

## Shmini 5781 silence

How do we respond to unspeakable tragedy?

This week's Torah portion, Shmini, opens with the story Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu:

And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire in it, and put incense on it, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, This is what the Lord spoke, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come near to me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron was silent. ...Leviticus 10:1-3

Up until tragedy struck, Aaron must have been having a great day. He was brought up as a slave in Egypt, yet here he was serving as the high priest, one of the two most respected men in the Jewish world. And nothing brings a parent greater pride and joy than seeing their children prosper, and there's a special joy in seeing your children choose to follow in your path. His sons Nadav and Avihu were also serving God in the Temple; what could have been finer?

The flip side of that joy we take in our children is that when tragedy strikes, nowhere is it felt more acutely than when it strikes your children. It also seems unfair. It's not the normal order of things that parents should bury their children.

When fire came out from the Lord and killed his sons, what was Aaron's response? Did he cry out? Did he yell? Did he demand answers?

The Talmud tells us that when someone is struck with calamity, they should cry out, so that others will know and pray for them (Chullin 78a).

When we learn of the death of a loved one, we traditionally respond by tearing our clothes and reciting a blessing, *baruch dayan haemet*, praising God as the true judge. But sometimes the grief is too intense, the pain is too great for even that much, and that was the case for Aaron. Moses tried (seemingly unsuccessfully) offering some words of comfort. But *vayidom Aharon*. And Aaron was silent.

Instead of crying out, Aaron was dumbstruck. Shocked into silence.

The rabbis have multiple opinions about the nature of Aaron's silence. Rashi says that Aaron was rewarded for his silence – implying that it was a difficult thing to do, worthy of a reward. Nachmanides says the opposite. He says Aaron's silence was one of being at ease; Moses' words succeeded in comforting him, he believed his sons were even more precious to God than he and his brother Moses were.

It seems unlikely that Nachmanides was right. I've been to too many shiva homes, especially for a tragic death, to believe that anyone's grief is set aside by just the right magic words at the most difficult time of loss.

Aaron's silence was a silence of pain, as described in Psalm 39: "I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, had no comfort, and my pain was stirred up." When experiencing tragedy, it is often impossible to find words: in the book of Lamentations we are told "The elders of the daughter of Zion sit upon the ground, and keep silence; they have cast up dust upon their heads; they have girded themselves with sackcloth; the virgins of Jerusalem bow down their heads to the ground."

A few days ago we marked Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day. A time when we mark the "unspeakable horrors" of the Shoah. And for some years in the Jewish community, the Shoah was an "unspeakable tragedy." The pain was too raw, the shame that we failed to save 6 million of our brethren from the Nazis too great. It's a subject that simply wasn't discussed for years. The trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 was incredibly important because 15 years after the horrors of the Holocaust many survivors who had been silent felt the need to make their stories known, and they finally found the strength to speak of their pain. And a lot of effort has gone into capturing their stories ever since, while there is time, before the last of that generation is no longer with us.

In the words of Ecclesiastes, there is a time to keep silence, and there is a time to speak.

Many people feel uncomfortable going to shiva minyanim because they feel they don't know what to say. I can tell you one thing NOT to say – too much idle chitchat in the presence of mourners. When they are sitting there in pain with a broken heart, many do not want to hear people talking about hockey scores or

other idle subjects. The Talmud in Moed Katan tells us that “A mourner is forbidden to give the usual greeting of shalom, because the All Merciful said to Ezekiel: Sigh in silence.” How can a mourner who is very much not at peace, greet a visitor with shalom, with peace? But this also teaches us that mourners don’t engage in idle conversation. We have a custom that when making a shiva call, you simply sit quietly with the mourner, and let them initiate the conversation. Or not initiate a conversation.

When I very unexpectedly lost my mother in a car accident, all the words of condolence seemed so empty, I didn’t want to hear them. I needed to be left alone in quiet to try to come to terms with the magnitude of the loss.

When someone is grieving and in pain, and asks, “Why God??” that’s a rhetorical question. Almost always the last thing the person actually wants at that moment is a theological discussion.

Author and physician Rachel Naomi Remen says “The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention.... A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words.”

*Vayidom Aaron.* And Aaron was silent. Attendance counts – sometimes the most important thing we can say is nothing, but rather to simply be present. A loving presence sharing our pain can be a greater comfort than any number of words.