

## **Aaron's Loss and our Own Losses**

**Rabbi Melanie Aron**

**Yizkor Service**

**April 15, 2020**

My Muslim colleague in community work, Maha Elgenaidi of the Islamic Networks Group, was appalled by a recent study she sent me. It showed that in the face of recent events, Americans have markedly increased their consumption of alcohol and other substances. Actually, drinking to wipe out feelings of anxiety or loss is nothing new.

In the Torah, we see it in Noah turning for solace to alcohol after coming out of the ark and seeing the destruction all around him. Lot too turns to drink after the destruction of his adopted cities of Sodom and Gemorrah and the loss of his wife. In both cases the consequences were not pretty.

In the Torah portion we will read this coming Shabbat, an instruction, drink no wine or other intoxicant while serving in the tabernacle, is given to the priests immediately after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons. I have always understood that instruction to relate to what the young men had done: presumably come into the holy place plastered and bringing an alien fire. But Professor Eliezer Diamond of the Jewish Theological Seminary understands these words as directed to Aaron in the aftermath of his loss. God was concerned that Aaron would follow in the footsteps of Noah and Lot and attempt to escape the pain of his loss in drunkenness, bringing disgrace to the priesthood and not truly alleviating his pain. Professor Diamond further understands Aaron, in telling

Moses that it is not appropriate for him to bring sacrifices in his condition, as also rejecting Moses's solution to psychic pain—that is, plunging into work to escape his feelings.

Dulling our emotions with alcohol or pills is only a temporary solution; the pain will return until we take the time to mourn. Similarly, those who escape into busyness will find that the work of mourning remains to be done.

We have Yizkor four times a year, in part so that there is no escape from the reality of our losses, no “out of sight, out of mind,” no temporary relief through loss of consciousness. The repetition of these prayers, like the Kaddish at every service, is meant to lead us gradually through the journey of loss and mourning. Like the Israelites wanderings in the desert, the journey of loss is neither direct nor short, nor should we attempt to complete it in a more efficient manner. God did not take the Israelites on a shortcut along the coast, and we eventually recognize that there is no circumventing our pain.

But if we contrast Noah and Lot with Aaron, we will see that there is a value to making the journey. I am sure Aaron remembered his two lost sons every day of his life, but he also continued to love his two remaining sons, to be a force for reconciliation within the Israelite community. Aaron's ability to help reconcile those who had fallen out is remarked upon and is one reason he was mourned, perhaps even more than Moses. As we are told in later rabbinic texts, “Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them closer each other and to God.” May our own experiences of loss deepen our character and turn us toward each other in kindness and compassion.