Nadab and Abihu and the Day of Atonement. We have stated in the beginning the fact that “Sermon number 26, entitled *מִוֵּת אַחֲרֵי מוֹת* falls under the theme of the Day of Atonement.” In order to link the former interpretations with the advent of *יּוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים* (The Day of Atonement), the rabbis resort to an analogy. The death of Miriam (Num. 20:1) was recorded in the Scripture “next to the passage on the ash of the Red Heifer” (Num. 19). Since the ashes of the heifer are said to atone for Israel’s sins, and the account of Miriam’s death is placed next to that of the ashes of the heifer, it follows by analogy that Miriam’s death served the same purpose: to atone for Israel’s sins.³⁸ By analogy, since the Scripture places the account of Aaron’s death (Deut. 10:6) next to the account of the breaking of the Tablets (Deut. 10:2), it follows that in the eyes of God the

³⁷ This point is illustrated by the story of Simeon b. Qimhit. He was replaced by his brother as High Priest because of a contact impurity. The rabbis extend the story to include the seven sons of Qimhit who served in the high priesthood while their mother was still alive.

³⁸ Braude, *Pesikta D’Rav Kahana*, 546-47.

death of Aaron was as painful as the breaking of the tablets. One will notice that the underlying term in these examples is the “death” of someone and, implicitly, the act of “mourning.” Among other connotations, Yom Kippur implied the mourning of the people of God.

As expected, the rabbis will draw the final analogy with the death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 16:1) and the prescriptions for the Day of Atonement given to Aaron (Lev. 16:2ff). In R. Hiyya’s words, “just as the Day of Atonement makes atonement, so the deaths of the righteous ones make atonement.”³⁹ The proof for the first statement is well known (Lev. 16:30), but the second requires rabbinic creativity. The authors will then cite another biblical passage where “God heeded supplications for the land” after Saul and Jonathan were buried in Zela (2 Sam. 21:14).⁴⁰ Indeed, death can and does bring a favorable answer from God.

CONCLUSION

We can be certain that at this point the message of the sermon emphasized the positive aspect of Nadab and Abihu’s death. This may have not been possible at the beginning of the sermon, but it would make sense now, at the end. Both the righteous and the wicked seem to share the same fate. And it is true that joy is always accompanied by grief. But the wicked must remember that their joy is passing, and the righteous know that true joy is yet to come. Is the reality of grief enough reason for letting one’s gloomy thoughts affect those around us? In answer to this question, the rabbis would want people to remember that God mourned the death of his people; perhaps more than we human beings can comprehend.

It is at this point that we may ask if the concept of God “mourning” is an innovation of Pesikta D’Rav Kahana or it is a theme that appears in the Bible and/or other extra-biblical sources? We dealt with the issue of “divine emotions” in the Bible and various Targumic translations in our article “Does God Ever Feel Sorry.”⁴¹ For the sake of clarifying the larger context of Pesikta

³⁹ Ibid., *Pesikta D’Rav Kahana*, 547.

⁴⁰ It is possible that since both Lev. 16:1 and 2 Sam. 21:14 contain the word אָחַר – to indicate sequence in time - the authors may have used a *gezera shawah* argument here.

⁴¹ Aurelian Botica, “Does God Ever Feel Sorry? – Understanding Verbs of Emotion in the Pentateuch and the Targumic Versions of Onkelos, Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan,” *Seminatorul (The Sower): The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research*, vol 1:2 (2021), 6-24. See also A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God. Essays in Anthropomorphism* (London: Oxford, 1937), 29ff., for the view that “neither the Tannaim, nor the Amoraim...were unanimous in their views and teachings about the problems of anthropomorphism and anthropathism,” and Paul Flesher, “Anthropomorphism,” *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical World*, 2

D’Rav Kahana, however, we may say that there are a few texts in the Old Testament that attribute emotions to God and that could fall in the category of “weeping” or “mourning.”⁴² Since Pesikta D’Rav Kahana does not quote the passages in Jeremiah or other passages related to “divine suffering,” we will not mention them in this theme here. The theme represents another project in itself that deserves its own analysis. Suffice to say that both early and late Rabbinic literature allowed for the presence of anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms, even though the formal consensus was one of caution rather than certainty. But what about Nadab and Abihu’s sins, and the way God reacted to their death in the view of Pesikta D’Rav Kahana?

Our study has shown that the rabbis agreed that Nadab and Abihu failed to observe the proper ritual laws. Multiple attempts were made in order to identify what exactly those sins were. The rabbis also speculated that their character was conceivably flawed. And yet, at the end, perhaps on an emotional/existential level, the rabbis felt and argued that God mourns the death of his people; even the death of Nadab and Abihu. We cannot be certain whether or not the authors of Pesikta D’Rav Kahana presupposed the Old Testament prophetic notion of “divine suffering.” Still, given the context of the turbulent history of the first four centuries of the Common Era, and on the occasion of celebrating the Day of Atonement, Pesikta D’Rav Kahana testifies that, in God’s providence, death

volumes, J. Neusner ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1996), who argues that “the Targums have a strong tendency to alter...anthropomorphisms.” For the presence of this phenomenon in Rabbinic and Medieval Literature see also M. Klein, “The Translation of Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms in the Targumim,” *Congress Volume - Vienna 1980* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), L. Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2000), 21ff., E. Urbach, *The Sages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 38, 44, 152-53, and G.F. Moore, *Judaism*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1960), 420.

42 It is interesting that verb *lba* (to mourn) appears some 30x in the Old Testament, but never with God as the subject. Thus Koehler, L. Baumgartner, W., *lba*, Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the OT. The Old Testament does attribute human emotions to God, even though we may not speak of the act of mourning. Thus Hosea 11:8: “My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.” Another passage that may allude to the suffering of God is Jeremiah 9:10, “I will take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness...” The word קִינָה means “dirge”, “wailing” or “eulogy,” and is a term that in 90% of cases appears in the prophetic books (BibleWorks 10, 2016). The majority of commentators believe that the “I” in “I will take up... wailing” is Jeremiah, not God. Terence Fretheim, *Jeremiah*. Smith and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys Publishing, 2002), 159, disagrees and argues that “God is portrayed as one who weeps and wails,” and that “this depiction is continuous with the divine lament themes in this context (8:18-9:3; 9:17-19).” Fretheim develops the theology of divine suffering in *The Suffering of God: an Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984), 116-17, where he asserts that Jeremiah relies heavily on the lament genre, and that in chapters 8-20 “we find a concentration of prophetic and divine laments interwoven.” The concept of divine suffering in the Old Testament deserves its own analysis, even though it represents at best a minority interpretation in the landscape of commentaries on the book of Jeremiah.

is hardly meaningless. Especially the death of those who sought to serve him, as imperfect as they were.

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