



The Sound of Silence

Rabbi Debbie Reichmann

*This week's Torah portion is
Shemini: Leviticus 9:1 - 11:47*

Shemini was my bat mitzvah portion. As a young adolescent, I was most interested by the lists of animals we could or could not eat. As an adult, though, I am drawn to the first part of the parasha. The Israelites have just been commanded to perform their first sacrifice on the newly consecrated altar of the Mishkan. The offering is accepted by God, and we read "Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of God appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before God and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces." Leviticus 9:23-24.

These passages have been taken to mean that the Israelites were overjoyed at the successful offerings (there were three: sin, burnt and well-being.) Immediately after this joyous occurrence, tragedy strikes. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, attempt to make an offering of their own design and are fatally struck down for their efforts. Aaron, instead of rending his clothing, tearing at his hair or wailing in grief does nothing. He remains silent.

The masses of watching Israelites get no explanation, and neither do we.

Just because there is no textual explanation in the Torah, doesn't mean that countless scholars haven't taken on the burden of elucidating a rationale for Aaron's behavior. His silence has been taken to be acceptance of God's actions, and as a legitimate form of mourning. However, instead of focusing on why he remained silent, there is much to be gained from examining how that silence can be a source of understanding grief and mourning.

Aaron's horror and the scope of his loss were both tremendous, and his silence was, in its own way, a profound statement. Given his power and position amongst the Israelites, he couldn't take the path that Job did, that of crying out to God about the unfairness of it all. That would have been perceived as undercutting God's authority, God's justice and God's mercy. By staying silent the people could assume his faith superseded his personal feelings. And instead of seeing Aaron's silence as indifference, it gave leeway for people to comprehend that expressions of grief are not necessarily apparent. That silence is a legitimate response to sorrow, its own powerful lament.

In today's world, silence is almost unheard of in the face of devastation. At minimum, community leaders trot out statements of "thoughts and prayers." Should

one stay silent, one is complicit or callous or worse. The constant noise of the 24-hour news cycle, the unfettered commentary pouring from countless social media outlets, the deluge of instant analysis, prognostication and invective make silence almost unnoticeable.

Yet, for many Jews and many other people worldwide, the horrors of Oct. 7, and the continuing suffering since then, have elicited cries of pain, wails of sadness, screams of anger and for some, silence. Not the silence of indifference, not the silence of callousness, not the silence of suppressed rage, but the silence of grief. The silence that denotes the anguish of the moment and an apprehension of the future.

Aaron's silence in the face of personal devastation should, once again, be a guide to the Jewish people, to all people, that expressions of grief and mourning are both personal and public. That expressions of grief and mourning do not fall neatly into preconceived notions. That expressions of grief and mourning are as loud when you can't hear them, as when you can. ■

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