

This Week's Shabbat Message:

And Aaron Was Silent

In this week's Torah portion, *Shimini* (Leviticus 9:1-11:47), we find the emotional description of the glorious ordination of Aaron as *Kohein haGadol* (The High Priest). We also find the spiritually inspiring passage that describes Aaron and his brother Moses blessing the children of Israel. We also find detailed instructions about Kashrut (dietary laws). But time and again, my attention is drawn to one of the most heartbreaking events in the Torah, the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu.

Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before Adonai alien fire, which God had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from Adonai and consumed them; and they died before Adonai. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what Adonai meant when God said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy and gain glory before all the people."

And Aaron was silent. (Leviticus 10:1-3)

Commentators have long struggled to find justification for the deaths of Aaron's children. Had they been punished for offering an inappropriate sacrifice? Were they arrogantly usurping their father's priestly prerogative on the very day of his ordination? Were they drunk and simply stumbled in their stupor upon the altar's fire? (Just a few verses after the incident, the Torah warns the priests not to approach the altar while in a state of intoxication lest they die.)

Perhaps the most poignant response is Aaron's. He was silent. He found no words or explanations compelling. No matter how heartfelt, Aaron was not looking for platitudes and soothing condolences. He was simply too stunned to respond to even well-meaning gestures.

Rabbi Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) said that Aaron was silent because "Aaron's heart turned to lifeless stone. He did not weep and mourn like a bereaved father, nor did he accept Moses's attempts to console him, for his soul had left him and he was speechless."

We all mourn in different ways. Indeed, not every death is a tragedy and not every mourner shares the same feelings. But every mourner goes through a process of loss. Our world has changed. A person who we loved and who once loved us is now gone. Conflicting emotions of grief and relief, deep appreciation and guilt, anger and love, a need for solitude and a desire for support, a search for the right words to describe our feelings and an exhaustion that finds relief only in silence.

Last week I buried my father. It was not a tragic death. His suffering is now over. Our close knit but widespread family gathered to share beautiful memories---and to forgive and thereby exorcise the negative. It is a complex thing to lose a parent. But for all of the conflicting feelings and complexities, my siblings and I knew that we were loved. And we had the profound awareness that our father intensely loved our mother. It is that knowledge that will help each of us through these days of mourning.

Please know how profoundly touched Susan and I have been by your outpouring of loving support and sympathy. You truly are a blessing.

May this Shabbat bring each of us a time for sweet reflection, rest and peace.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins