Shemini 5781 – The Value of Silence

In our Parsha, we read of the death of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's sons, who died after bringing "strange fire," *eish zarah* into the sanctuary. Often when we speak about the death of Nadav and Avihu, the first question is "why did they die?" or "what did they do to deserve that?" However, instead of addressing that question, I want to try to understand what happened after they died.

Immediately after fire came down from heaven and consumed the two young men, Moshe turns to his brother, who has just lost his two sons, and says "This is what the Lord spoke, saying, I will be sanctified through them that come near me, and before all the people I will be glorified." No sooner have the two young men been killed, than Moshe is offering an explanation, or a reframing of their deaths. The bodies have not even been collected from the sanctuary yet, much less given a proper burial, and Moshe is telling Aharon how to understand their death.

Aharon, not surprisingly, doesn't say anything at all. Instead, he remains silent. This silence is read by many commentators as tacit agreement with Moshe and acceptance of what has happened. However, it strains credulity to try to imagine a father reaching such a state of equanimity, mere seconds after watching his sons die on what was supposed to be a day of pride, as they performed their duties as priests for the first time, killed by the hand of the very G-d they were in the act of worshipping.

I tend to read Aharon's silence as neither acceptance, nor as protest, but as the natural stunned reaction of one who has just seen something too shocking to fully absorb.

What, then, of Moshe's reaction? Why does he say what he says, when he says it? Moshe is connecting something that he and Aharon have witnessed and experienced, and using the Torah he has learned to help contextualize and reframe it, in a way that helps makes sense of apparently senseless deaths. Moshe, in short, is doing what rabbis and teachers of Torah have done for millennia. Use the words of the Torah to try and help people make sense of their lives and find meaning and comfort in moments of sorrow as well as joy.

However, though Moshe may have been the first and the greatest rabbi of all time, the Torah shows him here making what any rabbi would consider a rookie mistake, and one that our tradition explicitly warns us against. In the fourth chapter of Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar warns us, "Do not comfort your fellow, when his dead is laid out before him." There is a time for comfort, when words of consolation are a balm to the grieving soul. But in the first shock of a loss, when a person has not yet fully absorbed the enormity of their loss, and is not ready to be comforted, words of comfort are not only useless, in fact they can cause more suffering.

This is a principle whose formal requirements we can fulfill simply by refraining from offering words of comfort to mourners prior to the funeral. However, the intention behind Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar's statement can serve as a general warning to ask ourselves, any time we are dealing with someone in a state of emotional distress, whether our words are likely to help or to hinder their natural process of grief and emotional healing.

Often as a friend, or as a rabbi, or someone who just happens to be in the room with someone who has undergone a loss, we want to say something, because WE feel uncomfortable. We feel unnerved by another person's grief, we feel of our own suppressed feelings of loss and grief, we feel worried that we are supposed to be DOING something to help, or insecure about the theological challenge of how G-d could allow good people to undergo suffering, and so we open our mouths and say something.

Moshe, for all his wisdom, his prophetic greatness, was not immune to this all-too-common human impulse to say something in the face of someone else's profound grief. Perhaps Moshe might have benefited from the simple lesson I was taught during a chaplaincy internship. We were taught that when we are with someone in the hospital, before speaking we should always remember the acronym WAIT: Why Am I Talking? WAIT is not a prohibition on saying anything ever, but it is a reminder to the would-be comforter, to take their own internal emotional temperature before speaking, and ask "Why do I want to say this? Is it because I feel uncomfortable in the presence of someone else's pain? Is it because I feel useless just sitting here while they are in pain, and I want to say something in the hopes of being useful? Am I speaking because I feel I need the comfort? Or is this something that this person in front of me actually needs to hear right now?" Nine times out of ten, if we're honest with ourselves, the thing we wanted to say would have been for our own benefit, not that of the person we are ostensibly seeking to comfort.

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar reminds us that we should be focused on the person who is in distress. If they are in a place where they are looking for comfort, and need comfort, then comforting words are a mitzvah. But if what they really need is to be allowed to experience their grief, then our words of comfort do more harm than good.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov says that when faced with the profound questions of why death and suffering exist in the world, the proper response is to remain silent. Perhaps this is because Rebbe Nachman thinks that we are simply not capable of making sense of these things, but I think even more likely it is because he understood that attempts to explain away suffering are misguided and almost always doomed to fail. When our friend, our brother or sister, is in the throes of grief, what they need are not comforting words, or philosophical explanations, but simply our quiet, supportive, loving presence. Any attempt to take away their pain with words will at best do nothing, and more likely make things worse.

We have experienced a very painful few weeks in our nation, after a very painful year. We have been buffeted by mass shooting incidents in Georgia and Colorado, and the attack and killing of a Capitol police officer not three months after January's horrifying assault on the capitol and our democracy. All these blows coming on top of a pandemic, with all the social and economic fallout that has entailed, and in a country that is suffering from intolerable levels of division, inequality, racism, and violence.

With each new tragedy, with each new piece of bad news, for many of us, steeped in the culture of social media and the 24 hour news cycle, our first impulse is to read (or write) analysis and contextualizations of what has happened, seeking patterns, and looking for the action item.

There is nothing wrong with doing those things. However, if we use that activity as a distraction from grief, if we try to skip the process of acknowledging sorrow, and allowing it space, we are actually doing ourselves and others more harm than good.

May we learn from Aharon's example, to stop, and to sit in silence if that is what is necessary, in order to simply absorb difficult and painful news, before we rush to analyze and explain events or attack those who see them differently.

And perhaps, in time, we will reach the level of acceptance and equanimity which Rashi and others attribute to Aharon.

Shabbat Shalom,
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