

Date: 6 Iyar 5786 (April 23, 2026)

Torah Portion: Acharei Mot / Kedoshim

Topic: In Life and In Death, Part 2

The Midrash cites R' Yudan, who compares the death of Aharon to the breaking of the Tablets. In the thought of the Sages, the shattering of the Tablets is one of the great tragedies in the history of Yisrael. Yet the Talmud teaches that the spiritual essence of the Tablets was never destroyed; when the stones were broken, the holy letters ascended heavenward (Pesachim 87b). The tragedy, therefore, was not an objective annihilation of holiness, but a subjective loss—the withdrawal of access. What was lost was not the divine light itself, but Yisrael's ability to receive it in a revealed and tangible form.

This distinction is essential. The Tablets, even in their broken state, retained their sanctity, but their function as a direct conduit of divine wisdom accessible to the people was diminished. In this sense, the breaking of the Tablets represents not the disappearance of holiness, but the concealment of it. The light remained above, while below, the people were left with absence, distance, and fragmentation. This dynamic echoes a principle later expressed in the Renewed Covenant: “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6), and further, that the covenant written on stone gives way to one written on the heart (2 Corinthians 3:3). The divine reality is not destroyed; rather, its mode of access shifts from the external to the internal.

A similar framework must be applied to the death of Aharon and, by extension, to the death of any tzaddik. From the perspective of the tzaddik himself, death marks the completion of a life fulfilled in divine service. As the Zohar describes (I, 122b), the departure of the righteous is accompanied by joy above, as the soul returns to its מקור (*ma-kor*; source). Likewise, the Midrash compares the removal of the righteous to the plucking of a rose at its peak (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 6:6), an act not of destruction but of fulfillment. The Tanya (Iggeret HaKodesh 27) further teaches that after death, the influence of the tzaddik expands even more, no longer limited by the confines of the physical body. This resonates with the Renewed Covenant's portrayal of righteous death not as defeat but as increase: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24), and “to live is Messiah, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

Yet from the perspective of the nation, the death of the tzaddik is a profound loss. Ramban explains that the righteous serve as channels of *ratzon*—divine favor—through which blessing flows into the world. When such a figure departs, the channel is constricted, and the collective loses access to a living embodiment of divine presence. Just as the breaking of the Tablets did not destroy the letters but removed their accessibility, so too the death of the tzaddik does not extinguish his righteousness but removes its immediate availability to the people. The tragedy lies not in what is lost above, but in what is no longer accessible below. This tension is reflected in the Renewed Covenant as well, where the departure of the righteous produces both grief and transformation: “you will weep and lament... but your sorrow will turn into joy” (John 16:20), indicating that loss itself becomes the doorway to a deeper form of connection.

Having clarified the position reflected in R' Yudan—and by extension the view associated with R' Abba—the Midrash turns to the opinion of R' Chiya. According to R' Chiya, even when the tzaddik who dies is not entirely free of sin, and thus his death cannot be understood as purely vicarious, the very fact of his death brings atonement to the generation. He derives this principle from Nadav and Avihu. Their death is explicitly understood as punishment for their sin (Lev. 10:1–2), yet Scripture places their death in proximity to the Yom Kippur service (Lev. 16), implying a connection between their death and atonement.

The analogy to Yom Kippur is precise and instructive. Even in the absence of the Temple and its sacrificial service, the day itself retains its atoning power. The question, however, is whether this can be assumed. The Midrash challenges the assumption: how do we know that Yom Kippur atones intrinsically? Its very name is not sufficient proof, for it could be that the atonement derives only from the sacrificial rites performed on that day.

To resolve this, the Midrash turns to the verse, “For on this day he shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you” (Lev. 16:30). The phrase “on this day” (*ba-yom hazeh*) indicates that the day itself possesses an inherent capacity to atone, independent of external factors. Ramban explains that Yom Kippur reveals the inner essence of Yisrael, a level untouched by sin, and it is through this inner נקודה that atonement becomes possible. This inner reality parallels the New Covenant's teaching that cleansing comes through an inner transformation: “how much more will the blood... cleanse our conscience

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from dead works to serve the living God” (Hebrews 9:14), emphasizing that true atonement reaches the פְּנִימִית (*pe-ni-mit*)—the inner being.

At this stage, the Midrash presents two positions. According to one, only the death of the perfectly righteous atones; according to the other, even the death of those who are not entirely sin-free can bring atonement. How, then, is the matter resolved?

The Midrash concludes by seeking a third and decisive proof: “From where do we know that even the death of the righteous who are not sinless brings atonement?” The earlier sources cannot serve, as they reflect opposing views. A new source is required—one that can decisively tip the scale.

The Midrash finds this in the account of Saul and Yonatan. Scripture states that after their burial, “Elohim answered the prayers of the land” (2 Samuel 21:14). This indicates that their deaths brought about a restoration of divine favor. Yet Saul himself is explicitly described as having sinned: “Thus Saul died because of the betrayal by which he betrayed YHWH... and did not keep the word of YHWH” (1 Chronicles 10:13). His death, therefore, cannot be understood as the death of a completely sinless individual.

Nevertheless, his death brought atonement to the nation and reopened the channels of prayer. The Zohar (III, 56b) teaches that the death of the righteous sweetens judgment for the generation, because such an event shakes the spiritual order and arouses divine mercy. In the Renewed Covenant, a similar pattern appears where the death of the righteous opens access and restores relationship: “having boldness to enter the Holiest... by a new and living way” (Hebrews 10:19–20). The event of death becomes a שַׁעַר (*sha-'ar*)—a gate—through which renewed connection is established.

This final proof supports the position of R' Chiya. Even the imperfectly righteous can, through their death, bring atonement to their generation. The power of atonement does not rest solely on the personal perfection of the individual, but on the relational and covenantal impact of their life and death.

Thus, the comparison to the Tablets returns with greater depth. Just as the breaking of the Tablets did not eliminate holiness but removed access to it, so too the death of the righteous does not diminish their spiritual stature but alters its mode of presence. In their absence, the generation is forced into a new awareness—one that can lead either to loss or to return. When it leads to return, it becomes the very mechanism of atonement.

In this way, the death of the righteous is revealed not merely as an end, but as a transition—where concealment gives rise to awakening, where loss becomes the catalyst for teshuvah, and where distance itself becomes the means through which the covenant is renewed.

Shalom.