

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

In Silence and in Speech: Responding to Tragedy

Parshat Shemini, Leviticus 9:1 – 11:47

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

In between the commissioning of Aaron and his sons into the priesthood and the laws of forbidden and permitted animals in *Parshat Shemini* we find a mysterious incident which has troubled generations of students of the Torah. We are told that Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, are struck down after presenting a “strange fire before the Lord.” Only moments before, we learn that Aaron and his sons performed the prescribed offerings “as the Lord had commanded through Moses.” So what when wrong? In his moment of glory and celebration, Aaron becomes a mourner confronting an unthinkable tragedy: the death of his sons. Even more troubling, however, are the reaction of Moses in the face of this terrible event. Where are Moses words of comfort and consolation to his brother in his time of need? For that matter, where is Moses’ grief in the face of the tragic death of his own nephews?

As we read this passage we wrestle with Moses’ words and Aaron’s silence, not to mention God’s intentions. Often in times of sorrow we find ourselves silenced by grief, groping for the ‘right words’ with which to console a dear friend or a loved one. As a rabbi I have referred to Aaron’s silence more than a few times. But what does it mean, and what can we learn from it?

Pirke Avot Chapter 4:23

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar used to say: Do not appease your fellow in the time of his anger, nor comfort him while his dead lies before him. Do not question him in the time of his vow. Do not try to see him in the time of his disgrace.

Sources

Leviticus 10:1-3

1. Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which God had not commanded them. 2. And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. 3. Then Moses said unto Aaron: 'This is it that the Lord spoke, saying: Through them that are near unto Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.' And Aaron held his peace.

Tzeror Ha-mor quoted in Torah Gems, Volume 2, pp. 268-269

“And Aaron was silent.” He was rewarded for his silence. And what was his reward? That the subsequent address (by God) was to him alone (Rashi). How do we know...that Aaron remained silent because he had accepted God's judgment? Couldn't he have remained silent simply because he was faced with the might of God against him, while inwardly he was seething?... It is a basic rule that God only appears to a person who is not sad or in mourning. Had Aaron been silent because of his mourning, God would never had appeared to him at that time.

Pirke Avot 2:10-12

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had five disciples: Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Joshua ben Chananiah, Yosi the Priest, Shimon ben Natanel, and Elazar ben Arach...He used to say: If all the sages of Israel were in one scale of the balance and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in the other, he would outweigh them all. Abba Shaul, however, said in his name: If all the sages of Israel, together with Eliezer ben Hyrcanus were in one scale of the balance, Elazar ben Arach would outweigh them.

Avot D'Rebbe Natan Chapter 14

When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's son died, his disciples came in to comfort him. Rabbi Eliezer entered, sat down before him, and said, "Master, by your leave, may I say something to you?" "Speak," he replied. Rabbi Eliezer said, "Adam had a son who died, yet he was comforted for the loss of him. How do we know that he

was comforted for him? Because it is said, 'And Adam knew his wife again' [Gen. 4:25], and [after she bore a son, Adam said], 'God has provided me with another offspring in place of Abel' [ibid.]. You, too, must be comforted." Rabban Yochanan said to him, "Is it not enough that I grieve over my own? Do you have to remind me of Adam's grief?"

Rabbi Joshua entered and said, "Master, by your leave, may I say something to you?" "Speak," he replied. R. Joshua said, "Job had sons and daughters, all of whom died in one day, and he was comforted for the loss of them. You, too, must be comforted. How do we know that Job was comforted? Because Job said, 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the Name of the Lord' " (Job 1:21). Rabban Yochanan said to him, "Is it not enough that I grieve over my own? Do you have to remind me of Job's grief?"

Rabbi Yose entered, sat down before him, and said, "Master, by your leave, may I say something to you?" "Speak," he replied. Rabbi Yose said, "Aaron had two grown sons, both of whom died in one day, yet he was comforted for the loss of them, as it is said, 'And Aaron was silent' [Lev. 10:3]--his silence implies a willingness to be comforted. You, too, must be comforted." Rabban Yochanan said to him, "Is it not enough that I grieve over my own? Do you have to remind me of Aaron's grief?"

