

Torah Thoughts Shemini

5779:

This week we read in parshat Shemini about the sudden and unexpected deaths of two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Abihu. The reason the Torah gives us for their deaths is that while acting in the capacity of kohanim (priests) in the Tabernacle, they offered 'alien fire.' The sages have suggested many explanations about the nature of that fire over the centuries. Some have said that Nadav and Abihu made improper offerings to God, or even that they were drunk while officiating. But this year I find myself focusing not on the cause of their deaths but rather on the reaction of their father, Aaron.

After the deaths of Nadav and Abihu, Moses speaks harshly to his brother Aaron, and the text notes Aaron's silence rather than any verbal response. It is odd, and compelling, that the Torah makes mention of someone not speaking, and it prompts us to speculate a bit about Aaron's silence. There is no greater sadness than that which attends the death of a young person. Whether it is due to their own actions, illness or accident, tragedy is the only appropriate label for such deaths. So much is lost when a youth dies; we are brought low not only by the death itself, but by the lost future it represents. We mourn for the dead as well as for the lives that they will not create in the future, for all the good that they and their descendants might have done. It is probably not possible to capture that kind of loss in words. From that point of view, silence is the only appropriate response.

But it is not only tragic death that prompts silence. At a time when so many words are said about subjects unworthy of our attention, when language is used less to communicate than to assault, silence might be a virtue worth cultivating. Lowering our volume when we address one another, and even refraining from commenting at all, could be one strategy for coping with the sheer volume of unwanted and unneeded voices around us. It has been said that a conspiracy of silence speaks louder than words. Perhaps, like Aaron, we too can find the highest truth in silence.