

This Week in Torah *Shemini*

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The book of Leviticus is filled with laws given to Moses to be shared with Aaron, his sons, and the rest of the priestly class. Yet, within the third book of the Torah are narratives, *mashalim*, or stories of sorts. *Parashat Shemini* is one of them—the painful story of Aaron’s sons and their death. The other is the story of the man who gathered sticks on Shabbat and how he was sentenced to be stoned to death. But let’s focus on our story for the week that tells of Nadiv and Abihu who brought into the Mishkan an “alien fire” that was unsolicited and unannounced. Both tales involve a death sentence—one at the hand of God, the other ordered by God to be done. Our *sedra* is not a legal illustration of trespassing law, no—ours is a story of... well... we don’t know exactly. We do know that our vulgate edition is one where we have no certainties, only speculation. And at the heart of it all is a father, whose response is silence.

Often, a bar or bat mitzvah will stare at me when preparing their *d’vei* Torah. Behind the wide-eyed gaze is puzzlement—I can only speculate what a 13-year-old is thinking: a death penalty when a person chooses to do the wrong thing? Try to engage a teen who is now drifting to another idea altogether: why am I choosing to embrace this faith that teaches us that if we mess up, we die?

The rabbis trying to explain Nadav and Abihu’s action: Maybe they were drunk? Maybe they were arrogant? Maybe they were practicing a type of idolatry? But there is no consensus. Groping for answers in such a case is like searching for the light switch in a darkened room—it is challenging and it is done with trepidation. Yet, Aaron’s response to the death of his two sons gives us a clue of how to grasp the unfathomable, “*vayadom Aharon... And Aaron was silent.*”

There is no way for us to know what is inside his head; all we can do is speculate. Perhaps Aaron’s silence was due to tension between responses—so grief-stricken and so

bound to uphold God's ruling. Perhaps Aaron chose not to do anything in front of the people because the last time he let his emotions speak for him, it was out of fear and the Golden Calf—a true symbol of idolatry—was born. Perhaps it was out of guilt or shock. But it also can be viewed as a sacred pause before Aaron responded. The sentiment of the Psalmist might well be suited for Aaron, who captured such sentiment this way [Psalm 39:3-5]: “I was dumb, silent; I was very still while my pain was intense. My mind was in a rage, my thoughts were all aflame; I spoke out: Tell me, O LORD, what my term is, what is the measure of my days; I would know how fleeting my life is.”

In two weeks, we will read portion *Acharei Mot*, which translates as “after the death” and that is when Aaron finally responds.

Aaron gives us a gift of sorts—modeling the importance of a sacred pause. Waiting to respond—waiting for God to invite him in, waiting to gather his response in a measured fashion. Aaron does not give a knee-jerk response. He does not say something that he will regret. It is far from stoicism or forbearance; it is a trained response to think before acting. This is certainly a challenge for all of us, especially for Aaron when he learns of his sons' deaths. But his faith is such that he believes that God is not capricious, thus his response cannot be so compelled by a visceral or emotional outburst. In his silence, there is an understanding of the complexities of faith.

We all need to take a sacred pause from time to time; a moment when a sigh shares the intensity and vastness as well as the contradiction inherent to a response:

- a. A pause before we eat by saying a *bracha* helps us to realize not to take food for granted. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that our gratitude is learned behavior while requesting things from God without a balance of gratitude is selfish.
- b. A pause before we respond prevents an improper response that can never be undone. Cartoonist Mell Lazarus who created the long-running comic strip “Miss Peach” told a story of an encounter with his son-law. In the heat of anger, he said things that truly wounded his son-law; although he apologized, Lazarus claimed that when he looked his son-law in the eyes for years to come, he sensed the hurt was still present.

- c. A sacred pause teaches us to gather up others with us so people can be together. A friend of mine lost her husband. She had to tell her children and her in-laws of the tragic death. That sacred pause let her call friends who could be there when the call arrived from her—no one was alone when the news was shared that their father/son/brother had died.
- d. A sacred pause is the ability to transform our fear into a teachable moment. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik described such an encounter in Genesis. When Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, they hide out of fear. When they were expelled, Rav Soloveitchik wrote that their punishment came with a blessing—they did not need the garden anymore for they learned the value of *teshuvah*, repentance and forgiveness.

As we look at the legacy of Aaron, one teaching that we must remember and cherish is what he did in this *parasha*—his silence was a sacred pause. *Vayadom Aharon...* Aaron was silent. Saying nothing can convey great sentiments—emotions that can be empathized in translation by the beholder, wisdom that transcends words, and/or grief that plunges into the very depth of the soul. Pained but aware, Aaron stopped to embrace the complexity of emotions with a sacred pause thus his emotions and his intellect be intertwined in his soul.

A sacred pause... a chance to respond with uncertainty and contradiction to the complexities of life. It is a silent cry out to heartbreak, a chance to silently voice confusion, and a moment to grasp a taste of the infinite. All are valuable lessons.

Nadav and Abihu gone in an instant. And a father responds, *Vayadom Aharon...* Thus—a grasp of the unimaginable is within our grasp in a sacred pause.