

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Parashat Shemini
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Listen carefully. If you listen very carefully, right now, you might be able to hear the sound of silence. And you can hear the sound of silence because you're expecting to hear other sounds, me talking, among them. It's the moments, I think, when silence is noticeable that we can say it has a sound.

And so it goes in the Torah too. The Torah is among the most laconic texts I know sometimes. Entire stories and generations are created and finished and destroyed in mere sentences. Details are often sparse. Speech is often noted; silence is almost never remarked upon.

Yet this week, in the story of the death of Aaron's two sons, Aaron's silence is called out. His silence is anything but silent.

The story, to refresh your memory, is that on the 8th day of the inauguration of the Mishkan (7 is fullness, 8 is beyond that, to something new and holy, kind of like a new dimension), finally the Mishkan has been dedicated and is operational. And just after that, Nadav and Avihu, two of Aaron's sons, bring incense in their firepans and they offered before God strange fire that God did not command them. And fire came out from before God and consumed them and they died before God. Moses says to Aaron, this is what God meant when God said, through those who are close to me am I sanctified, and in front of all the people I will be honored. And Aaron was silent.

What does Aaron's silence indicate? Commentators on the Torah disagree. Rashi, following a midrash, suggests that Aaron is silent because of his abiding and abundant faith in God. What could be said about God doing this? Aaron was comforted by the idea that his sons were sanctified by God, suggests another commentator (Seforno). And according to Rashi, God speaks solely to Aaron in the next sequence of commands to honor Aaron for his silent faith, his faithful silence.

Or maybe this wasn't it at all. Maybe Aaron was silent not out of faith, but out of shock, as suggests Abarbanel, another commentator. "Aaron's heart turned to lifeless stone. He did not weep and mourn like a bereaved father, nor did he accept Moses' attempts to console him, for his soul had left him and he was speechless." Says my friend and teacher Rabbi Shai Held, on whose work some of this d'var Torah is based, "In other words, Aaron's silence was a function of shock rather than piety. Aaron is presented not as a hero of faith but simply as a human being, a father stunned into numbness by the unthinkable - the sudden, completely unexpected death of two of his children. He does not speak because there are no words."

Silence can be pronounced and noticeable, but its meaning is not always clear.

How each of us deals with death, with grief, with loss, is very different. It depends on our psychology, our background and previous experiences, on the nature of the loss, traumatic or gently welcomed, of a close, beloved person, a more distant relationship, or a very complicated, ambivalent relationship.

Joseph and all of Egypt mourn for Jacob 70 days (while embalming him), and then Joseph takes Jacob's body, as promised, back to Canaan for burial, where he eulogizes his father and mourns for him for 7 days, a biblical first. And that's where the idea of 7 days of shiva comes from (although the rabbinic tradition does not see that example as binding—shiva is in fact an obligation that derives from the rabbis, not from the Torah).

There are other derivations though of the 7 days. One tradition says that shiva corresponds to the 7 days of feasting for a wedding. Another connects it to the 7 days of creation.

Jewish tradition imposes certain obligations of mourning on the mourner, as well as obligations of comforting on the individual visiting the mourner, and on the community.

Especially when death is untimely, or sudden, or traumatic, people often visit *shiva* homes and end up (usually unconsciously) trying to assuage their own anxieties instead of comforting - or just sitting with - the mourners. *Halakhah* tries to preclude that by instituting silence as the mode we embrace when we enter a house of mourning. We speak when spoken to; we do not impose our own theological musings on people who are beset with grief. The Talmudic Sage R. Papa declares: "The merit of attending a house of mourning lies in the silence observed" (BT, Berakhot 6b); the book of Job poignantly describes Job's friends initial reaction to his grief: "They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights. None spoke a word to him for they saw how very great was his suffering" (Job 2:13). Accordingly, R. Yohanan teaches that "comforters are not permitted to say a word until the mourners open conversation" (BT, Mo'ed Katan 28b).

We're only supposed to talk when spoken to by the mourner, and the mourner is not supposed to greet us. (Or get us coffee or more lox.) We are there to talk if they want to talk, and to be quiet when they are quiet. What a quaint idea, isn't it!

Yet it is so hard for us to be quiet. We seek to fill silences; little makes us more uncomfortable. Just as we may be uncomfortable and skeptical that Aaron was really silent in the face of his sons' death, so too may be we uncomfortable with the idea of not trying to cheer up or distract mourners.

But we as mourners also, generally, abhor silences. We don't like people to feel uncomfortable, so as mourners we talk.

Given all this discomfort with silence, I've come from being either too garrulous or silent at shiva homes (both symptomatic of not knowing what to say) to making conversation, a particular kind of conversation. I ask mourners about their loved one. Tell me a story about her. What did he like to eat? It's memories, memorializing, sharing, eulogizing. And it's not chitchat.

After Kiddush, we'll gather across the hallway with Louise Kaufman-Yavitz, a therapist and congregant, and talk and take questions about shiva and the mourning process, so that we

can learn how better to comfort different kinds of mourners. You're all invited to come, to listen, to ask a question, or just to be quiet.

Shabbat shalom.