

Parshat Shemini
Grief's Silence
Karolyn Bengier - Class of 2026

How do we describe pain? How can we articulate the feeling?

Is it a sharp stabbing or a dull throbbing? Or might it be neither? How do you describe that numbness, emptiness, and silence?

This week's *parsha* takes us into this space with the death of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's eldest sons, who are consumed by Hashem's fire before his eyes. We are taken to this place beyond pain with these words: וַיִּשְׁתָּם אַהֲרֹן וַיִּשְׁתָּם אַהֲרֹן And Aaron was silent (Vayikra:10.4).

"Emotional numbing is the mental and emotional process of shutting out feelings," [explains](#) Mayra Mendez, Ph.D. It can happen after a traumatic event or a deep state of depression.

One can hardly imagine the horrific pain of losing a child. Rather than scream and cry in anguish, Aaron, it seems, finds the pain so intense as to be emotionally numbing. "And Aaron was silent". וַיִּשְׁתָּם אַהֲרֹן.

Shiva houses are known to be rather quiet. When I sat shiva I did not wish to talk. It was somehow too difficult. I found comfort in the stillness of the silence. Visitors who came to bring me comfort did so only when they respected the space of this silence. Once acknowledged, I could open up to discuss my loss and share stories of the incredible man my father was.

Those who had experienced my same pain entrusted me with their feelings, which was the most comfort I could receive. Someone shared with me that she had felt like an amputee -- there was a tingling that existed in a space she knew to be empty. Another confided in me that she went through the rituals and observed the *halakha* and when the full year had passed, at her father's unveiling, she realized she had expected him to come back. As if the trials of grief were a test that, once passed, would be rewarded with seeing her father again.

I personally felt gutted -- as if someone had ripped out half of my heart and soul -- which, I suppose, is exactly what happened.

In the case of Aaron, there was no one who could relate to his pain. Many had likely lost children, yet not in a fire sent from Hashem after trying to honor him.

Following the death of a loved one, especially if it was unexpected, we typically ask: Why? What caused it? As if this could alleviate our pain.

David Kessler, a world-renowned expert on grief, notes people spend years looking for an answer to the question of why that will never come. There is no satisfying answer to why someone died. The case of Nadab and Abihu is no different. Our Rabbis have spent centuries seeking to understand why they died.

Rabbi Eliezer says Nadab and Abihu died because they made halakhic decisions in front of their teachers (Rashi on Vayikra 10.2 and Sifra, Shemeni, Mechilta d'Miluim 2.32). Rabbi Yishmael argues they died because they brought a fire that had not been commanded (Sifra, Shemeni, Mechilta d'Miluim 2.32). Abba Hanan states they died because they did not father children (Yevamot 64a). The Arizal claims it is because Nadab and Abihu refused to marry (Sha'ar H'Gilgulim). Rabbi Yochanon states in the name of Rabbi Levy, Nadab and Abihu died because they drank wine (Vayikra Rabba 20). And numerous other reasons have been stated.

But do any of these reasons explain away the grief? Does it address Aaron's pain?

We see Moshe attempt to mitigate the anguish when he says:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר ה' | לְאֹמֶר בְּקִרְבִי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד וַיְדַם אֶהְרֹן:

And Moses said to Aaron this is what the Lord spoke, [when He said], 'I will be sanctified through those near to Me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron was silent.'

Vayikra:10.4

We see in this *pasuk* with וַיְדַם that one can be rendered speechless by pain and grief.

According to Rashbam, Moses' response to Aaron wasn't meant to be comforting but to be instructive. The laws of mourning for the High Priest show he must refrain from overt expressions of bereavement.

Now we understand Aaron's silence may not be a form of grief but a forced stoicism. A trauma on top of trauma. Either Aaron was silenced in his grief or he was silenced from it. Neither offers us any consolation.

And maybe that is the point: there is no comfort in grief.

To the traditional five stages of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, David Kessler adds a sixth stage: meaning. While there is no comfort in grief and no reason to explain a loved one's passing can assuage the grief, there can be a meaning to it. Find the meaning in your loved one's life, he says. What did you learn from them? How was your life improved by loving them?

And of course, we may learn something from their passing. Perhaps we are more compassionate. Perhaps we value relationships differently, or time. Maybe we focus our actions to better reflect our values.

The death of Nadab and Abihu certainly struck Aaron. We see his grief in his silent, stoic mourning, in that space beyond pain. We cannot comfort him nor can we offer a reason why his sons died. But we can stand with him each year, in his silence, and we can try to understand the meaning of their life and what it means to us.



Karolyn Bengier is a student at Yeshivat Maharat (2026). Previously, she was the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council in Phoenix and served as the Executive Director of the Jewish Interest Free Loan in Atlanta. She is a graduate of Emory University with a degree in Political Science and a specialization in the Middle East where she studied Arab and Islamist opposition groups in Egypt. Karolyn has taught at Emory University, Georgia Tech, and Emerson College. Her love of Judaism, combined with her love of teaching and social justice, led her to join Maharat. You can find her writings in the Arizona Republic, eJewish Philanthropy, Blue Avocado, The Times of Israel, and Bina. Karolyn is a board member of the Arizona Interfaith Movement, serving as the Vice President of Education. She also serves on the Jewish Advisory Board for the Phoenix Police Department, was a member of the Valley

Interfaith Project's 3rd Monseigneur Ryle Public Policy Faith Leader Institute and a mentor in the Women's Leadership Institute.