

Silence in the Face of Tragedy **Shabbat Shemini 5776**

The Torah portion of this week presents us with one of the most startling images of personal tragedy, the sudden and unexpected death of children, and a surprising response from a shocked and grieving father. What does the Torah mean to teach us in this dramatic sequence?

Parshat Shemini opens with a description of the inauguration of the rites performed by the Kohanim on behalf of the people of Israel following the completed construction of the Tabernacle. Sacrifices are brought and blessings over the people are offered. The mood is awesome but joyous. Then, the disaster, as we read (Leviticus 10:1-3):

10:1-3: Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his incense-pan, placed fire in them, laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before YHVH, which they had not been commanded. Fire came forth from before YHVH and consumed them, and they died before YHVH. Then Moses said to Aaron: 'This is what YHVH spoke, saying: Through those who are close to Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'
Vayidom Aharon. Aaron was silent.

A question that often arises in response to this passage: what was the nature of the transgression of Nadav and Avihu such that they merited death as an apparent punishment? Commentaries and midrashim range far and wide to make sense of the incident, to probe the nature of their possible misdeed or even to suggest radically counter-intuitive notions where the death is understood not as a negative consequence of a misdeed but as a positive result of extreme piety. The idea being that God draws near to those who merit special closeness.

As a relevant aside, when my younger sister succumbed to a brain tumor at the age of 35 she left two children. One, my then eight year old niece, received an attempt at comfort from her best friend who told her that God only takes those He loves. Far from feeling comforted, my niece decided that she had little use for such a God. When she shared the encounter with me years later, including the words of attempted comfort, I admitted that I too, though a rabbi and a believer, had little use for such a God.

Vayidom Aharon. Aaron's silence in the face of the news of the death of his two sons has always struck me as poignant. Upon hearing the shocking news of

the death of children, I would expect a loud and forceful reaction. Shouting I would understand. Uncontrollable tears I would anticipate. Self-flagellation would not surprise me. Maybe a spell of fainting or a sudden paralysis, a temporary inability to react due to a state of shock induced the silence of Aaron. *Vayidom Aharon*. Aaron was silent. We do not know the coloration of his silence.

We do know that silence/*Shtikah* is a middah, one of the traits of character associated with guarded or careful speech, or *Shmirat Halashon*. As a general teaching, not necessary in connection to a reaction to sudden and unexpected personal tragedy, the classic Mussar treatise called *Cheshbon Hanefesh* has these cautionary words on how we should employ our speech and our silence:

Before you open your mouth, be silent and reflect: What benefit will my speech bring me or others? . . . The regimen of discipline for this trait is to free your mind to deliberate before speaking ... If you are tempted to say something frivolous, condition yourself to swallow your words. As King David said proudly to himself (Psalms 17:3) “My thought did not leave my mouth.” And as our sages said (*Tanna D'bei Eliyahu*), “Think before you speak.”

Vayidom Aharon. Aaron was silent. We do not really know why. However, we do know that training ourselves to pause and reflect before speaking often makes the difference between speech based on mere reactivity, speech likely to inflame, and that which locates itself in a more spacious reality, usually a place of greater calm. A response that allows for a stage of noticing of one’s interior emotional state without necessarily letting the emotional state dictate the behavioral response can transform a potential conflict into a meeting of minds.

Vayidom Aharon. Aaron was silent. Aaron held his peace. Sometimes, not always but sometimes, when we hold our peace in the face of an affront, we allow a healthier calm to ensue, our kinder and better instincts to take hold. Perhaps the Torah means to teach us to consider silence as the default manifestation of wisdom.