

In the clergy office at one of the local hospitals there is a poster that is as politically incorrect as anything one could possibly imagine. It is a poster that describes “typical” responses of patients and their families from different ethnic and racial groups. For example, it says that certain groups from Eastern cultures will be very accepting and respectful of a physician’s opinion and medical care. It says, in certain groups there will not be extensive visitation. But for Jews it says the following, “There will almost always be visitors. They will question the medical care and they have a tendency to complain.” Stereotypes are truly frowned upon in today’s society. Yet, stereo-types are based on certain truths. The problem of course is within any group there are individual differences that need to be understood and respected. But one thing that we know about us is that we do talk a lot. We have a tradition that is built on language, on conversations, on discussions. Around the table we talk, in our cars we talk, in our synagogues we talk. We talk about important things and we talk about major issues and we talk about minor things. If there is a stereotype of the Jewish people, it may be that we talk too much. And this is even reflected in our prayer. Within the context of the service we are given a time for silent devotion, but we rarely see it used in silence. We mumble our prayers, we say the Amidah, we take three steps forwards and three steps back and we sit down. In other religious traditions silence is considered to be a core component in relating to God. Silence is the essence of meditation and silence is that space where we feel the holiness within and we connect to. Truth be told, there is a place for silence in our tradition also. It is an important component in prayer. In certain Chassidic traditions men would sit in silence for one hour in preparation of prayer.

We need silence in a world that is filled with noise and distraction. We need time to be quiet. I think it is one of the reasons for Shabbat. It is to give us time to separate. We know that Shabbat was very important when people worked so hard physically. And we realize it is important again in a technological era where there is such an impingement of noise and information that it can nearly make us crazy. So, we need to be able to move away from the noise. We need to be able to listen to our heart sound. We need to be able to listen to our breathing. We need to be able to refrain from speech, to hear our souls, to be in touch with our spirit.

Koheleth taught there is a time to speak and there is a time to be quiet. We are aware of that. I think, though, we may have lost touch with that time to be quiet. Yet, there is another side to silence. There is a silence that wounds and a silence that hurts and a silence that can be very painful. In relationship, often a partner will shut down. Conversation will end. We don’t know what is expected, we don’t know what to say. Silence can be punishing in that way. In the world in which we live, silence can also be very dangerous. Silence can become a form of acquiescence to danger and threat. When there is wrongdoing and there is evil, we should never be silent. Silence can actually be a form of evil. So, silence which seems to reflect absence can actually threaten and actually be a danger. And then there is the silence that comes with being alone. That is a

painful silence and too many people around us experience as we age. So, silence can be golden, but silence can also tarnish.

I speak about silence today because it plays a very important role in this morning's parsha. I would like us to go into the parsha and look at an event that has such great power and such deep meaning and evokes so much terrible pain. It is Parshat Shemini. Shemini means "eight." This is the eighth day after the celebration after the ordination of Aaron and the Priests. The eighth day was the beginning of their work. The Kohanim were a separate entity. They had a particular holiness invested in them because they worked on behalf of the people. This eighth day should have been a day of great celebration. The first collective House of Worship, the Tabernacle was completed and all the preparations had been made. For seven days Moses performed the inauguration. Now, the eighth day, the first of Nisan arrived. The priests, lead by Aaron, were ready to begin their service. The Talmud says that this day was as joyous to God as the day that the heavens and the earth were created. Then a tragedy occurred, a horrific and unspeakable tragedy. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu brought a strange fire that had not been commanded by God. "Fire came from the Lord and they were consumed," they died.

There are two scenes between Moses and Aaron that ensue and teach. I want to talk about them.

Before we get to the two scenes, it's important to understand how the rabbis responded to Nadav and Avihu's lives being taken by God. It is the cause of great consternation. Some said it was because of their attempt to take over the leadership for Moses and Aaron and destroy the structure of governance and the very order of the people. Some believe that the fire that they brought was the sacrifice of a child to *Molech*; a forbidden pagan sacrifice. Some say they entered the sanctuary while drunk, which is insinuated in the text a little bit later. And some say they were even more righteous and pure than anyone and therefore they were "chosen" to be sacrificed at the dedication of the Temple. From each of these explanations, there is much to learn. Whichever explanation we read, none seem to justify such a tragedy. In any case, they provide a paradigm for learning.

What I want to do this morning, however, is to look at the two scenes between Moses and Aaron that follow. Moses then said to Aaron: "This is what the Lord spoke of when he said among those who are near to me I will show myself holy. In the site of all the people I will be honored." And then the text says, "*vayidome Aharon*," and Aaron remained silent. Moses commands that the bodies be removed and forbids Aaron and his remaining sons to engage in the rituals of mourning. He gives them instructions to prevent such tragedies from occurring in the future. Then he proceeds to check whether the sacrifices of the day have been performed. He discovered that Aaron and his surviving sons burned the sin offering instead of eating as described. When Moses inquired about the goat of the sin offering and he it had been burned up. He was angry with Eliezar and Itamar, Aaron's two remaining sons and he asked "why didn't you eat the sin offering in the sanctuary? It is most holy. It was for you to take away the guilt of

