

## Parshat Shemini: Difficult Silence

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*Parshat Shemini* contains one of the most harrowing scenes of Tanach, the instantaneous, cruel deaths of Nadav and Avihu, two sons of Aharon, who "offered before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them" (Leviticus 10:1). God's response is swift and dramatic:

And fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed them; thus they died before the Lord (Lev. 10:2).  
 וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי ה': (ויקרא י"ב)

Only two verses prior, at the end of last week's *parsha*, the same language of fiery consumption was used to different effect.

Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces. (Lev. 9:24)  
 וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת-הָעֹלָה וְאֶת-הַחֲלִבִּים וַיֵּרָא כָּל-הָעָם וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם: (ויקרא ט:כד)

It seems that burnt offerings of animals did not satisfy the hunger of the divine fire. It needed to "eat" ("*vatocha*") more. Nadav and Avihu create a mysterious opening through the use of their own fire, and the heavenly flame consumes two more offerings, so to speak.

Their father's response to this tragic loss is arresting:

"And Aaron was silent" (Lev. 10:3).  
 "וידם אהרן" (ויקרא י"ג)

After so much heated activity, an eery quiet now falls upon the *mishkan*. What are we to make of this uncomfortable stillness?

Commentaries abound on this matter, speculating on the precise nature of Aharon's silence and, mostly, venerating it as a great act of piety. Rashi, and those who follow his lead, see in this response to trauma submission and noble self-restraint. Aharon was silent because he devoutly accepted his fate as God's will--without challenge, or tears, or resentment. He not only did not cry; he had no inclination to, so comforted was he by the presumed justice of the loss (even if it could not be fully discerned).

On this read, Aharon manifests extreme piety, but compromises his humanity in the process. The absence of feeling at a time of epic loss confounds the heart and disturbs the mind.

Rabbi Yitzchak Abravanel offers a compelling alternative. Perhaps Aharon's silence did not indicate his lack of emotion, but rather his overwhelming emotion.

"The meaning of 'And Aharon was silent' is that his heart turned to inanimate stone and he could not raise his voice in tears, eulogizing, or mourning like a bereaved father. He also could not be consoled by Moshe because his soul was gone, as was his speech. For this reason the verse says "*va'yidom Aharon*," "And Aharon was silent," from the language of [that which is] inanimate ["*domem*"] and eroding. (Abravanel on Lev. 10:1)  
 . . . אבל פירוש וידום אהרן הוא שנהפך לבו והיה כאבן דומם ולא נשא קולו בבכי ובמספד באבל אב על בניו. גם לא קבל תנחומים ממשה כי לא נותרה בו נשמה והדיבור אין בו ולכן אמר וידום אהרן שהוא מלשון דומם ושוחק. (אברבנאל על ויקרא י"א)

Aharon was stunned into silence. Overwhelmed by the unimaginable loss, on the same day, at the same moment, of his two beloved sons, he froze. Like the matriarch Sarah--about whom the *midrash* says "*parcha nishmata*," "her soul flew away," upon hearing about the near-sacrifice of her son Yitzchak--Aharon's soul

departed when confronted with the actual sacrifice of his. He became like a "*domem*," an inanimate object--lifeless, heavy, blank, still. Not because he was invulnerable to pain, but because he was so profoundly stung by it.

This poignant linguistic connection between silence and stillness, between *vayidom* and *domem*, yields to yet another linguistic play in the words of a more contemporary spiritual figure. There it becomes not only a description of one spiritual giant's distress but a spiritual charge for how to manage distress. The following is an account of the Sanzer-Klauzenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam (1905-1994), as told by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin:

I was present, as a very young boy, at the first Sabbath circumcision of the Klauzenberger Hassidim in the temporary home they made for themselves in New York – their way-station between the European destruction and the rebirth of their community in Kiryat Sanz, Netanya. The Rebbe intoned the time-honored verse, "Then I passed and I saw that you were rooted in your blood, and I said to you, 'by your blood shall you live'" [בְּדַמֶיךָ חַיִּי] (Ezekiel 16:6), as he blessed and named the newly-circumcised child entering the covenant of Abraham.

At the conclusion of his blessing, the Rebbe commented,

I always understood these words from the prophet Ezekiel, '*be'damayikh hayii*,' to mean 'by your blood shall you live,' because of the sacrifices the Jews have been forced to make for our God and our faith, we merit the covenantal gift of eternal life. However, now that we have suffered the unspeakable tragedies of the European conflagration, it seems to me that Ezekiel's '*damayikh*' comes not from the Hebrew *dam*, blood, but rather from the Hebrew *dom*, silence, as in '*Vayidom Aharon*' – and Aaron was silent. It is because we held back from battering the gates of heaven with our cries, because we swallowed our sobs and continued to pray and to learn and to build and to plant, because we utilized our energies not to weep over our past losses but rather to recreate our communities, our synagogues, our study-houses, here in America and, please God, soon in Israel, that we continue to live and even to flourish."

Aharon's silence, alas, was not a demure submission to wildly tragic fate, nor a stoic acceptance of cruelty, but a powerful choice made to live in protest of despair. Heavy as his heart was, he elected not to indulge his misery, but to find a way to press on in the face of it--to insist on the possibility of life and of *kedusha* (holiness) even when circumstances threatened to destroy his soul. This improbable strength made him a model of holy, willful defiance, a skill that would serve the Jewish people well over time.

As Ezekiel reports:

And I passed by you and saw you downtrodden with your blood, and I said to you, 'With your blood, live,' and I said to you, 'With your blood, live.' (Ezekiel 16:6)

"וְאָעֲבַר עֲלֶיךָ וְאָרַאךָ מִתְבֹּסֶסֶת בְּדַמֶיךָ  
 וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמֶיךָ חַיִּי וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמֶיךָ חַיִּי:  
 (יחזקאל טז:ו)

The difficult quiet of Aharon, whether through the lens of Rashi, Abravanel, or the Klauzenberger Rebbe, issues a series of weighty calls. By your blood (*dam*), you shall live. With your silence (*dumiyah*), you may submit or protest. In your paralysis, you may manifest your deepest pain. But remember that beyond your lifelessness (*domem*), life awaits.



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