

Date: 5 Iyar 5786 (April 22, 2026)

Torah Portion: Acharei Mot / Kedoshim

Topic: In Life and In Death, Part 1

After the death of Aharon's sons (Lev. 16:1), the Midrash turns to the death of Miriam (Num. 20:1) and asks why her passing is placed adjacent to the laws of the ashes of the Red Cow (Num. 19). The Sages answer that this juxtaposition teaches a profound equivalence: just as the ashes of the Red Cow atone and purify from ritual impurity, so too the death of the righteous brings atonement. The comparison suggests that impurity is not only a ritual condition but also a moral and spiritual state, and just as the Red Cow removes *tum'ah*, the passing of the righteous cleanses the impurity of sin within the community.

Rashi, citing Moed Katan 28a in his commentary to Numbers 20:1, makes this teaching explicit: the death of the righteous atones just as the offerings do. In this sense, the righteous themselves become a kind of *korban*, a living offering whose very existence—and ultimately whose departure—draws others near to YHWH. The mechanism of this atonement, however, is not mechanical but relational and psychological. As Eshed HaNechalim explains, when people witness the suffering or death of a righteous individual, they are stirred to repentance. Some reflect that if such a righteous person could be struck, then they themselves are certainly deserving of judgment; others conclude that the righteous must have suffered on behalf of the generation. In either case, the result is *teshuvah*, and it is this awakening that brings about atonement.

This idea is reinforced by another Midrashic teaching. R' Yudan notes that the death of Aharon (Deut. 10:6) is placed adjacent to the breaking of the Tablets (Deut. 10:1–5), teaching that Aharon's death was as difficult before the Kadosh Barchu as the shattering of the Tablets themselves. The breaking of the Tablets represented a rupture in the covenant between Yisrael and their Creator, and Aharon—who embodied peace, mediation, and spiritual leadership—served as a living embodiment of that covenantal connection. His death, therefore, is not merely a personal loss but a cosmic diminishment, a fracture in the channel through which divine presence flows into the world.

Ramban, in his discussion of atonement in Leviticus 16, deepens this understanding by emphasizing that atonement is not merely juridical but relational. It restores *ratzon*, divine favor, and reopens the flow of blessing between heaven and earth. The righteous play a central role in sustaining this flow. Their lives uphold the spiritual equilibrium of the world, and their departure creates a rupture that reverberates beyond the visible realm. The Zohar (III, 56b) expresses this in mystical terms, teaching that the death of the righteous sweetens judgment (*mituk ha-dinim*) for the generation. When a tzaddik departs, it awakens mercy in the upper worlds, rebalancing divine judgment and allowing compassion to prevail.

R' Chiya bar Abba adds another layer by noting that Nadab and Abihu died on the first of Nissan, during the inauguration of the Mishkan, yet their death is recalled specifically in the Yom Kippur service (Lev. 16). The Midrash explains that this teaches that just as Yom Kippur atones, so too the death of the righteous atones. The Torah states, “For on this day he shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you” (Lev. 16:30), and similarly, after the burial of Saul and Yonatan, Scripture says, “And Elohim answered the prayers of the land after that” (2 Sam. 21:14). Yet the Midrash still seeks proof that Yom Kippur brings atonement, even though this seems self-evident. The implication is that atonement must be understood not only as a fact but as a process. Just as Yom Kippur requires *teshuvah*, confession, and inner transformation, so too the death of the righteous does not automatically cleanse, but rather awakens the people to return, thereby generating atonement.

This raises the question posed by the Alshich: which righteous individuals possess this atoning power? Is it limited to the most exalted souls, or does it apply more broadly? R' Abba appears to restrict it to rare individuals such as Miriam, whose purity parallels that required for the Red Cow. In this view, their deaths cannot be attributed to personal sin but must be understood as bearing the burden of the generation. R' Chiya, however, challenges this limitation. If only the completely sinless atone, why do the Sages describe the Holy One as grieved by the death of the righteous? One might expect that the completion of a flawless life would bring only joy. Indeed, another Midrash compares the removal of the righteous to the picking of roses from a garden (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 6:6), suggesting a moment of divine delight.

The Zohar (I, 122b) resolves this tension by describing a dual reality: when a tzaddik departs, there is sorrow in the lower worlds but joy above, as the soul returns to its source. The death of the righteous thus operates on multiple levels simultaneously. It is both a loss that diminishes the world and an ascent that fulfills the purpose of the soul. The Tanya (Iggeret HaKodesh 27) further develops this idea, teaching that the passing of the righteous brings atonement in a manner comparable to the burning of offerings, but also that their spiritual influence increases after death. Freed from the limitations of the body, the tzaddik's presence becomes more pervasive, continuing to inspire repentance and draw down divine compassion.

A parallel concept appears in the Renewed Covenant, where the death of the righteous is portrayed as transformative rather than merely tragic. "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). Here, death becomes the condition for multiplication and renewal. Similarly, the tearing of the veil and the quaking of the earth at the death of the righteous one (Matt. 27:51) reflect a cosmic response, echoing the rabbinic idea that the passing of the righteous affects both heaven and earth.

Taken together, these sources present a unified vision. The death of the righteous is not an isolated event but a dynamic force within the covenantal relationship between YHWH and Yisrael. It awakens repentance, sweetens judgment, restores divine favor, and continues to influence the world even beyond the boundaries of physical life. The juxtapositions in the Torah—Miriam and the Red Cow, Aharon and the Tablets, Nadab and Abihu and Yom Kippur—are therefore not incidental but deliberate, revealing that atonement is achieved not only through ritual acts but through the lives and deaths of those who embody righteousness. In this way, the righteous become a bridge between heaven and earth, and through their passing, impurity is cleansed, judgment is softened, and the covenant is renewed.

Shalom.