

Shemini: The Sound of Silence

Yali Szulanski, Class of 2025

Parshat Shemini is nestled into the section of the Torah that delves into themes of purity, holiness, and the consequences of defying divine commandments. However, within its verses lies a poignant narrative that often evokes contemplation—the role of silence after a tragedy.

The *parsha* begins with the culmination of the consecration of the *Mishkan*, a sacred space where the Israelites could commune with God. Amidst the celebration and offerings, tragedy strikes. Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, offer unauthorized incense before God, resulting in their sudden and untimely deaths. The abruptness and severity of this loss leave the community reeling in shock and grief.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, a significant silence descends. The Torah tells us that Aharon, upon witnessing the death of his sons, falls quiet. The verse in Vayikra 10:3, states: "*vayidom Aharon*", which translates to "And Aharon was silent." His response, devoid of words yet undoubtedly laden with profound meaning, invites us to explore the role of silence in the face of overwhelming sorrow.

The agony of a parent mourning the tragic loss of a child, even when the child was in the wrong, is devastating and complex. Despite any mistakes or missteps the child may have made, the bond between parent and child runs deep, and is intertwined with a parent's hopes, dreams, and unconditional love. The pain of losing a child, regardless of the circumstances, is a crushing weight that envelops the parent's heart and soul.

Grief becomes a constant companion, mingled with regret, anguish, maybe anger, and a profound sense of loss. In the midst of this turmoil, the parent may find solace in memories of happier times, clinging to moments of joy and connection amidst the overwhelming sorrow.

Silence in the wake of tragedy can serve as a sanctuary for the soul. It can provide a space for introspection, allowing individuals to grapple with complex emotions and to make sense of the incomprehensible. It can also create a well within the person, in which they can easily sink, their silent screams bouncing within an echochamber. In Aharon's silence, we witness the depths of his anguish and the magnitude of his loss. It is a silence born not of apathy or resignation but of reverence and solemnity—a recognition of the profound mystery and fragility of life.

Interestingly, our own mourning practices offer opportunities to find healing in silence and to build resilience in the face of the silence of others. Aharon and his remaining sons model that.

The process of sitting *shiva* embodies the transformative power of silence within the grieving process. During the seven days of mourning following a loved one's passing, mourners refrain from engaging in mundane activities, instead immersing themselves in a sacred silence punctuated by prayer, reflection, and communal support. Through this practice, mourners honor the memory of the departed, finding solace in the embrace of their community. In the intricate tapestry of communal mourning, silence serves as a profound thread that binds individuals together in shared grief and reverence.

In Jewish tradition, being silent in the home of a mourner stems from the principle of respecting the grieving process and providing comfort to the bereaved. Visitors to a house of mourning are often encouraged to offer their presence and support through wordless companionship.

Rabbi Shimon ben (son of) Elazar said...do not console [your fellow] at the time [their] dead lie before [them] (Pirkei Avot 4:23).

This silence allows the mourner space to express their emotions, memories, and thoughts without interruption. It demonstrates sensitivity to their pain and offers them the opportunity to share as much or as little as they wish, knowing that they are surrounded by a supportive and understanding community. This practice reflects the Jewish value of empathy and solidarity during times of loss and grief. As the community joins Aharon in his silence, they bear witness to his pain and offer silent solidarity, affirming that he is not alone in his grief.

Silence allows for the passage of time, a necessary ingredient for healing and reconciliation. In the immediate aftermath of a tragedy, words may ring hollow, unable to assuage the pain or offer comfort. Silence also honors the sacredness of the present moment, allowing individuals the space to mourn, remember, and eventually, move forward. As time passes, the sharp edges of grief may soften, and the healing balm of quiet paves the way for the emergence of hope and resilience.

In moments of tragedy and loss, silence can be a vessel for the expression of profound emotion, a conduit for communal solidarity, and a catalyst for transformation and renewal. Hence the lasting power of “*vayidom Aharon.*”

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