Rabbi Simeon entered and said, "Master, by your leave, may I say something to you?" "Speak," he replied. Rabbi Simeon said, "King David had a son who died, yet he allowed himself to be comforted for the loss of him. How do we know that David was comforted? Because it is said, 'And David comforted Bathsheba his wife, and went in unto her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon [Peace, Consolation]' [2 Sam. 12:24]. You, too, Master, must be comforted." Rabban Yochanan said to him, "Is it not enough that I grieve over my own? Do you have to remind me of King David's grief?"

Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh entered. As soon as Rabban Yochanan saw him, he said to his servant, "Take my clothing and follow me to the bathhouse, for he is a great man, and I shall be unable to resist him. Having entered, Rabbi Eleazar sat down before him and said, "May I tell you a parable? To whom may you be likened? You are like a man with whom the king deposited an object. Each and every day the man would weep and cry out, saying, 'Woe is me! When shall I be safely relieved of this trust?' You too, master, had a son: he studied the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings; he studied Mishnah, *Halakhah*, and *Aggadot*, and departed from this world without sin. You should be comforted because you have returned unimpaired what was given you in trust." Rabban Yochanan said to him, "Eleazar, my son, you have comforted me the way men should give comfort!"

Commentary

Often, in the face of sorrow, we are at a loss for words. We're not sure what to say or how to address someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one or is confronted by tragedy. We feel the need to explain or assuage their sorrow rather than embrace it. I often counsel people not to be afraid of silence and that one's presence is often the best way to console someone who is grieving. This is also the advice of Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar in *Pirke Avot*. In the four situations to which Rabbi Shimon refers, the individual is 'not him/herself; he/she is overcome by emotion or irrational thought and no words will assuage such deep emotions. In such situations, the most we can do is to stand by and be present.

But such advice begs the question. It is unbearably painful to remain completely silent. But what can we say? And when we confront tragedy in our own lives how should we respond? What does our silence mean? The Torah does not tell us the meaning of Aaron's silence? Is it the silence of anger, acceptance or affirmation? Is he silent in the presence of God, or does remain silent rather than respond to Moses' cryptic words which are hardly comforting.

When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai is visited by his students in a time of sorrow, he rebukes each of them for increasing his grief rather than consoling him. Only Rabbi Eleazar is able to comfort him. He does so through example as well as words. First he sends his servant to the bath house, a subtle reminder to Rabban Yochanan that despite our sorrow we must attend to the everyday details of life: eating, bathing and living. And then, rather than trying to deny his grief, he validates it by acknowledging that it is very real. And yet he gently chides his teacher by telling him that nothing in life comes with guarantees. No one promised that we have been given will not be taken from us. By combining both validation with an honest appraisal of life, he is able to bring comfort to the great sage, Rabban Yochanan.

Questions to Ponder

1. How do you understand the meaning behind Aaron's silence? Is his silence a response to Moses, a reaction to the terrible tragedy that has taken place or a response to God? Do you agree with Rashi that Aaron's silence was praiseworthy?
2. What does Moses statement to Aaron mean: "This is it that the Lord spoke, saying: Through them that are near unto Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified." How might this statement reflect Moses' own struggle to come to terms with the death of his nephews?
3. There are many attempts in rabbinic literature to understand the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Some sages claimed that the brothers were actually righteous men who were overly zealous in their desire to serve God while others found cause for their tragedy. Do you find any evidence for either point of view in the Torah? Why did the sages feel it was necessary to explain the death of these two men?
4. Do you think there is a connection between the story of Nadav and Avihu and the chapter dealing with forbidden and permitted animals? Why do you think these two passages are juxtaposed in the Torah (assuming everything in the Torah has meaning)?
5. What do the four situations in Rabbi Shimon's statement have in common: anger, loss, a sense of urgency after making a vow and a moment of embarrassment? Would your response to these four situations be the same?
6. How did each of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's students try to comfort him? Why did they fail? Do you think Rabbi Eleazer ben Arakh's words (and actions) in the presence of his teacher are more comforting than the words of the other disciples? Why or why not? What would you have said to him if you were present? What would you have done that might have been helpful in confronting the death of his son?
7. When is silence called for and when is it more appropriate to speak up?
8. *Parshat Shemini* is often read after Passover around the same time as *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Memorial Day. What insights can the story of Nadav and Avihu give us (if any) in trying to confront the tragedy of the Holocaust? Is silence an appropriate response to the *Shoah*?

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