

Parshat Shemini
Be a Mensch
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Parshat Shemini discusses the heartbreaking incident of the death of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's sons, after they brought unauthorized sacrifice, an *esh zara*, to the Tabernacle. Their actions are clearly and strongly condemned from above and their punishment is swift – their lives are immediately taken by G-d. After the horrific deaths, Moshe starts orchestrating the next steps to be taken, and he immediately calls upon Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel, to carry out the burial rituals for Nadav and Avihu's remains. Specifically, the pasuk in Vayikra 10:4 states:

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-מִישָׁאֵל וְאֶל אֶלְצָפָן בְּנֵי עֲזִיָּאֵל דֹּד אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם קְרְבוּ שָׂאוּ אֶת-אֲחֵיכֶם מֵאֵת
פְּנֵי-הַקֹּדֶשׁ אֶל-מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה:

Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, "Come forward and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp."

The language in this *pasuk* is puzzling; why are these two individuals, Mishael and Elzaphan, named? Couldn't the Torah just have said that "Nadav and Avihu were removed from the camp?" It's especially perplexing as when Miriam and Aharon die in Bamidbar chapter 20, we don't hear anything about who buries either of them.

Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, The Netziv, in his Ha'Emek Davar commentary explains that Moshe specially appointed the sons of Uzziel because of their amazing *middot* (personality traits) and for the huge love and compassion he knew they would show towards Aharon in Aharon's time of need – that these were two individuals that would be deeply pained over Aharon's pain.

In discussing the wonderful *middot* of Mishael and Elzaphan, the Neziv writes: "Uziel's sons were very humble; we see Mishael's great humility from the fact that his younger brother became the Nasi of Kehot and he (Mishael) did not protest at all, and Elzaphan is written without a *yud*, which shows that he was humble in his own self appraisal, as is known to those who interpret names."

In addition, we learn in the Talmud and Midrash (Bavli Sukkah 25b and Sifrei 68:1) that the time of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu was an especially challenging one as the burial arrangements took place on Erev Pesach, and anyone involved in their burial would have to miss Pesach altogether because they would be ritually impure from the burial and be unable to participate in the *Korban Pesach* (the eating of the Paschal lamb). They would subsequently be required to wait a whole month for Pesach Sheni to come to celebrate chag and eat of the *Korban Pesach*, which would be a big hassle. So to be picked for such a task would take an even higher level of selflessness and *menschlichkeit*, because it would involve a personal upheaval, highlighting further the selflessness of Mishael and Elzaphan.

As such, we come to understand that Mishael's and Elzaphan's cameo appearances in the Torah is not incidental; rather, they represent *middot* that are of prime importance to Klal Yisrael, middot that we should all aspire to in our daily lives, namely that of *menschlichkeit*.

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In a sermon given at the Jewish Center in 1964, Rabbi Norman Lamm (zt"l), defines the characteristics of a mensch. He writes that a mensch is “one who has a mature personality, a fully developed character, a sense of finesse and savoir-faire, one who is courteous, well-mannered, and amply endowed with the qualities of patience and self-restraint....a [m]ensch is one who does not shrink from a difficult task which [their] conscience requires of [them].” This image perfectly sums up the flawless and noble behavior demonstrated by Mishael and Elzaphan.

Furthermore, Rabbi Lamm’s sentiments echo throughout Rabbinic Literature. For Chazal, there is no higher virtue than being a mensch – so much so that it ensures one a place in the World to Come. We learn this in a story from The Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 22, where Rabbi Beroka is incredibly puzzled to learn from Eliyahu Ha-Navi that the prize spot in heaven is being given to clowns. The gemara explains that a clown's mission is to strive to make peace between quarreling people by cheering people up and making them happy, and this act of selfless menschlichkeit merits a very special place in the afterlife.

So whether we are simple clowns or members of the elevated priestly house of Aharon, there is nothing more important than spending our time spreading menschlichkeit: kindnesses, *chesed* and love between our fellow travelers. May we all *zocheh* to use our unique charms to raise each other up and spread kindness. *Shabbat Shalom*.



Originally from London, England, Tamar lives with her husband and four children in the Bronx, where she spends her spare time walking her dog in the Riverdale Forest and reading chick lit. Tamar is a graduate of Oxford University and Northeastern University School of Law, and in her prior endeavors worked as an Assistant Attorney General in the Charities Bureau at the New York State Attorney General’s Office. Tamar has been involved in numerous Bronx-based nonprofits and community organizations, including SAR Academy/High School, the Riverdale Jewish Center and the Hunts Point Alliance for Kids. Tamar has been fortunate to learn Torah in some incredible yeshivot including Midreshet Lindenbaum, Matan, Drisha, and Lamdeinu.