the community by making atonement for them before the Lord. You should have eaten the goat as I have commanded.” Aaron then replies to Moses: “Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord. But, such things, as this has happened to me. Would the Lord have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?” When Moses heard this, he approved. There is a fascinating exchange that is taking place between the brothers. Moses wants to comfort his brother who lost his two sons. He tells him that God said, “Those who are near me, I will show myself holy.” Rashi says, “That now I see that they were greater than you and me. The holier the person, the more God wants of them. It’s like that line of cold comfort. God wants the innocent. It was Moses’ lame attempt to comfort his brother. Then it says that Moses said to Aaron, “My brother, don’t give up. We have come so far. We climbed so high. I know that your heart is broken and so is mine. Didn’t we think that our troubles were behind us after we suffered in Egypt and the Red Sea, we battled against Amalek and the sin of the golden calf, and now we thought we were finally safe and free and now this has happened? Aaron, don’t give up, don’t lose faith, don’t lose despair, your children didn’t die because they were evil. They died because they were holy. The act was wrong, their intentions were good. They merely tried too hard.”

Despite Moses’ words of consolation “*vayidome Aharon*” and “Aaron remained silent;” he was lost in a grief too deep for words.

Silence is a response to pain. Silence is a response to our suffering. Silence is a response to death. It’s the only response when words don’t matter and don’t help. Later the Rabbis teach “We don’t console when our dead lie before us.”

In the second exchange, Moses is concerned with something else. His concern is the community. Their sins are atoned for by the sin offering; it is as if he said to Aaron: “My brother, I know that you are in grief, but you are not just a private person. You also are the High Priest and people are depending on you” Aaron said, “Would the God have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering?” I think what he means is in general a High Priest is forbidden to mourn as if he was an ordinary individual; we know that. That is the law and we accept it. But had I acted on this day as if nothing happened, as if my sons hadn’t died, wouldn’t it seem as if I was heartless? As if human life and death meant nothing? As if in my position as a Kohan meant that I was not a human being?” This time Moses is silent. Aaron is correct and Moses knows that Aaron is right.

In the exchange between the brothers, a type of courage is born. It’s a courage born out of silence. It is the courage of Aaron who has the strength to grieve and not accept easy consolation and then there is the courage of Moses who has the strength to keep going in spite of grief. It seems that in our own lives, in life both are necessary as a response to tragedy and to death. We need to have the courage to grieve. We have to be able to remain silent. Sometimes there are no words. And yet there comes a time we have to be able to talk. An expression of emotion is also so very important. And yet, we also know that there is time that we have to move on in spite of grief. We can’t remain in our grief and live our lives.

That's the personal side, but there's also a communal side. It seems that this emotional confrontation is not just personal, but it also characterizes our people. We have had our share of suffering and in spite of the suffering; we know that we are not allowed to lose our humanity. We are not allowed to allow our grief to dull or deaden or desensitize us. But, we also can't allow our grief to allow our capacity to carry on, and to hope, and do what we must for our survival!

It is truly amazing when we think about it. The Shoah did not allow our people to lose faith in their future and lose faith in God. The coming days bring us two contemporary holy days on the Jewish calendar. It used to be after Pesach we looked forward to Shavuot, but now after Pesach we have two new commemorations and celebrations and that is Yom HaShoah and Yom Ha'atzmaut. One day perhaps they will take on the importance of our traditional holidays. It seems to me that what happens to the Jewish people after the Holocaust, we all know it from our family and friends, that they found no words. There was silence. It wasn't even spoken about. The victims who died, were innocent victims. They died *Al Kiddush HaShem*, sanctifying God's name. When all the explanations and consolations are given, grief, sadness and mourning continue. We wouldn't be human beings otherwise. We walked through the Holocaust Museum just a few weeks ago, maybe the fourth time that we were there, and the tears continued to flow for the death of so many innocents. And once again we realized that there were no words.

But, like Moses the Jewish people found the strength to continue, to reaffirm the hope in the face of despair, to reaffirm life in the presence of death. Three years after coming face to face with the angel of death, 1948 saw the establishment of a state of Israel. It made the single most powerful affirmation of the Jewish people in two thousand years. *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish continue to live.

There is so much to learn in this story that is nothing less than "biblical". It seems so far from our experience and so easy to discount. Moses and Aaron are like the two sides of a Jewish brain, deep feeling and emotion on one hand and the side that needs to organize and work for the future on the other. Without the ability to move on we would have lost all of our hope. Without the silence and the mourning and the experience of the pain, we would have lost our humanity. It is not easy to live in that balance, to live in that tension and yet, it is essential. Silence maybe a critical component of faith. In silence we find our deepest and truest emotions. But the faith that can be found, which will never make us invulnerable to tragedy will give us the strength to mourn and then despite everything to get up and carry on.

You know, the longer we live, the more we realize it ain't easy to be a human being and it is certainly not easy to be a Jew. Perhaps it is our central purpose, through our consideration of these stories, these narratives and our history to bring to light the great tensions that we find in living life, to grapple with them and to find meaning in it. That maybe the most important thing we do. That may be what makes us an *Or L'goyim*, A light unto the nations.

Shabbat Shalom