

A few weeks ago we read about the tragic deaths of Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu, who were killed after making an offering of "strange fire" to God. We are never told the reason for their deaths, or what kind of behavior caused them to be punished in this way. It simply says "A fire went out from God and consumed them." Their father saw this take place, saw his own sons die, and responded not with questions or a vow to challenge God, but with silence. In fact, he moved on from the tragedy without even mentioning it again—the story continues and Aaron, at least from our perspective simply continues on his path. The first words of this week's Torah portion mention this event, as Aaron is warned not to repeat the mistakes of his sons and to not approach the holy of holies in the mishkan. Yet in the preceding chapters, Aaron still has not spoken up about the tragedy. His silence about his son's death is eternal.

It says in the Psalms: *Lecha Dumiya Tehila* – for you silence is praiseworthy (Psalm 65), and our tradition says that silence can be one of the most powerful forces we have at our disposal. While silence can be seen as the essence of the act of no response, it can also be one of the strongest reactions. In silence there is stability, and in silence there is strength.

Yet, I think most of us would argue that something about this response of Aaron just doesn't feel right. Your own children die, and you don't even say a word? The twin towers fall in New York City, and we just walk away? Six million Jews die and we just move on? Another natural disaster or a war, and the world is silent? This just isn't the way that most of us feel we should best respond to tragedy, and as Jews this is not how we believe we need to make change and promote healing in the world. We respond to tragedy with action, and work to make sure that such pain does not happen again.

While silence may be praiseworthy, we also know that we should never be forced to remain silent. If we are confronted with an event that needs our response, we should not have to remove ourselves from action. Again, as the Psalms also tell us through the

words of King David: “I shall sing of your glory and shall never be silenced”(Psalm 30). King David is vowing that he will never be forced, will never allow an end to the existence of silence, to the peace that can exist a quiet world. If we don’t respond to the tragedies, if we don’t fight back against the pain and suffering in the world, they we become used to the noise—to the constant pain, and to the suffering—and we lose the option of a quiet world. If we don’t respond to tragedy, then we leave ourselves in place where we get too used to the news we hear.

Just a few weeks ago was the anniversary of the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In this heroic act of resistance of the Jews in World War II, we see the enduring power which came from a strong response to suffering. The Jews in the ghetto were not happy with the quiet in their midst.

On the day before Passover, April 19, 1943, troops of German, Polish and Ukrainian soldiers surrounded the ghetto in Warsaw, a 1.3 square mile walled off section of the city where thousands of Jews had been forced to live for years. The ghetto leaders had been informed of a “resettlement” plan, where the ghetto would be liquidated and everyone sent to the death camps. As the Nazi troops marched in, their plan was to deport all the remaining Jews in under three days. Yet they were met by strong Jewish resistance. The Jewish fighters were prepared with homemade bombs, guns and one machine gun to attack Nazis who had tanks, artillery and armored cars. More than 200 Nazis were wounded or killed by the end of the day.

Of course the Jewish fighters knew who they were up against. The Nazis were well armed and were determined to come into the ghetto to complete their plan. But the Jews fought back, and they fought back with a determination that many say was unparalleled in the entire Jewish experience in WWII.

After several days of battles, the Nazis had no choice but to burn the Jews out of their underground hiding places. Every building was set on fire by the Nazis, and many victims were buried and everyone else was forced outside. In the end, the Jews were defeated, but they did not go quietly. They fought to the end. In the words of one survivor of the uprising. In the words of the historians, these fighters "knew that they

had to die, but they wanted to leave a trace of their existence, hence those acts of heroism, a testimony to honor".

We will always have tragedies. There is no doubt that we will continue to wake up to the morning news and hear of more pain and suffering in the world, of more deaths, and more sadness. And we will always need to find a way to appropriately respond, where to put our efforts and what questions to ask. From Warsaw to Syria, or from everything that happens closer to home, we have to fight back—not always through force, but through strengthening our ties to our community and to the higher goals of peace and healing. We shouldn't remain quiet, since doing so would allow those who caused the pain to continue creating suffering. Yet we have to remember that what we are really fighting for is the right to have another kind of quiet in the first place, the right to not have to wake up every morning to tragedy. In this space of calm, we can then make sense of the difficult world we live in.

As I was preparing for my talk on my experiences in Poland last week, and as I recalled the stories of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, I remembered back to the time that I worked as an educator and tour guide at the museum of Jewish heritage on the southern tip of Manhattan in New York. The museum, while a Holocaust museum, was even more, as its tagline says: "A Living Museum to the Holocaust". While it covered the history and events of WWII, it also described the incredible culture and traditions of Jews before the Holocaust, and also both the painful aftermath of the War and the many ways that Jewish communities grew and changed in the decades since.

The most remarkable part of the museum comes near the end. I remember many times as I would give tours—the groups would explore the first floor about Jewish life before the Holocaust. On the second floor we would look at the beginnings of anti-Semitism in Europe and make our way through the beginnings of WWII, the horrors of the concentration camps, the end of the war and finally the few years after the war as the survivors came home and the world was confronted with the reality of what happened.

It was at this point that the people in the groups would often be talking: “I can’t believe that this could have happened!” “What an unbelievable story!” “It is too difficult to think about!” Sometimes the groups would still be talking, some with tears in their eyes as they made their way up the escalator to the top floor of the museum. And then as they stepped off the escalator and turned the corner, they were confronted with something in some ways even more powerful than all that they had just seen. There in front of them was a full wall of windows overlooking the waters of New York City, and in the distance, The Statue of Liberty standing proud with her torch in her hand. This is when, without a doubt, there was silence. In this moment, in this image, hope hits so hard, that there is often nothing to say. And as the visitors continued on the floor, they saw not pain, not sadness but large photographs and beautiful sounds of Jews celebrating life from all corners of the earth. The groups usually ended their visits with smiles.

And in a world filled with plenty of events, too much news that leaves us speechless and sometimes with tears, this is what we are fighting for. We are making sure that by not being quiet, by responding with action, we give ourselves a future where we can continue have powerful moments of hope and peace, and of the calm that we need to make sense of this very broken world. We too want hope to hit us as hard as pain. It takes time, but we are left with no other choice.